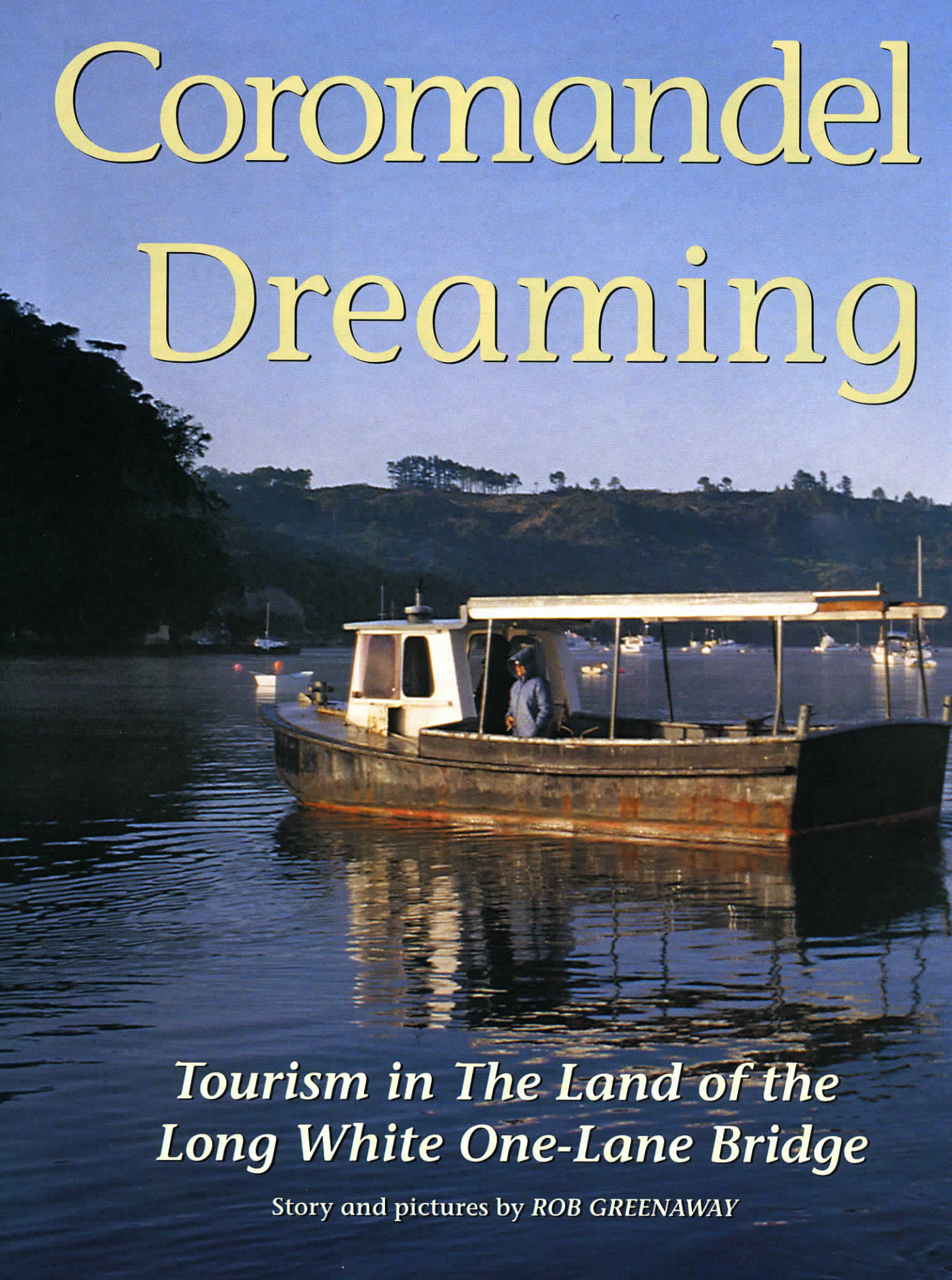
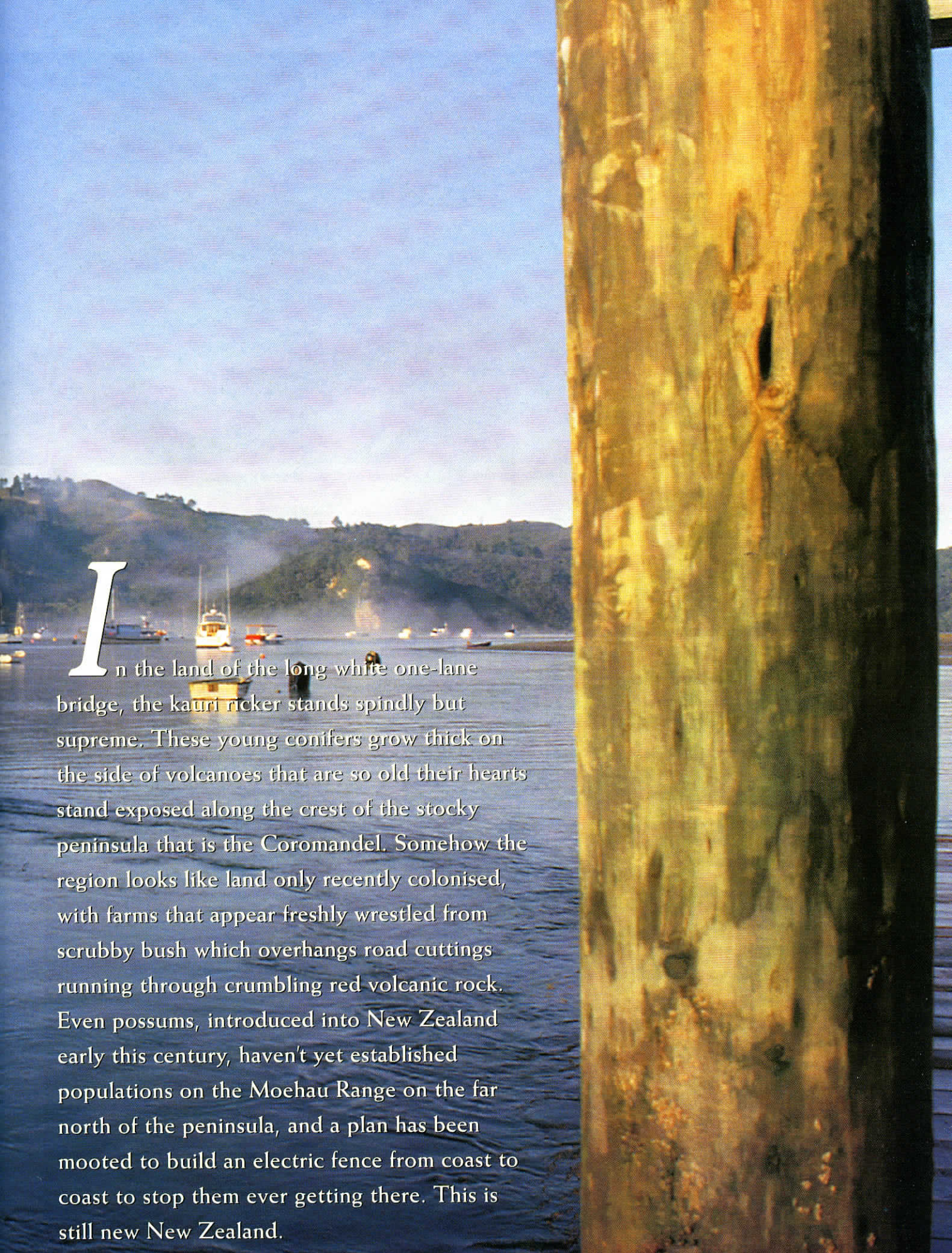
Coromandel Dreaming



Tourism in The Land of the Long White One-Lane Bridge

Story and pictures by *ROB GREENAWAY*



In the land of the long white one-lane bridge, the kauri ricker stands spindly but supreme. These young conifers grow thick on the side of volcanoes that are so old their hearts stand exposed along the crest of the stocky peninsula that is the Coromandel. Somehow the region looks like land only recently colonised, with farms that appear freshly wrestled from scrubby bush which overhangs road cuttings running through crumbling red volcanic rock. Even possums, introduced into New Zealand early this century, haven't yet established populations on the Moehau Range on the far north of the peninsula, and a plan has been mooted to build an electric fence from coast to coast to stop them ever getting there. This is still new New Zealand.

The entrance to the Coromandel region is marked by a series of one-lane bridges. Although they are impediments to the flows of traffic that strike during New Zealand's national holidays — when Aucklanders by the thousands drive to the region's beaches and baches — the narrow, wooden-sided bridges now mark the beginning of my arrival home, although I've never lived in the Coromandel.

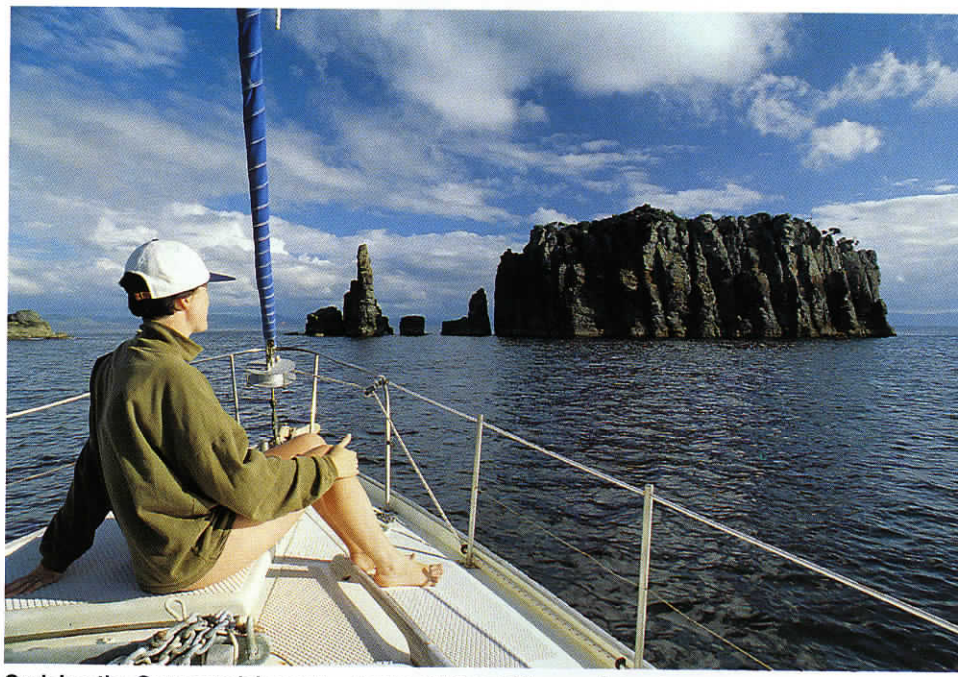
In the 60s and 70s the Coromandel for me was Whangamata and Whitianga, two seaside settlements built around river-mouths where we anchored the kauri-hulled yacht my father built. The river flow on the outgoing tide made the anchor warp wobble, and shoals of small fish would plop in the silence of glassy-calm morning waters.

With bare feet in the summer dust of the curbless streets we strolled the villages to find lime popsicles, impellors and drive belts for the boat's motor, and water and fresh vegetables for our annual six week cruise around the Mercury Islands.

We would forget what day it was, going to sleep in narrow bunks slightly itchy from the dried salt on our sunburned skins, waking to the clattering of seagull claws on the deck and eventually returning to Tauranga with eyes white from a diet of crayfish, scallops and fresh fish.

My excuse to return now is that my parents have retired to Whitianga. The village has changed since the 70s, but the essence remains. If I stay for more than a week, I still forget what day it is.

Perhaps that is why the region is renowned for its alternative lifestylers. Besides the Buddhist centre in Tairua, a couple of New Age-style retreats (one complete with pyramid), and a handful of true communes dotted around the peninsula, there's the family that runs an international software company from their goat farm. There are also several commercial potteries which are located near one of the best sources of clay in New Zealand (what is often called 'alternative' in the Coromandel is usually called good business in most other parts of New Zealand).



Cruising the Coromandel coast — rocks off Great Mercury Island.

Potter, Barry Brickell, for example, remembers the time he spent teaching in Coromandel township. He lasted two terms in 1961, disliked it and became the country's first Kiwi full-time potter. Coromandel is almost synonymous with his art, and for good reason. The volcanic history of the area has created a wealth of raw materials — iron-rich clay which when fired in the kiln turns a rich red, ideal for bricks and terracotta sculptures and pots.

Now in his 60th year, Barry's sun-browned skin slides over a set of healthy potter's muscles. His reasons for settling in the Coromandel as a 26 year-old are similar to the factors that attracted my retired parents — besides the clay.

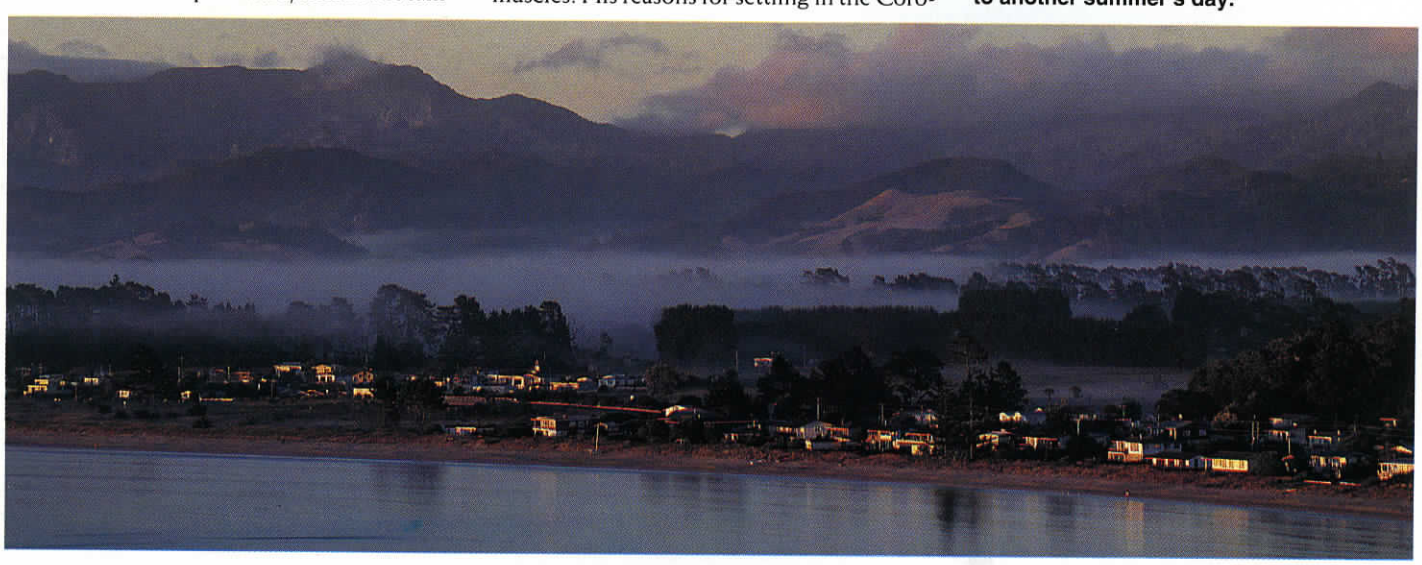
"The peninsula has a wilderness aspect. It's romantic in its wilderness feel. That's the first reason I came here from the city," answers Barry, as soon as you ask him why. He's been asked a thousand times.

"Reason number two, is the abundance of raw materials for potting. Although the raw clay we get nearby is prone to shrinking, we mix in river sand and that gives it a good texture.

"Reason number three is that I could avoid roads and traffic here, but have direct sea access to Auckland."

Up until the early 1960s a small coastal ship called the Onewa would run between Auckland and Coromandel township twice

BELOW: Whitianga township wakes up slowly to another summer's day.



a week, as tides permitted. Barry used this service to deliver his sculptures and pots for sale in Auckland. An improved road network killed that marine service, but Barry still delivers his wares on the Ngaru, his aged, nine metre Thames fishing boat. Like most 'alternative' locals, he is also into reforestation, and he runs a planting programme on his property, with rimu and kauri two favourite species.

Barry Brickell is now as well-known for his pottery as he is for his award-winning tourism venture. While he isn't keen on roads, Barry is enthusiastic about rail. His excuse to satisfy this enthusiasm was the need to access tonnes of heavy clay at the back of his steep 22-hectare bush-clad property, just north of the Coromandel township.

In the late 80s he gave birth to the Driving Creek Railway, currently a three -kilometre stretch of narrow-gauge rail winding through regenerating bush and over a series of viaducts and tunnels. Intended for giving access to clay pits and an area of old pine trees — which provide kiln fuel — Barry is stunned about the success of the railway as a tourist attraction. Dozens of visitors ride the 'Driving Creek' rail, and tour the pottery centre each day during summer.

But Coromandel is not aiming at becoming a humming tourist destination, although new tourism businesses are developing each year. Dozens of operators are ready to take punters on anything from four-wheel-drive trips to horseback expeditions. There is even talk of reinstating the ferry service between Auckland and Coromandel township.

This time, however, the Onewa will probably be replaced by a jet-powered aluminium cruiser. You can hire dive equipment, swim with the dolphins, go fishing, rafting, sailing, mountain biking and sea kayaking.

To keep entertained ten years ago, you dug a hole at Hahei's hot water beach and sat in the thermal spring water that filled it. You lay on a beach and attempted to make conversation over the sound of cicadas screaming in the flowering pohutukawa, crouched for hours over rock pools feeding things to the sea anemones, and dug for pipis in the sand at low tide. You simply walked off into the sunset and forgot what day it was.

Of course you can still do that today, and the perception of a laid-back lifestyle remains the region's attraction. That hasn't yet been lost and the region is aiming to keep it that way. In 1994, Tourism Coromandel — the region's tourism promotion organisation — released its tourism strategy. The strategy is as much a regional planning document as it is a marketing programme, and it addresses very directly the possibility of tourism killing just what it is that gives it life.

It isn't often that you can look at a development plan for somewhere that is very close to your heart and say, 'thank goodness for that'.

Economies like those of the Coromandel

Early morning at Whitianga Wharf, Mercury Bay, Coromandel.

have grown on the fruit of the local ecosystems. Ngati Arawa and later Tainui Maori lived off the sea resources, or kaimoana. The first Europeans in the early 1800s took to felling the kauri, with its timber straight grained, solid and almost as easy to work as butter. Gold was discovered in the mid-1800s and mining continues today in Waihi, although rigorous opposition has prevented other new operations being developed. In the late nineteenth century, farming was encouraged, and government incentives provided the impetus to burn extensive areas of forest to create pasture.

As the wool and meat trade grew, the kauri forest retreated further until the economic depression of the 1930s forced many farmers off their land. Only a little over ten percent of the peninsula remains under its original cloak, and in only a few areas kauri rickers are beginning to show through the extensive low canopy of scrub.

Fishing made the money through the second half of this century, with scallops, crayfish, snapper, kingfish and trevally forming the catch. The vast fish schools of the 1950s have now all but disappeared and the small numbers of scallops and crayfish remaining can only support a few small commercial operations (and the recreational diver who knows the terrain).

A new national fish quota system has also reduced the viability of many small fishing ventures and many boat owners have sold their quotas to larger companies which operate out of the ports of Tauranga and Auckland.

Although the number of fishing boats working in the 60s and 70s made it near impossible to find a berth at the wharf in Whitianga, the well-equipped engineering shops that supported the industry made it easy for us to find impellors and drive belts.

Some workshops are still there and for a few dollars you can have the axle in your car straightened on a steel press and lathe that wouldn't look out of place in the engineering shops of industrial Auckland, although there might be a cat sleeping under the lathe in Whitianga. A little boat building carries on.

The boom and bust cycle of the Coromandel has been running for some time, although it has never really ever boomed, or ever gone totally bust. That is likely to be the case with the latest 'economic miracle' — tourism. The region's tourism strategy is designed to tread that narrow path between reasonable incomes and good lifestyles. The tourism promoters work very closely with the Department of Conservation, and also maintain a watch on developments which will affect the nature of the Coromandel experience.

I had a chat about this with Glenn Leach, chairman of Tourism Coromandel, owner of Aotearoa Tours with his wife Rennie, and a man born in the region. He doesn't think too much has changed since he was a boy.

"I have vivid memories of the dusty smell of the gravel road from the Thames coast all the way to Oamaru Bay. That's sealed now. There are still a few long-drop toilets around, and electricity has replaced the kerosene lamps and cookers that I grew up with. Yes, and the dinghies are no longer clinker built with old two-horse seagull outboards. Besides that the magic remains.

"We still enjoy the taste of mussels straight from the shell, walking across a deserted cove arm in arm, fishing — successfully — from the rocks as the sun goes down, and relaxing in a deck chair with a good book. All this is still available, especially outside the main holiday times of January and Easter."

Glenn doesn't consider the number of visitors to the region to be a threat to his lifestyle or the special atmosphere of the region that attracts visitors.

"We are focusing on low impact development," he says. "A 'Surfers Paradise' experience can be found in dozens of Western countries, and we are planning to avoid that type of creature. However, it's not the number of visitors that is likely to change the character of the Coromandel most. The

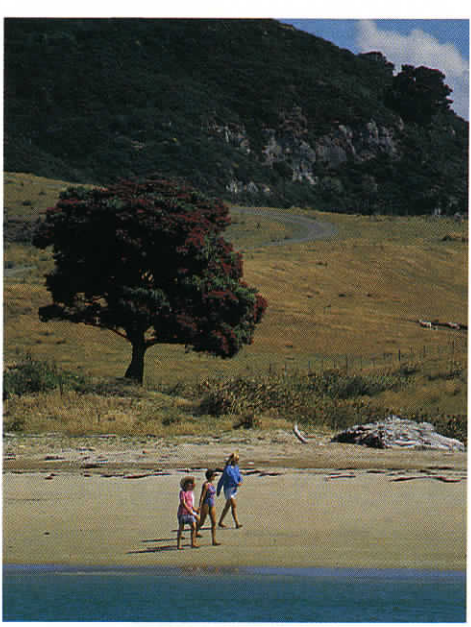
future challenge will be to manage the New Zealanders who wish to make the Coromandel their permanent home. We have to address that as much as direct management of international and domestic visitors."

The tourism strategy developed by the Tourism Board and Tourism Coromandel's Executive Officer, Chris Adams, is therefore unusual in comparison with other regional tourism marketing plans. It is targeted as heavily at promoting the region as it is in advising and reacting to local government planners and bureaucrats to ensure that all new developments maintain the character of the region — whether they be for tourism or not.

"We can market the Coromandel best by looking after it," says Glenn. "Although we do go out there and market what we have, we understand what the essential essence of the Coromandel is, and we have to keep that in tact."

It was a wet winter in Coromandel in 1995. At the time of writing, my parents' water tanks were overflowing — they aren't on any town supply. The macrocarpa they felled at the back of the section last year, and towed to the house with a rusty old Landcruiser, is keeping them warm in the log burner at night. Californian quail race around the garden and grey warblers keep them company through the dewy mornings. Most days are spent on their yacht — winter maintenance at present. A new marina in Whitianga has made getting to the boat much easier, and as a result they reckon it's meant they'll be sailing for an extra five years of their retirement. There are curbs in some of the streets too.

It's thirty years since I first visited the Coromandel, and it's all so different. But it's still very much the same. We'll still go to Coromandel this summer with the explicit intent of forgetting what day it is. Strangely, tourism could help keep it that way. □



Coralie Beach on Mercury Island ... "Can anyone remember what day it is?"