

## **MOKOHINAUS, NEW ZEALAND**

*By Doris Neubauer*



**W**hich part did impress you most?" people keep on asking the two of us after our cruise from the Bay of Plenty to the Bay of Islands in New Zealand. The answer comes as quickly as simultaneously: The Mokohinau (Pokohinu) Islands – a paradise for those who love solitude, the sights of fish curiously checking out your boat, the sound of birds in a starry night, hikes on long forgotten tracks, dives underneath arches and kayaks in clear water.

"Places like this were the reason why I wanted to be a ranger," my partner says, and I sense the longing behind these words. It is the same longing I see in his gaze when he looks at the lush green landscape over the steep hills, the deep blue ocean, and the little islands in the background of the Mokohinau Islands off the northeast coast of New Zealand and approximately 25 kilometres northwest of Great Barrier. Volcanic in origin, the group are some of the most solitary and desolate in the Hauraki Gulf. This said, it does not come as a surprise that we

are the only human beings on top of the hill where the lighthouse overviews the Pacific Ocean. Actually, we are the only visible human beings at all.

Whereas the other islands such as Fanal, Flax and Trig Islands, and offshore stacks of the group, form a wildlife sanctuary and are the habitat for some of New Zealand's smallest endangered species, including the Mokohinau stag beetle, robust skink and several threatened plant species, only Burgess is open to visitors. Nowadays at least.

In former days it was a different story. As secluded and isolated as the island(s) are, the Mokohinau Islands have a spiritual, cultural and historical importance for the Maoris.

In the past, the Ngati Wai tribe visited the islands frequently,

and in season, to harvest grey-faced petrel (muttonbird) chicks. They preserved and consumed them later as a delicacy. Hence, the islands were named "Pokohinu" which can be translated in English as "the oil of the muttonbird." Archaeological sites such as midden (food waste deposits), terraces and occupied rock shelters are evidence for these visits.





The Maoris were not the only ones who left imprints on the Mokohinaus. From the 1880s onwards, three keepers inhabited the isolated island till the last settlers left in 1979. Now, remains of the tramway, which transported materials up to the lighthouse area, their cottages and the lighthouse itself as well as an oil storage and some World War II early warning stations, remind today's visitors of these bygone days. As there is no public ferry service to Burgess Island and just a few charters available, there are not a lot of visitor out there. Among them, cruisers like us are the minority. Most of the humans setting foot on Burgess Island are environmentalists and employees of DOC (Department of Conservation) New Zealand who



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maintain the track, count the gannet colony on Maori Rock close by or make sure that the island stays pest free after the last Pacific rat (kiore) was removed.

Today, we are the only ones on the Mokohinaus. Equipped with a big rucksack stuffed with cookies, a thermo with hot tea, water and blankets, we make our way up to the lighthouse. It takes about 40 minutes to hike from the anchorage south of Burgess Island, where the old wharf was, up to the lighthouse. This is the information you can find on the internet, at least. Maybe we were too excited or too curious, but we climbed the grassy, bushy hill within 10 minutes. There could not be a better spot to watch the sunset, we thought - and the view at the top of the hill, just underneath the lighthouse, really could not have been better. How many hours we spent up there, just taking in the quietude and the vastness, exploring and taking one picture after the other, I do not know.

My partner interrupted our peace at one point and sounded extremely excited. "Look, there is a school of fish!" I know why... After being on the ocean for weeks, cruising from the Bay of Plenty via Mercury Islands and Great Barrier up to the Mokohinaus, it was here, in the distance that we spotted the first school of fish. Unfortunately, commercial fishing has left the former, plentiful sea, in a sad state. One can imagine how uplifting the sight of fish, of birds feeding on the ocean, of sea life in general can be.

"Look, they obviously do not fear people." My partner was pointing out how, nevertheless, untouched this paradise was in comparison with the rest of New Zealand. "They come pretty close to the boat."

After hiking down, we left the unsheltered area in front of Burgess Island and found a better overnight

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anchorage which was not hit by the swell. We found it in between the rocks and arches of the other islands. Despite being quite small, Arch Rock was perfect and with four to six meters, deep enough for our Raven 26 yacht. We wished we had more time to kayak and explore the cliffs and coves. We would have also liked to dive the canyon which is more than 30 meters at the entrance, tapering off to around 6 meters at the far end. It is said to be full of stunning, colourful wall life which puts it on an even par with the legendary (and touristy) Poor Knight Islands. It is something we saved for our next visit.

When the sky got dark, stars and the bioluminescence in the ocean illuminated our little paradise and the songs of birds: red-crowned parakeet, tui, bellbirds - filled the air. So we took our blankets and some cushions, grabbed the sleeping bags and squeezed ourselves into the gap in the cockpit. We closed our eyes, listened to the birds and made a promise: Mokohinau Islands, we will be back soon! 🚩



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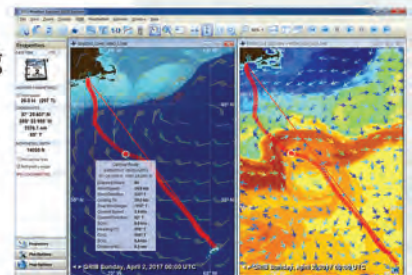
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