

East Coast Explorer: 10 Days of Beaches, Bays & Geothermal Delights

Ready to explore some of the North Island's most beautiful and diverse regions? This 10-day East Coast road trip takes you from Auckland through the Coromandel Peninsula, down the stunning Bay of Plenty coastline, around the remote East Cape, and into the cultural heartlands of Gisborne, Napier, Taupō, and Rotorua. Whether you're in a campervan or rental car, you'll enjoy golden beaches, geothermal wonders, and rich Māori heritage at every turn. From sunrise at Wainui Beach to sunsets over Lake Taupō, this journey is packed with unforgettable moments.

Quick Overview

- **Duration:** 10 days
- **Start/End Point:** Tāmaki Makaurau – Auckland (circular route)
- **Best Time:** November–April for best weather
- **Driving Time:** Approx. 22 hours total
- **Highlights:** Coastal gems, Māori culture, geothermal wonders, stunning sunrises



Day 1: Auckland → Coromandel Peninsula

Begin your journey with a scenic coastal drive through the Thames Coast to the laid-back charm of Coromandel.

What to Do:

- Grab lunch in Thames or at Waiomu Beach Café
- Ride the Driving Creek Railway
- Optional soak at The Lost Spring in Whitianga

Where to Stay:

- Shelly Beach TOP 10 Holiday Park
- Freedom camping: Long Bay near Coromandel Town



Day 2: Explore Coromandel Beaches

Soak up the region's stunning coastline and iconic beaches.

What to Do:

- Hike to Cathedral Cove (start early)
- Dig your own pool at Hot Water Beach (check tide times)
- Swim or walk to New Chums Beach

Where to Stay:

- Hahei Holiday Resort
- Freedom camp at Flaxmill Bay (self-contained only)



Day 3: Coromandel → Mt Maunganui

Travel via the Karangahake Gorge to reach one of the North Island's favourite beach towns.

What to Do:

- Walk the Windows Walk in Karangahake Gorge
- Hike to the summit of Mauao (1 hr return)
- Relax in Mt Maunganui's saltwater hot pools

Where to Stay:

- Mount Maunganui Beachside Holiday Park
- Freedom camping: Marine Parade (designated area, limited spaces)



Day 4: Mt Maunganui → Whakatāne

A shorter drive brings you to the gateway to the East Cape and home to gorgeous Ōhope Beach.

What to Do:

- Morning beach swim or brunch in The Mount
- Walk the Ōhope Scenic Reserve loop
- Optional: Tour to Moutohorā (Whale Island)

Where to Stay:

- Ōhope Beach TOP 10
- Freedom camp at Maraetōtara Reserve

Day 5: Whakatāne → Gisborne

A long but scenic drive around the East Cape — rugged, remote, and rich in culture.

What to Do:

- Detour to Te Araroa to see Te Waha o Rerekohu (NZ's oldest pōhutukawa)
- Optional: East Cape Lighthouse sunrise (early risers only)
- Arrive in Gisborne for a relaxed evening

Where to Stay:

- Waikanae Beach Holiday Park
- Freedom camping: Gisborne Showgrounds (seasonal)

Day 6: Explore Gisborne

Slow down and enjoy the easternmost city in Aotearoa.

What to Do:

- Watch the sunrise over Wainui Beach
- Visit Tairāwhiti Museum and Wharf Market
- Wine tasting at Bushmere Estate or surf lesson at Midway

Where to Stay:

- Tatapouri Bay Eco Retreat
- Freedom camp: Sponge Bay (check signage)

Day 7: Gisborne → Napier

Head south through wild, coastal countryside toward art deco architecture and vineyards.

What to Do:

- Stop at Morere Hot Springs for a soak
- Take a short beach walk at Mahia Peninsula
- Explore Napier's Marine Parade and art deco trail

Where to Stay:

- Kennedy Park Resort
- Freedom camping: Perfume Point or Marine Parade (SC only)

Day 8: Napier → Taupō

The inland shift reveals rivers, waterfalls, and lake views.

What to Do:

- Visit the National Aquarium or MTG Hawke's Bay
- Stop at Waipunga Falls lookout
- Sunset at Five Mile Bay

Where to Stay:

- Taupō TOP 10 Holiday Park
- Freedom camp: Five Mile Bay (SC only)

Day 9: Taupō → Rotorua

A geothermal wonderland packed with natural beauty and culture.

What to Do:

- Visit Huka Falls and Craters of the Moon
- Wai-O-Tapu or Waimangu Volcanic Valley
- Māori cultural performance and hāngī dinner

Where to Stay:

- Rotorua Thermal Holiday Park
- Freedom camp: Sulphur Point (limited SC spots)

Day 10: Rotorua → Auckland

Wrap up your East Coast loop with one last scenic drive.

What to Do:

- Optional: Hobbiton Movie Set tour (detour via Matamata)
- Stop for lunch in Cambridge or Tirau
- Return to Auckland for your final night

Where to Stay (if needed):

- Ambury Regional Park (freedom camp)
- Auckland Holiday Park (car and van friendly)

What to Pack

- Swimwear and beach towel
- Good walking shoes or sandals

- Insect repellent and reef-safe sunscreen
- Layers for changing weather
- Camera and power bank
- Reusable water bottle and daypack

Local Travel Tips

- Book Coromandel and East Cape stays in summer
- Always check tide times for Hot Water Beach
- Many roads around East Cape have no reception — download offline maps
- Try to fuel up before long stretches (like Te Araroa to Gisborne)
- Keep cash handy for remote markets or honesty-box stalls

Must-Try Local Flavours

- Coromandel: Mussel fritters at a roadside café
- Mt Maunganui: Cinnamon buns at Spongedrop Café
- Whakatāne: Fish curry at Spice Junction
- Gisborne: Rosé and cheese board at a local vineyard
- Napier: Bluff oysters or Hawke's Bay lamb
- Rotorua: Traditional hāngī meal

Need to Know

- Cell coverage can be patchy on the East Cape
- Freedom camping is only allowed in designated areas — check signage
- Some DOC campsites have no water or toilets — come prepared
- Watch for sharp coastal turns and narrow roads between Tolaga Bay and Mahia

TohuTravellers – Trust the Journey