



How to encounter Maori culture in New Zealand

By Elissa Richard | Compass – Tue, Mar 26, 2013 5:38 PM EDT

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Maori rock carvings in New Zealand. (Photo: John Garay)

New Zealand's gorgeous geology may get all of the glory, but encounters with this island nation's indigenous population provide an unexpected cultural richness.

Today, some 15 percent of Kiwis count themselves as Maori and maintain tribal ties related to their ancient Polynesian ancestors, who first inhabited these lands some 1,000 years ago. The rich fabric of the Maori experience is woven into the tapestry of the country's heritage and its contemporary cultural scene, and sampling the Maori's unique customs and traditions should be an integral part of any traveler's itinerary.

Most Maori encounters come clustered in cultural centers, museums, and art galleries on the North Island, with the heart of the Maori experience set in the geothermal area of Rotorua. Read on for a quick cheat sheet to the most essential Maori cultural experiences, each vetted and personally reviewed during my recent month-long New Zealand tour, along with a local glossary.

Essential Maori Cultural Experiences

Te Puia, Rotorua

View Maori artists at work in carving and weaving schools at the New Zealand Maori Arts & Crafts Institute, and experience a *powhiri* and traditional cultural performance at the onsite *marae*. Guided tours of the grounds illustrate



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how the Maori have long used the geothermal features of the region—steaming vents, boiling mud pools, and the active Pohutu Geyser—for cooking, bathing, and heating purposes.



(Photo: John Garay)

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

In the Maori language, “*te papa tongarewa*” translates roughly to “a container of treasures,” a fitting description for the historic Maori art and artifacts highlighted here, along with interactive displays featuring Maori culture and history, including a contemporarily carved *marae*. The six-floor national museum, set in the country’s cultural and administrative capital, also showcases New Zealand’s natural history, multicultural landscape, and fine arts.

Mitai Maori Village, Rotorua

Set in Rotorua, Maori’s cultural heartland, the family-run **Mitai Maori Village** invites visitors to experience an evening cultural performance, to view costumed warriors display weaponry and paddle a stream in a traditional *waka*, and to learn more about traditional carvings and tattoos. All of that comes followed up by a lip-smacking *hangi* feast featuring lamb, chicken, sweet potatoes, and more. The cultural village’s grounds also afford a glimpse of glowworms, and highlight a crystal-clear spring that’s considered sacred to the Maori tribe.

Hetet Art Space, Lower Hutt

Set on an authentic *marae* just outside of Wellington, the family-run **Hetet Art Space** showcases traditional and contemporary arts and crafts displays from local New Zealand artists. Adjacent artists’ studios and workshops help foster traditional Maori arts like carving and weaving. Book in advance for small-group and refreshingly non-touristy guided tours of the surrounding *marae*, and gain more insight into the inner workings of the community.



Wellington, New Zealand. (Photo: John Garay)

Waitangi Treaty Grounds

New Zealand’s founding treaty was signed on these grounds by both leading Maori chiefs and the British Crown back in 1840, marking the terms of European settlement. Though precise treaty terminology is disputed today, it has remained an important cornerstone of law in the country. Learn more about the document on guided tours, view the world’s largest ceremonial *waka*, and catch one of the newly launched cultural performances at the onsite *marae*.

Tamaki Maori Village, Rotorua

A coach transfer shuttles guests to this Maori village on the outskirts of Rotorua, where the traditional protocol of entering a *marae* ensues. Take in cultural performances and demonstrations of Maori art forms and rituals, highlighting weaponry, tattooing, weaving, and more, in an atmospheric forest setting, before tucking into a traditional *hangi* feast.

Maori Rock Carvings, Lake Taupo

Cruise scenic Lake Taupo, the world’s largest volcano crater lake, for front-row seats to the Maori Rock Carvings. Accessible only by boat, hop aboard a short cruise-tour with **Chris Jolly Outdoors** for up-close ogling of the tall cliff carvings—created by a master Maori carver in the early ‘80s, they highlight a prominent depiction of a mythological Maori navigator.

[Click here for a helpful glossary covering Maori culture.](#)



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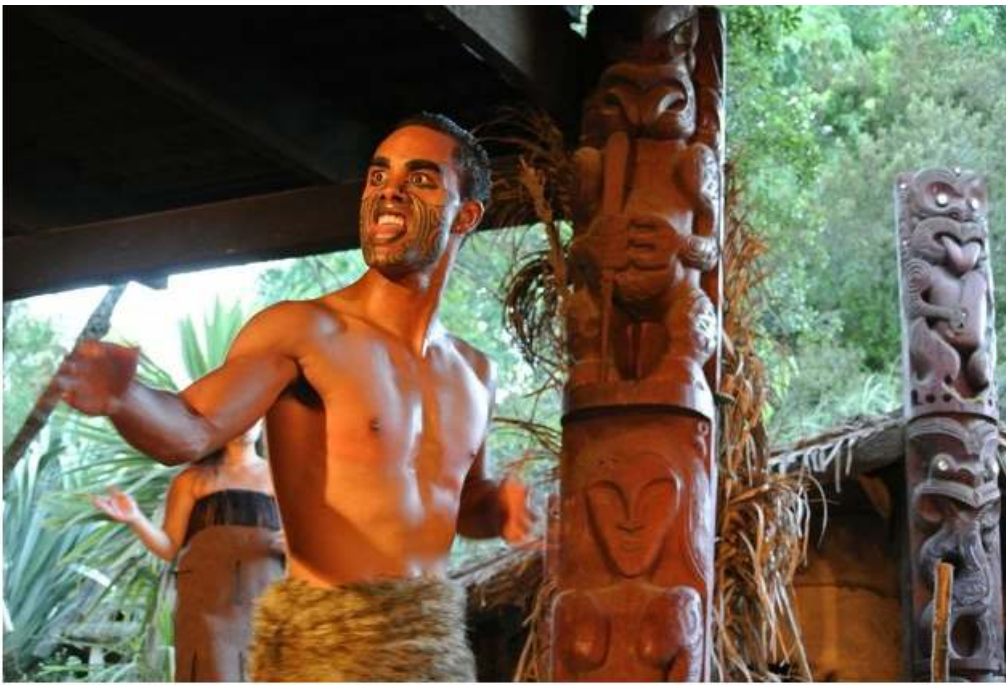
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A Maori Haka display. (Photo: John Garay)

An Essential Glossary to Maori Culture

Te Reo: You'll quickly discover that the Maori language, *te reo*, is widely represented throughout New Zealand, with many of the towns and natural features bearing their original (and often difficult to pronounce!) Maori names. Upon arrival in "Aotearoa," New Zealand's Maori name, meaning "land of the long white cloud," have a go at greeting the locals with a friendly *kia ora*, a handy word meaning hello, welcome, and goodbye.

Marae: The *marae* marks the Maori meeting grounds and the heart of the community—guests are traditionally welcomed here at the main meeting house, or *whareniui*.

Powhiri: This formal welcome ceremony to a *marae*'s meeting house begins with a warrior-posed challenge, followed by a peace offering, a *hongi* greeting, and a call to welcome by the local tribeswomen. Various greetings, speeches, songs, and feasting typically ensue.

Hongi: A ceremonial touching of noses in greeting.

Hangi: A customary Maori cooking method; food is prepared on hot stones, which are dug into the earth to serve as an underground oven.

Kapa Haka: These performances of synchronized group song and dance showcase traditional costumes, symbolic movements and facial expressions, and skillsets like *poi* twirling. *Kapa haka* is most famously illustrated by the fierce *haka*, a terrifying Maori war dance—it's a powerful display of vigor that you won't soon forget.

Whakairo & Raranga: Traditional methods of *whakairo* (carving) and *raranga* (weaving) are represented in workshops and showcased in galleries around the country. The works, far more than being purely decorative, serve to depict Maori stories and legends.

Waka: Canoes used for voyaging, ceremony, or battle.

Ta Moko: The traditional art form of tattooing, which the Maori historically used to illustrate their identities via patterns carved onto the face or body.

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