



TASTY OFFERINGS: The scenery on the Mangawhai Beach walk is great — and so is the food that Jack Spyksma (below) produces for walkers.

PICTURES / JIM EAGLES, PAUL ESTCOURT

# Keeping track up north

**W**E CLIMBED the narrow track through the long, wet grass, up one last steep slope and, suddenly, there before us was the magnificent sight of the Hen and Chickens, Sail Rock and Little Barrier, framed by Whangarei Heads and the stone figures of Manaia to the left and Cape Rodney to the right, all floating in a glittering silver sea.

We had reached the start of one of the most spectacular sections of Te Araroa — the national walkway system — the Mangawhai Cliffs track.

The section of track we had walked that morning, starting from near Lang's Beach, is known by locals as "the Missing Link", because when it opened in 2009 it joined together the established Brynderwyn and Mangawhai Cliffs trails.

And, in many ways, that's a perfect description of what the Te Araroa Trust has achieved since it was formed in 1994: filling in the many missing links between existing tracks to produce a long pathway — Te Araroa — stretching 3000km from Cape Reinga in the Far North to Stirling Pt near Bluff in the deep south.

The first such link was built by the trust in 1995, from Kerikeri to

Walking a spectacular coastal section of Te Araroa is a special New Zealand experience, writes Jim Eagles

Waitangi, and enough joining up has been done over the years for the whole pathway to be officially opened this weekend.

Catered Coastal Walks, which was hosting us for our walking weekend, provides a great example of the spin-offs from Te Araroa: a successful small business which takes advantage of that marvellous long pathway as well as opening up a further network of tracks on private land.

Natalie and Jac Spyksma came up with the idea of setting up a coastal walks business while they were doing the Routeburn Track and pondering life after selling their garden centre and café in Mangawhai Heads. "Suddenly it came to us that there were equally spectacular tracks back home that we could help walkers to enjoy," said Natalie. "We talked to a lot of people, did a lot of research... and here we are."

So on Friday evening after work we headed north to the Spyksma home, set on 15ha of regenerating bush with spectacular views of Bream Bay, where a wing origin-



ally built for the children now provides two double-bedrooms, a lounge and a dining area for walkers.

Dinner that night — yes, that's why it's called Catered Coastal Walks — showed the benefits of Jac's previous life as a chef: Moroccan chicken breast and

roasted vegetable stack with lemon and coriander drizzle, poached asparagus and snow peas and a mixed salad, with a rhubarb meringue sandwich for desert. Yum.

Next morning after breakfast, and with a tasty lunch in our packs, Natalie drove us down to

Waipu Cove for our first walk. The plan was to go along the beach as far as the mouth of the Waipu River, then retrace our steps and head back to Lang's Beach.

Alas, we had barely got past Waipu Cove Surf Club when my walking buddy, John, got the first in a series of important calls. I left him sitting on a sign proclaiming the presence of a wildlife refuge and wandered on, enjoying the mix of amazing coastal views, interesting patterns on the sand dunes, beautiful shells on the tideline, kayakers fishing and surfers trying to make the most of the small waves.

A series of notices along the edge of the dunes advised that endangered New Zealand dotterels, fairy terns and variable oyster catchers were nesting here. A brightly coloured sign, presumably by a local youngster, added: "Stop! Fairy terns nest here. Beware or wash your hat."

I soon discovered the significance of the warning when a fairy tern circled over my head. This was exciting stuff — despite the risk of having to wash my hat — because there are only about 50 fairy terns left in New Zealand so

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