

Travel

HAVING travelled to many countries and witnessed an abundance of exciting things, I thought a waka trip up the Waitangi River in the Bay of Islands would be an interesting, but predictable, journey to make.

How wrong I was.

Together with a score of other people I joined Taiamai Tours for its Maori War Canoe adventure.

Being a photographer had its advantages and I was given the prime position perched up in one of the bows of the double-hulled waka where the most strenuous thing I had to do was try to shoot around the front paddlers. My fellow travellers were not so fortunate and had to paddle in time with the chanted rhythm of the leader of our expedition Ropata Hohepa and his crew — Tiaki Te Haara, Dean Chambers, Wade Tamati and Hendrix Hura.

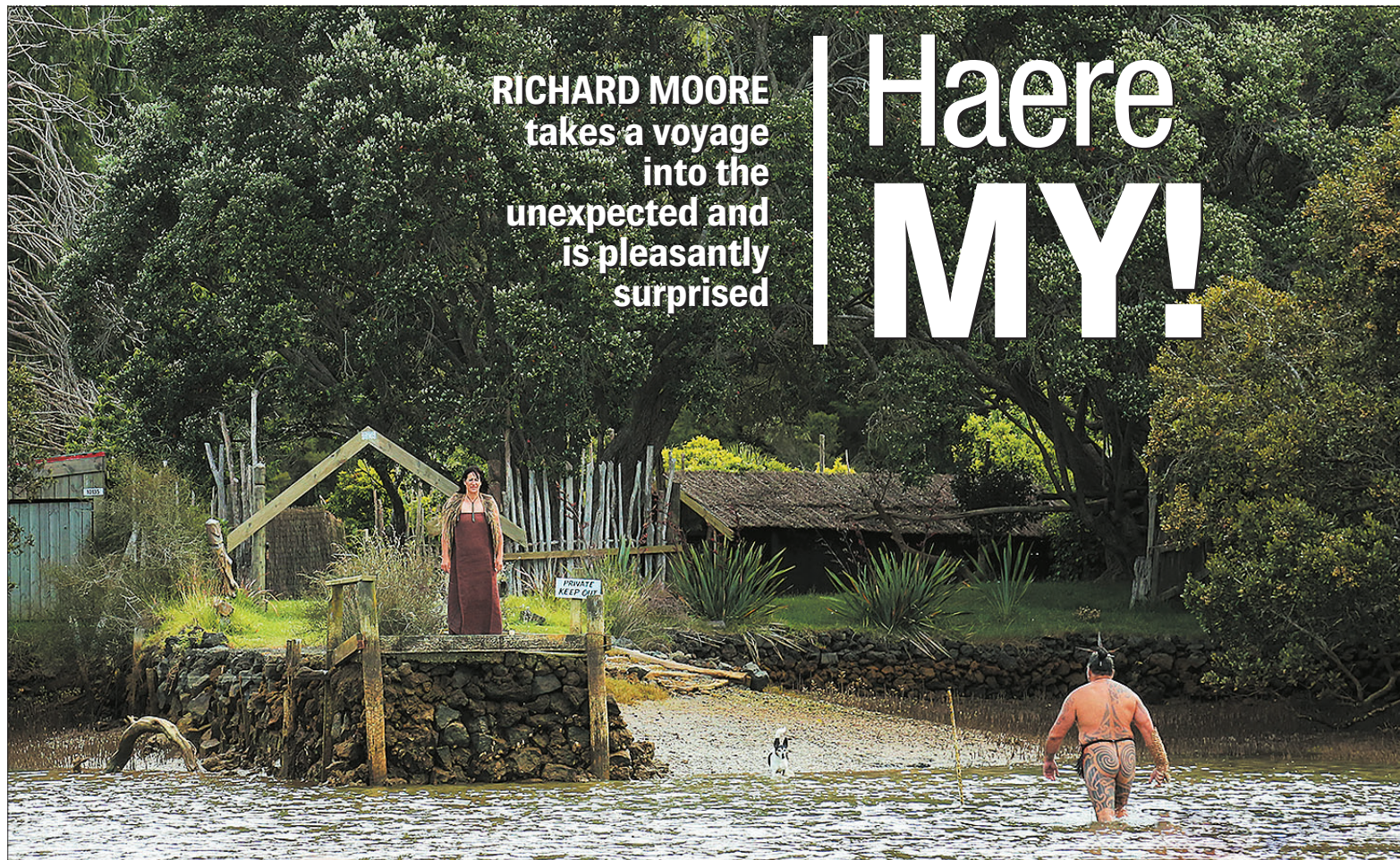
The mainly Dutch visitors took to the water like ducks on the Zuiderzee and clearly enjoyed exerting themselves to power the 50-foot waka.

This is what inclusive tourism is all about, I thought, with people paying to get stuck in and experience something they will talk about for years to come.

Our destination was a family marae a few kilometres up river and this is where things were going to get interesting.

Firstly we had to get off the canoe without falling into the water or getting our shoes wet. With the assistance of Ropata and Co we managed both. It was then a short distance to where our group was going to be challenged by Hone Mihaka, who leads Taiamai Tours with Judy Mihaka.

Hone has a considerable



RICHARD MOORE
takes a voyage
into the
unexpected and
is pleasantly
surprised

Haere MY!

facial ta moko, or tattoo, and also the one of the biggest, brightest smiles you can imagine. He is passionate about Maori traditions and culture.

So the challenge was going to be full-on and whoever was going to receive it needed to know it was a serious part of Maori protocol and should not be taken lightly. Once our leader was chosen — more like everyone stepping back a pace or two leaving poor Caspar out the front — Ropata told him what was expected.

Treat this seriously, look the challenger in the eyes and don't smile. Then Ropata added, don't take the patu (club) — that means you are accepting a fight. Then it was on. Young Hendrix began the

challenge, or wero, with a bounding appearance from inside the marae. In the background Hone lurked and then he stalked forward, patu in his right hand, a hatchet in the other.

Hone proffered the patu to Caspar who unthinkingly went to grasp it. Ropata hissed a warning and our leader quickly pulled his hand away.

On three more occasions Hone offered the club, tempting an acceptance of his challenge, but the Dutchman was not obliging him.

Then Hone backed away and lay the patu down. He pulled out leaves from behind his back and advanced to gently place the leaves on the ground. If Caspar accepted the leaves it showed the intent of his visit was peaceful.

I have to say this was the best challenge I have ever seen. Just to reinforce the moment Hone then made slashing cuts — at a safe distance from Caspar — across his body and head. Then he ran back inside the marae while Judy Mihaka delivered a karanga, or call, to welcome us.

Inside the small earth-floored whare we sat on low benches and listened as Hone, Ropata and Hendrix spoke in te reo Maori. They talked of their culture and traditions.

Our representative, Koro Carman from Footprints Waipoua, supported each speaker by singing a Maori waiata as part of the customary thanks.

We were welcomed to the Waitangi area and Hone spoke of how his culture was very important to him and his family. He talked about his father and ancestors and acknowledged young Hendrix who was about to fly out to live in Melbourne.

Hone also told of his dream to improve the Maori economy in the North to help young people. He saw what they were doing as “a vessel to create opportunities for youth”.

Then, in English, Hone talked of a young man who had died tragically and explained that he had a real concern for young Maori today and the terrible toll suicide was taking.

Then two of the journalists

got up and spoke about losing loved ones. The feeling in the whare was very powerful and it was one of those moments when you realise that language barriers can be overcome when people share what is in their hearts.

Our visit was an astounding one and you can guarantee the Dutch tourists will return home buzzing by the memorable exchanges — as did our party of journalists. Northland is an amazing place to visit, made even more special by Maori determined to revive traditions and show their true world to those who open up to it.

■ Richard Moore is the editor of the online travel guide.

■ He visited Northland courtesy of:
 TIME (To Integrate Maori Experiences) Tours, one of New Zealand's most awarded tourism businesses. They conduct personal, small group and private tours. Contact Ceillhe Sperath on 09 846 3469.
 Footprints Waipoua's Koro Carman, who guided us in to the special world that mixes nature and Maori culture. 09 405 8207.
 NZ Maori Tourism.

