

# Walk back in time

In the enchanted forests of New Zealand's Te Urewera National Park, BRIDGET MARTIN discovers Ents are alive and thriving

**M**Y FRIEND was insistent. "You must go to Lake Waikaremoana," she said when I told her we were planning to go to the North Island of New Zealand. "It's the original home of the Ents."

I am now so grateful for my friend's advice. Every few metres my husband and I are stopped in our tracks by a forest guardian, ideal for a part as the giant, talking trees that shelter some Hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*. With gnarled, moss-covered trunks and fern-festooned branches, these are indeed trees of mythical character.

We have embarked on the short Tawa walk for starters, a circuit track which should take us 30 minutes. In fact, we fall under a spell among the trees and emerge well over an hour later.

In a country where almost all of the original vegetation has been cleared, Te Urewera National Park, with Lake Waikaremoana at its centre, protects the largest remaining tract of native forest in the North Island.

It is magnificent. There are rimu and rata trees, tawa and hinu, miro, kahikatea and totara. Oh, and beech, too.

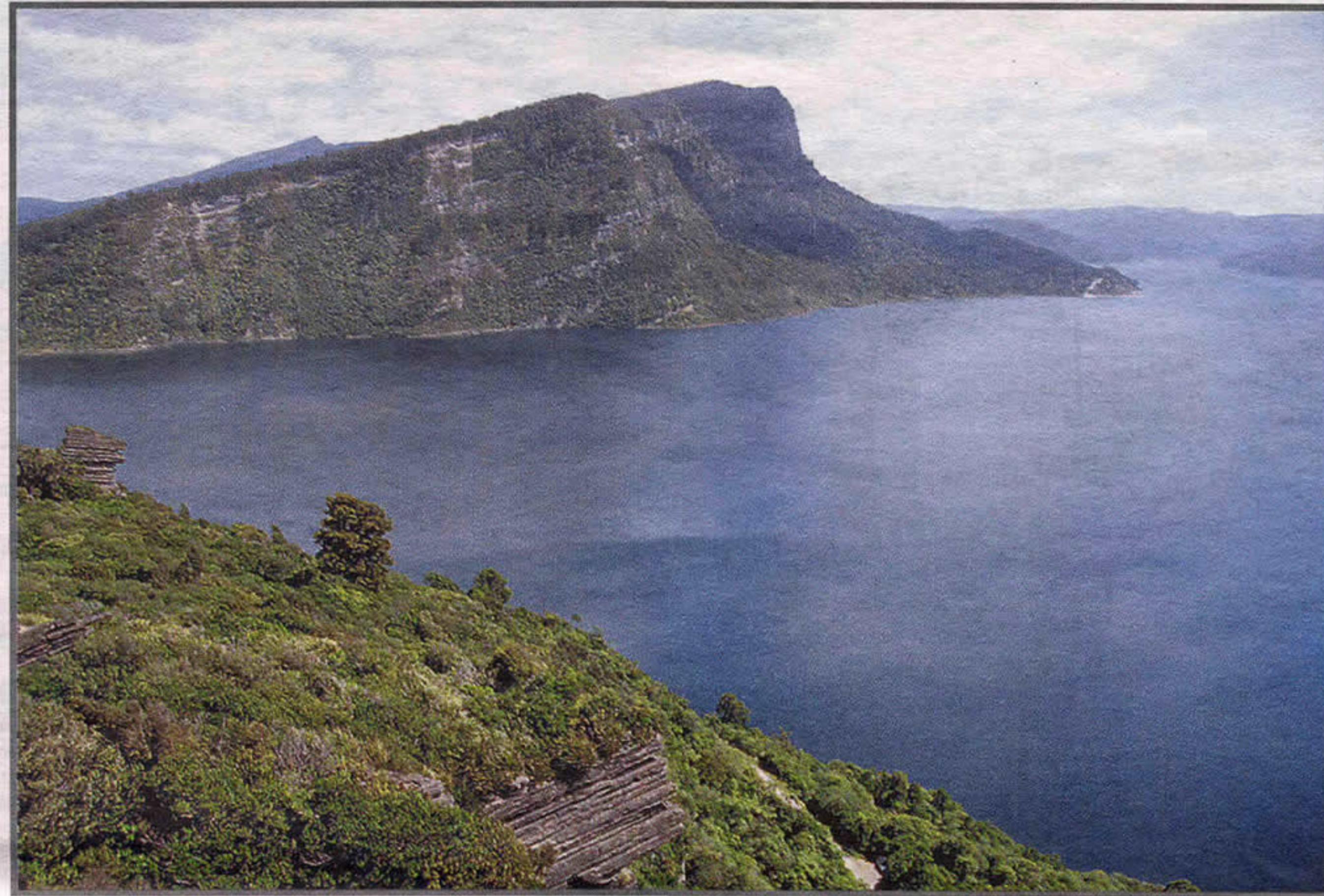
Visually, it is a complete contrast to the bare, sheep-shorn hillsides which typify much of the countryside of North Island.

The reason this area of forest was so fortuitously spared from clearing was the fierceness of the local Maori population.

They could see no benefit in losing their land to the pakeha, the white people, who were converting the country to farmland.

A highlight of the Tawa walk is the giant rata tree. Thought to be as much as 1000 years old, it would have started life when the seed germinated high on a branch of a mature rimu tree.

From there it would have sent long roots to the ground, increasing its rate of growth as it



**NORTHERN EXPOSURE:** Lake Waikaremoana and Panakira Bluff from Lou's Lookout in Te Urewera National Park

tapped into nutrients on the forest floor.

Eventually, having produced enough roots to become a free-standing tree, the rata outlived its host which long ago rotted away.

Now free-standing it is thought to be the largest rata tree in New Zealand, measuring 12.2m around the base.

We drive on to the visitor centre on the shores of Lake Waikaremoana.

The lake itself is not at all old. About 2200 years ago an enormous landslide, probably triggered by a powerful earthquake, blocked the gorge through which the Waikaretaheke River was flowing. Debris 300m thick filled the valley for a distance of 4km.

Within minutes (how do they know these things?) another

landslide piled in on top of it. The effect was to dam the river, creating a vast, 248m-deep lake.

From the visitor centre we set out on a more demanding walk to Lake Waikareiti, created by yet another, much older landslide.

Thought to have been the world's biggest, it happened about 16,000 years ago when a 10km long section of country simply slid off the nearby ridges.

Lake Waikareiti, among others, formed in depressions in the debris.

One of New Zealand's most pristine lakes, its name means "little rippling waters"; the much larger Lake Waikaremoana's name means "sea of dashing waters".

To reach Lake Waikareiti we

must cross the landslide, ascending 300m.

This track passes through what surely must be some of the most beautiful forest in the world.

Ground ferns carpet the forest floor below a canopy of tree ferns, and through this lacy layer thrust the tall trunks of red and silver beech trees and giant rimus.

Along the way we spot a dark shape, hunched on a moss-covered branch. It is a morepork, an owl, named for its call.

This one is trying to get some sleep but is suddenly surrounded by a busy, squeaking flock of rifleman. Hyperactive balls of feathers, weighing just 6g apiece, these birds are now found only in native forest remnants such as Te Urewera National Park.

During our stay we tackle a

variety of short walks. We descend from the visitor centre to admire three waterfalls known collectively as the Aniwanuiwa (rainbow) Falls.

We climb up to Lou's Lookout for a fine overview of Lake Waikaremoana from the top of a rock bluff.

We explore lakeside caves and do a circuit of the spring-fed Green Pool.

With 600km of walking tracks within the park, we are spoiled for choice but are not equipped, or fit enough, to tackle long walks. It is possible to lose yourself for several days on the longer tracks, staying at pre-booked huts along the way.

Having had a taste, however, we will be back for more.



**MAGICAL** (Clockwise from above): Towering trees and ferns along the Tawa Walk; fungi light up the ancient forest; and the Aniwanuiwa Falls, just a short walk from the visitor centre



## NEW ZEALAND



**GETTING THERE:** Freedom Air flies Brisbane to Hamilton and Palmerston North [www.freedomair.co.nz/](http://www.freedomair.co.nz/) Air New Zealand flies Brisbane to Gisborne and Rotorua [www.airnewzealand.com.au/](http://www.airnewzealand.com.au/) Te Urewera National Park is on the 213km route from Rotorua to Wairoa on the east coast, south of Gisborne.

**ACCOMMODATION:** Bed and breakfast at the Waikaremoana Homestay in Tuai, just outside the southern entrance to the park. NZ\$85 (about \$A80) double. Phone: +64 6 837 3701; Fax: +64 6 837 3709; email [ykarestay@xtra.co.nz](mailto:ykarestay@xtra.co.nz); [www.waikaremoanahomestay.co.nz](http://www.waikaremoanahomestay.co.nz) The Waikaremoana Motor Camp on the shores of the lake has camp sites, cabins and basic huts; Ph: +64 6 837 3826. Campsites along the tracks can be booked through the visitor centres.

**INFORMATION:** Contact the Aniwanuiwa Visitor Centre, Ph: +64 6 837 3803; Fax: +64 6 837 3722; email: [urewerainfo@doc.govt.nz](mailto:urewerainfo@doc.govt.nz) or the Ikaohenua Visitor Centre, at Murupara, Ph: +64 7 366 5641.