



# Palliser Bay

## Wellington



At the southern-most point of the North Island, the road from Lake Onoke to Cape Palliser offers dramatic scenery with many attractions. A rich history of Māori occupation, still evident in the landscape and legends of the area, is overlaid with a history of nineteenth century seafaring disasters and the fishing village lifestyle of today.

### The first inhabitants

Māori mythology teaches us that Maui-tikitiki-a-Taranga was the demi-god who fished up Aotearoa from the Pacific Ocean, using the enchanted jaw-bone Muri-rangi-whenua, which he had fashioned into a beautiful fish hook. Legend records that Palliser Bay is the mouth of the huge fish and that Wairarapa Moana is the fresh-water eye of Maui-tikitiki-a-Taranga's fish, Te Ika-a-Maui (Maui's fish).

Early ancestors, by word-of-mouth transmission, tell that Te Ika-a-Maui had lain dormant for many, many moons until the tall and handsome Kupe of Rangiatea, with his wife Kura-marō-tini, and their people, set sail aboard the large and handsome canoe *Matahou-rua* (a double canoe capable of carrying up to 300 people). Kupe and his people set sail from their homeland, Hawaiki, to discover the promised land that the demi-god Maui had created for the Māori people.

After a long and hazardous journey across unknown seas, the navigators sighted Aotearoa. They eventually made it to Palliser Bay, where they rested and recuperated at Matakītiki and decided to make it their

headquarters. Māori tradition records that Kupe and his people were the first residents and pioneers of the South Wairarapa and were in occupation for more than two decades.

Kupe himself named Matakītiki, which means 'to look upon with admiration' because of its beautiful view. When he and his wife ascended a nearby hill, he looked across the blue waters of Cook Strait and saw the snow-capped Tapuaenuku, the highest peak in the inland Kaikoura Range.

### Places of interest at Palliser Bay

- The Cape Palliser lighthouse was installed in 1897. Visitors may climb the 250 steps to take in the view from the lighthouse.
- The fur seal colony at Matakītiki-a-Kupe and on the immediately adjacent coastline is the only one in the North Island where breeding is well established.
- Geological formations of note include the Putangirua Pinnacles and the coastal Whatarangi Bluff. Active erosion threatens the road below the cliffs, so drive with care! Many of the coastal rock

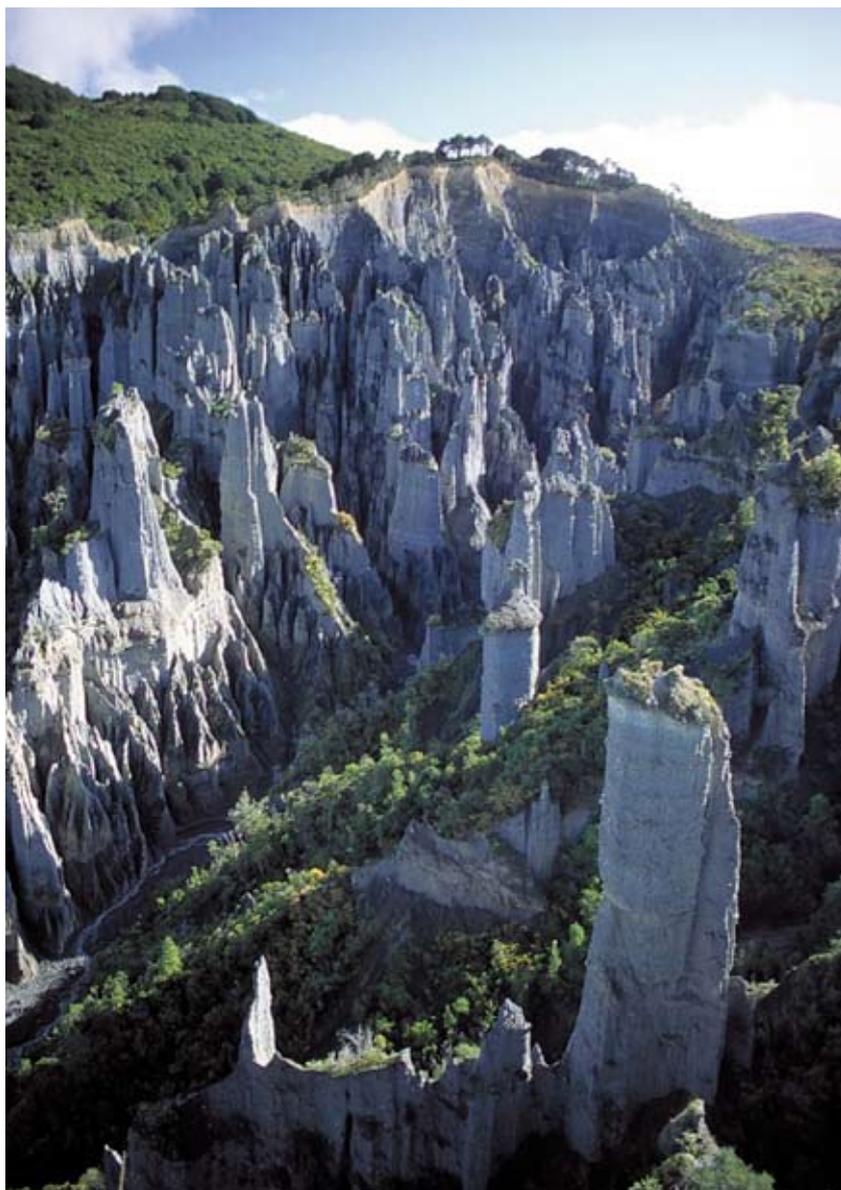
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formations contain fossils.

- The reefs at Cape Palliser comprise lumpy pillow lava erupted onto the sea floor more than 100 million years ago.
- Nga-ra-o-Kupe or Kupe's Sails are high slabs or rocks resembling sails straining to point into the stiff southerlies of Cook Strait. They derive their name from the early Māori explorer, Kupe.
- Traces of twelfth-century stone walls along the coastal terraces around Te Humenga Point hint at the extent of prehistoric settlement. These are some of the earliest Māori occupation sites recorded in New Zealand.
- Many ancestors of the Ngāti Hinewaka people are buried along this coast, making this a very sacred place for Māori. Visitors are, therefore, asked to treat the area with respect.
- The rugged coastline of Palliser Bay has claimed many ships and many sailors' lives. The anchor from one wrecked ship, the Ben Avon, has been recovered and is now a memorial, created by the Wairarapa Underwater Club to 'further public interest in New Zealand's colourful maritime history'.

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## Putangirua Pinnacles Scenic Reserve

The Putangirua Pinnacles is a spectacular landscape feature that attracts many visitors to the southern Wairarapa. It is one of the best examples in New Zealand of badlands erosion and earth pillar formation. The reserve also incorporates mixed beech-broadleaved forest, mānuka forest, shingle valley flats, unstable erosion surfaces and coastline.

When the Aorangi Range was an island, 7 to 9 million years ago, screes poured gravels onto the coast, much as they do today around Cape Palliser. The Putangirua Stream has exposed this ancient layer of gravels to the erosive forces of rain and floods. Where cemented silts or rocks within the gravel beds prove more resistant than the underlying sediments, spectacular individual pinnacles or 'hoodoos' are formed.

There is an old pā site on the hilltop to the north of the entrance to the reserve. The indigenous vegetation provides a natural corridor from Aorangi Forest Park to the coast, which is uncommon on the Palliser Bay coastline. The coastline is rugged, with nearly vertical hillsides backing narrow, bouldery beaches and rock platforms with dunes on short segments. Dunes south of Te Humenga Point have a rare pingao/spinifex association and small wetlands. The area contains breeding sites of variable oystercatchers, banded dotterels and red-billed gulls.

The area is grazed by stock and other browsing animals, including rabbits, hares and possums. Human settlement is concentrated at Ngawihi and Mangatoetoe; private baches are scattered along the coast. The Department of Conservation administers Kupe's Sail Rock Recreation Reserve and an access strip to Aorangi Forest Park on the Mangatoetoe Stream. The remainder of the land is in private ownership, a substantial portion being owned by Ngāti Kahungunu.

The Matakītiki-a-Kupe coastal strip from Mangatoetoe Stream to Waitetuna Stream is of special significance to Ngāti Kahungunu because of the sites associated with Kupe, the high concentration of archaeological sites, waahi tapu and the once important fishing grounds.

### Further information

For more information about the Palliser Bay area, contact the Department of Conservation's Wairarapa Area Office (phone 06 377 0700) or the Conservation Information Centre in Wellington (phone 04 472 7356).

Ngawihi B. Dix

