

East of The Border

Student 1: Low Excellence

NZQA Intended for teacher use only

④ For some locals, a day in Tokomaru Bay starts at five-thirty. Those who are brave enough to tear themselves from their beds and drive a few minutes on the still dark road will find the gym sleepily blinking light from its windows. As my father and I pull up outside, we can already hear up-beat music pumping from its blue-painted walls. My dad stops inside for a bit of pre-walk banter, greeting the sweating cyclists with, "Now, I now you have all been naughty over the weekend, eating unhealthily. Kia kaha, you'll need to go to the gym three times a day this week." He exits the warm gym, laughter and music spilling out of the door as he shuts it. ①

Welcome to Tokomaru Bay. Perched on the East Coast of the North Island, an hour-and-a-quarter North of Gisborne, the Bay lies at the base of Mount Marotiri. The headlands curving out either side shelter 7km of beach. Tokomaru is home to a pocket-sized, mostly Maori community of about three hundred. But whatever Toko (as it is affectionately called by locals) lacks in size, it definitely makes up for in personality. Home to diverse and caring characters, its four Marae (meeting houses) host entertaining events which foster a sense of community. ③

④ Just down the road from the gym, we meet our local walking partners, Iwiata (Kui) Williams, and Makita Forrester. Falling into step with them, a friendly "Kia Ora" greets us. The conversation drifts to their entry, as part of a group, into a Maori kapa haka (performing arts) competition – with only three days' practice. Koka Kui, her bushy auburn hair framing a lean face, explains, "All the songs we sung were written by Nanny Tuini, (a local composer) so they were songs we were familiar with. So, really, three days was sufficient. We entered as a (competitive) group, but it was only for the purpose of getting other groups into the Matatini... It was cool. We got up, ad lib... that's the enjoyment - being supportive..." The middle-aged Koka Kui walks beside me with a confident, upright stride. I can easily imagine her in her role as the leading woman, claiming the stage. Her skills are not only limited to Maori performing arts either – as a self-confessed culture lover, she can also whip out a Rarotongan hula. ②

The softly spoken Koka Makita switches easily between Maori and English as she talks about their performance. Her brown face shows few traces of her sixty-odd years as she explains how the more skillful performers led the inexperienced ones. "The ones who were rather unfamiliar with the songs were the ones who didn't really do kapa haka...so we supported each other." How appropriate that the word Koka Makita uses for "support" literally means "embracing", suggesting the warmth offered by this fostering community. That's what I like...big family community." "You are close-knit with the people from here," Koka Makita remarks, "you know everyone, our relations. Here, if there's a stranger..."...the whole town knows about it!" I finish. This small-town nosiness draws a chuckle from Koka Kui and I. "Everyone knows everyone, and if there's someone that you don't know, ooh, you get really inquisitive, where do they stay, which house did they buy...and you put a face to the name." ③

④ As we talk, the sun is yawning out of the sea in pastel colours. By the time we part ways with our fellow walkers, calling out "Haere ra" as we return to our car, the bay is already shaking itself awake. We drive towards the main road, and ease our way around a car idling in the middle of the road, its occupant having a good "catch-up" with another parked-car local. The drivers glance up with an easy laugh- Tokomaru Bay is a place where life moves at a slower pace, convention often sacrificed to the laid-back lifestyle. ③

Mid-morning, and the town has settled into its quiet rhythms. As I step into the local Four Square, I hear a cheery "Hello, babe," from my neighbour, Henrietta Moana. Aunty Henri and I head around the back of the shop for her break. Recently, she helped M.C. "Toko's Got Talent", performing several numbers herself. As Koka Makita says, "There's always someone in the Bay who specializes in something." The collared Four Square uniform Aunty Henri is wearing hides a melting voice, and a coordinated line-dancer. Not to mention a great community spirit – she has helped out with horse sports, Christmas at the Pa, Tri Toko, fundraising at the school, a Karaoke club, and line dancing, "And I was doing it all for free," she adds. Her dyed-red hair pulled back into a tight bun, she recalls her enjoyment at listening to everyone singing and dancing at "Toko's Got Talent" – "It was really interesting watching everyone's talents come out, and everyone had fun, that was the main thing," she says. Born and bred in Tokomaru Bay, Aunty Henri (now in her early forties) ①

returned from Australia nearly two years ago. As we sit on our upturned wooden boxes, several cars scattered along the main street, she reminisces about her childhood in a small community. "The freedom that a lot of the kids had, to do whatever they wanted. Security, there was none...because you didn't need to. No danger, everyone knew who you were, And as a kid being able to go swimming without your parent's permission, just going to do stuff..." Now Jamal, her 9-year-old son, is enjoying some of the same benefits, "...that was the other reason why we came back, it was just so that he knew where he came from, you know, what Toko has for him. He's had his horse, and been able to meet a lot of his cousins he didn't know..." she says.

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4 The sun reaches its zenith, and then slowly sinks westward as I head to the gym. On the way, I pick up the key; with a typical Tokomaru Bay Security measure, it is hidden under a paua shell on a neighbour's step. Funky music is still playing as I enter, but the morning crowd is long gone – only three exercisers are toiling away inside. Local policeman Constable Brian Leach is bench-pressing in one corner, a smear of sweat gleaming on his shaved head. By Toko standards, Uncle Brian is a newcomer, having lived here only five years. But his readiness to lend a hand in our community makes him a valuable addition. As well as helping out with the horse sports, he has a new project: working with the older children from a local primary school every Friday for work experience. "Oh, we take them out thistle cutting, and just teach them...tying knots, ropes, that sort of thing, and the purpose of it all, crutching, chain-sawing, just teaching them life-skills."

Leaning back on the padded vinyl bench, Uncle Brian explains the attraction that Toko has for him. "...the people are a lot different as opposed to... further up the Coast. Just a different attitude, you know, and each little town has it. And our one seems to be the best," says Uncle Brian. These attributes of his new home are also catching the eye of other non-locals. "The scenery itself, beautiful bay, as I said, the people are nice. But it's just an attraction for outside people to live here, because of the town. The word is out about Tokomaru Bay, and about how it's the safest community to work in." Not to mention its colourful characters—there are plenty of light moments for those with a sense of humour. Uncle Brian recalls one occasion, when he had to chase a mental health patient around the hills on horseback. "He took off up the hill, ranting and raving...and he stripped off naked and did the haka at the top of the hill," he relates, with a wide grin on his face. "We caught two horses, and rode up around the back of him...and we caught him." Job done.

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More local characters gather around the Four Square in the late afternoon, once school and work are over. My brothers and I head down to the Tokomaru Bay Domain for touch rugby game. A few old men sit on a bench, swapping tidbits of conversation. Without much preamble, teams are chosen, and the two sides face each other. After a few moments, Brook Raroa receives the ball, dodges a touch attempt, and then tears off for the try line, another player in hot pursuit. Brook accelerates, changes tack, and dumps the ball down, hooting victoriously. Everyone else has been standing still, watching the one-on-one speed competition. Good-natured banter is tossed back and forth between the boys, and the teams line up for the next kick-off.

I strike up a conversation with Brook. At fifteen, he is already fully-grown, and the largest boy on the field. I ask him what he enjoys about Tokomaru Bay. "Surfing, hunting, and hanging with the bros," he replies. Brook displays his usual flash of humour when I inquire whether his family is one of the pluses of living here. "No," he jokes with a chuckle, and a glance at my brother. His laid-back words and casual hoodie make him look like just another one of the "bros", but Brook has a hidden talent. One of the competitors at "Toko's Got Talent", he gave a shy rendition of "I Don't Want to Talk About It," as the disco lights flashed, and the crowd cheered. The local spirit was shown by the audience's support— applause wasn't loudest for the best performers, but for the young "bros" and "babes" who needed encouragement the most.

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The fiery sun is melting into the sea as the game finishes, and we stroll back to the Four Square, Auntie Henri, in typical small-town spirit offers us a ride home. As we pull away, a passing car throws us a merry toot. Tokomaru Bay may not be particularly large or bustling. But its local culture and community spirit, not to mention its diverse and delightful characters, make it a great place to spend a day, a week... or even a lifetime!