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"A Different Light"

A Different Light –14th October 2023 – “The long and Winding Road to the Hokianga”

As occasional, but dedicated, holiday makers my wife Sally and I, often embark on trips seeking adventure (some) , relaxation (lots) , and always memorable experiences. Recently, we had the opportunity to visit the picturesque Hokianga Heads Hotel, perched at the mouth of the Hokianga Harbour. With high hopes and a confirmed reservation, Sally and I were excited to be going back to one of our favourite getaways. However, what awaited us was a Tale of Unexpected, which was memorable for sure but for all the wrong reasons.

The drive from Waipu to Hokianga Heads seemed to stretch into infinity, taking us through the winding roads of Mangakahia and eventually onto State Highway 12. The weather that day, was wild and diverse – one moment, the sun would break through the clouds, casting a sparkle over the landscape, and the next, thunderstorms would erupt, unleashing torrential rain.

As we navigated the winding roads, we also found ourselves caught in the midst of numerous bouts of hail, each pellet a stark reminder of nature’s capriciousness. It was as if the weather itself was trying to test our determination, setting the stage for what would turn out to be a bit like the Rocky Horror Picture Show’s opening few scenes portraying the hapless Brad and Janet .

“ It’s all about getting from A to B, A to B,” - I so dislike this cliché that reduces our travel experiences to mere destinations. Little did I know that this time, “B” would turn out to be a colossal anticlimax.

The Hokianga Heads Hotel, our ultimate “B,” was supposed to be the culmination of our trip—a place of comfort and serenity after battling the wild weather and winding roads. But reality had a different plan in store for us.

As Google Maps counted down the final moments until our arrival at the Hokianga Heads Hotel, I couldn’t help but notice a peculiar sight. Orange cones on the driveway entrance, a subtle sign that something was amiss. Ignoring my initial concern, I pressed on, determined to reach our destination.

What greeted us at the hotel’s entrance was again unanticipated. An oddly parked car, its driver looking more than a little grumpy, sat right in front of the hotel entrance. With his car door flung open to the weather, he sat staring disconsolately into the hail. Confusion and disbelief. The surly-looking driver, his frustration palpable, got out of his car and approached my car window. He asked me if I had a booking, and I defensively replied that indeed I did. He grumbled, “Me too, and they are shut. It says on the door, ‘closed for renovations.’”

As the reality of the situation sank in, my heart sank along with it. It was a feeling of disbelief mixed with disappointment. How could a place that had confirmed our reservations just days ago now be closed for renovations without any prior notice? In fact, we had an email asking us what our time of arrival would be, if we had any mobility needs (which hugely impressed me) and if we were going there for a special occasion.

The front door had a notice on it advising that the Hotel was closed for renovations and to ring the General Manager Tim for further information. We rang Tim. Tim did not seem overly concerned. He said the Hotel had been shut for 6 weeks and asked where we had made out booking. “Directly from the Hotels website”, we replied. “Well you would have got an email notifying you of the cancellation”, Tim said. No we did not.

We drove in search of a solution, heading towards the Opononi Visitors Centre, where my wife shared our woeful tale with the extremely helpful Becky. Her empathy was a ray of hope in our otherwise bleak situation. She said that we were the 3rd people that day with the same story.

Becky immediately sprang into action, making calls to local accommodation providers, despite the added challenge of a Country & Western Festival, which was in full swing. My wife, although grateful for Becky’s efforts, couldn’t help but feel a sense of pessimism creeping in. She returned to the car and despondently asked, “Shall we just go home?”

But at that very moment, like a modern-day Mother Teresa braving the hail, Becky emerged, her scarf wrapped securely over her head. She crouched down next to the car window. With a reassuring smile, she said, “I’ve found a nearby Airbnb, and it’s on the ground floor.”

While we were very grateful for the bnb which saved us from a gruelling road trip back to Waipu, it wasn’t the luxury villa we had been looking forward to. There was no private spa, no view and no restaurant. We settled for crackers and cheese for dinner, washed down with the warm bubs we had brought with us.

The next day the weather reverted from hail and thunderstorms to sunshine. We spent an enjoyable day at a café and then the pub, chatting to gregarious and friendly locals about the improved weather and the Country & Western festival. We asked locals what was going on with Hokianga Heads Hotel. Each time we had the same distant and vaguely dark answer - that things ‘weren’t good’ there, but the original owner was back in the saddle. I rang the owner Shane Lloyd a key figure in the Hokianga Tourism sector, a man of action. A man of mana. When I told him our story to say he was mortified, would be a gross understatement. He said he would rectify the website booking issue straightaway. He said that 5 years ago they had leased the hotel out and things have not been ‘good’. He was in the process of doing a total refurbishment to breathe life back into the hotel. It would be open in December with a new name given by the locals as a tribute to the magnificent sand dunes of the Hokianga Harbour. It will be called The Sands Hokianga Hotel. We certainly look forward to going there to experience the sparkling new Sands Hotel in the summer.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.