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I'm writing this as *Feierabend*, our trusty house-bus, transports us south from Cape Reinga. Though I've been several times to the Hokianga Harbour I've never been right to the Cape – and it's a good fifty years since Mani was there – so we thought *about time!* So, the trip has been up the east coast, and back down the west.

As always, themes emerge even from the most loosely planned trip. So far – they're old industries, old family connections – and oysters!

Oysters seem to be among the things that firmly divide people's opinions – up there with religion, politics, and sports teams! Mani remembers a Swiss Club celebration many years ago where there were big bowls of raw oysters, and he and a couple of others had them all to themselves. But yes – we're in the "oysters are the food of the gods" camp. The highlight of our weekend in Paris last year was not the art and architecture – it was the oysters from the street-stall.

So, you can imagine our distress when we realised that leaving early for Europe this year will mean we miss the Bluff oyster season. Compensation: each oyster farm has been a "must stop".



Gathering oysters at Totara North

The best oyster eating place so far combined all my three themes. **Family:** we went to Totara North on the Whangaroa Harbour. **Old industries:** it's where my great-great grandfather's family had a kauri timber mill – the last one to operate once the kauri trade finished. The Lanes built ships there too – indeed the last time I was back there was twenty years ago when we took the scow *Te Aroha* 'home' for her 80th birthday. There's not much remaining now – just the huge sheds breaking down in the weather, and some rusting machinery.

Industries change as our lives do. Boat building and timber milling have disappeared from the Whangaroa – but – **oysters!** The new industry of oyster farming means spat are plentiful in the harbour! Heaps of them have colonised the piles of the old wharf buildings at Totara North and grown into gorgeous oysters. We gathered, opened, and ate, until we'd had enough, then stayed the night on the wharf in *Feierabend* and did the same the next day. The cuts in our hands have healed now – but the flavour lingers in our memory.

We'd been exploring another "once-was" industry a week or so before – sulphur-mining on White Island. What an extraordinary place that is; the most consistently active volcano in New Zealand, where you can walk around the fumerols, and experience in the heat and acrid steam that stings your nose and throat what life must have been like for the miners camped out there for months on end. Eventually the economics of getting the sulphur out meant the industry there died (as had a group of ten miners earlier).



White Island sulphur works

Now tourism has replaced mining – much more profitably! We went out on a boat-trip with 70 others of all nationalities. We watched the dolphins which accompanied us on the way out to the island, then donned hard hats and carried gas masks for a long walk with knowledgeable guides.

Probably all school children have heard about the gum-diggers, Maori and Pakeha – and the 900 or so Dalmatians who came out to seek their fortune, and ended up founding the wine industry as the gum ran out. But walking among the holes they dug, and looking at the tools they used, and the conditions they lived in, it all becomes very real. And it was all so recent! The Far North has the longest inhabitation by Maori, and following on, the longest by Pakeha, and yet our history here is so short compared to the layers and layers of history in Europe.

It's also sobering to think about how those forests came to be under ground. The very old ones (125,000 years or so) were, they think, gradually swamped by rising water-levels. The event 45,000 years ago was sudden, cataclysmic – and since all the trees have fallen in the same direction, the preferred theory is a tsunami even bigger than the 32 metre one that went through that area in 1450AD. Scary! We have decided not to think about tsunamis as we park most nights as close to the sea as we can get.

More musings will have to wait till next edition. There are people to talk to (the name *Feierabend* on the bus is a magnet for German-speaking tourists) – and we need to keep heading south to be in Wellington when Taranaki come for the great Cowbell Competition! Till then...