

# On the beaten track

Auckland's west coast was where the late Sir Edmund Hillary would go to recharge. Now a five-day walking trail, named in honour of the great explorer, has been created there.

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The trail visits Whatipu, the southern-most beach at the entrance of the Manukau Harbour.





Sir Edmund Hillary's son Peter (left) and Waitakere City Mayor Bob Harvey were key players in the trail's creation.

The Hillary family's rustic bach at Whites Beach was their second home. Sir Ed called it one of the special places on Earth.

The wild, undulating coastline that the Hillary Trail explores.

**BEFORE AND AFTER** his all-conquering expeditions, Sir Edmund Hillary would come here, to Auckland's rugged west coast. In all seasons, our greatest explorer would lead his children through the lush native forest of the Waitakere Ranges, and along its beautiful, heart-flipping coastline.

Their rustic bach at Whites Beach, a small stretch of black sand secluded by cliffs and bush, was their second home. Sir Ed called it one of the special places on Earth. Here, he and the kids would test out expedition tents, or walk along the black sand while he planned his next adventure. Legend has it that when he conquered Mt Everest, a telegram landed at the Piha Post Office for the family of his soon-to-be-wife Louise.

It was also where the Hillary family came – after Louise and daughter Belinda were killed in a plane crash in Nepal – to heal their broken hearts and “rechart our lives”, says son Peter.

Now the paths they travelled along that coastline have been united to create the Hillary Trail, a five-day walking track through the Waitakere Ranges, linking the dramatic beaches of the wild west – Whatipu, Karekare, Piha, Anawhata, Te Henga/Bethells and Muriwai.

The Hillary family hopes the 70km trail, which opens next month, will become one of New Zealand's great walks, alongside the South Island's Heaphy, Milford and Abel Tasman tracks. “It's an absolutely stunning walk; we're really excited that it has come to fruition. Five generations of the family have been going out to the old bach on the west coast, and it's a very special place for us,” Peter Hillary says.


The Hillary Trail is also the dream of the Mayor of Waitakere City, Bob Harvey, who has worked on the concept for almost two decades. “For 20 years, Ed and I talked about a trail going along the coast, and I said, ‘We've got to do it.’ Since I became mayor 17 years ago, I've been exploring ways of doing it,” Harvey says. “When Ed died, I approached the family and got permission to use his name.”

It seems the name “Hillary” was the crucial stamp needed for the project to come together. The trail will finally be opened by Prime Minister John Key on January 11, 2010.

It will be managed by the Auckland Regional Council (ARC) which has long wanted to create a multi-day tramp in response to the myriad inquiries park rangers fielded about overnight tramping in the Waitakere Ranges. The trail has the support of the New Zealand government, local councils, Hillary's old climbing partners Mike Gill and Graeme Dingle, and Te Kawerau-a-Maki, the *tangata whenua* (local people) of the Waitakere Ranges.

To walk the Hillary Trail is free, and it's classed as a safe, accessible walk with some challenging sections. Safety is paramount: although it winds over hills and sand dunes, through valleys and gorges, the trail doesn't venture near cliffs, and there are no major river crossings. It also takes into consideration the safety of the forest, making sure visitors don't enter kauri glades, since this can endanger the health of the trees by introducing the deadly kauri collar rot, which can be carried from tree to tree by soil on footwear.

One of the features that sets the Hillary Trail apart, Harvey says, is that walkers can join the track at any of the beaches, and leave when they like. “It's still close to Auckland, so you can walk for a day and



The gannets at Otakamiro Point nest on columns of pillow lava.

“We don’t let the kids bring their laptops or Game Boys out here. I want them to float twigs down a river and find extraordinary things washed up on the beach.”

then get transport back to a hotel in the city,” he says.

Harvey describes the trail as the only “big walk” in the North Island. But why has it been so long in the making? The chief obstacle has been finding suitable accommodation along the way. Years ago, Harvey investigated using the many surf clubs along the route as overnight stays, but there wasn’t enough room at the clubhouses. Now there is a choice of beds – from historic lodges and beach cottages to back-country campsites – put together by the ARC.

The Hillarys still spend weekends at the bach their family built at Whites Beach, between Anawhata and Piha. The land was originally owned by Sir Ed’s father-in-law, Jim Rose, an Auckland lawyer, keen mountaineer and conservationist who gifted Te Waha Point, at the northern end of Piha, to what is now the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park. “In his diaries, my grandfather [Jim] wrote that one of his great hopes was that the public would be able to walk the entire distance of this coast unobstructed by private property, as he imagined Maori would have done,” says Peter Hillary.

“As a student he did a lot of hiking in the ranges down to Whites Beach, Piha and Anawhata. He exclaimed it was the most beautiful vista he’d seen in the Auckland region. Call me biased, but I absolutely agree with him. It’s an incredible piece of coastline – rugged, raw and very much untamed. It’s not a place to lie on the beach and sunbathe; you go there to be amazed by nature. By all means build a sandcastle, but don’t expect it to be there tomorrow.”

As kids, the Hillarys were led on different walks around the Waitakeres; some up rivers into the ranges – “great, jungly, exploratory hikes” – others along the jagged coastline from Anawhata to Bethells, or south to Karekare. “It was a great childhood. I really appreciated the Huckleberry Finn aspect of it, and we still try to keep it all very primitive today,” Hillary says. “We don’t let the kids bring their laptops or Game Boys out here. I want them to float twigs down a river and find extraordinary things washed up on the beach.”

Hillary, who has scaled the world’s highest peak himself, is keen to be among the first to walk the new track. He will tramp alongside Harvey, who has an affinity with the coast, particularly the world-famous, wild Karekare where he has been a weekend resident for more than 40 years. Over those years, he has run the length of these tracks three times, and walked them more than 20.

The Hillary Trail officially begins at Arataki, the Waitakere Ranges’ visitor centre near the township of Titirangi, and wends down through the bush to Whatipu, the southern-most beach at the entrance of the Manukau Harbour. Here, walkers can stay at the Whatipu Lodge, built in 1867 during the days of timber milling, and today running on alternative energy, or the Pararaha Campground.

The next day is the start of the 40km stretch of coastal walking, leading up Gibbons Track to take in breathtaking sea views of the Manukau Heads and Bar, before passing along the ridge overlooking two Maori *pa* (fortified village) sites, then dipping into the Pararaha



The sand dunes of Karekare.

“This trail has been long overdue. It’s a glorious coastline that needs to be loved and appreciated. In honouring Ed, it gives it a special significance.”

Valley. A climb over sand dunes reaches the beach at Karekare, with the natural extremes of its powerful, booming surf and its fairy-veil waterfall.

The walk to Piha the following day takes about five hours, following the easy gradient of Ahu Ahu Track, skirting one of the largest *pa* sites on the coast, Hikurangi, before joining the Winstone Track down to Piha and the three-tiered Kitekite Falls. At Piha, walkers can explore the majestic Lion Rock, the blowhole and the famous Gap, where waves blast their way through a narrow break in the rocks.

Day four passes by the Hillary bach at Whites Beach on the way to Anawhata, one of the most unspoilt of Auckland’s beaches and which can only be reached on foot. The trail continues alongside the Anawhata Stream on to farmland owned by the Bethell family, whose pioneering ancestor John Neale Bethell gave his name to the beach in the 1860s.

Today, Bethells Beach is also known as Te Henga, Maori for “sand”. The Bethell-Paice family are the hosts at Bethells Beach Cottages on the shorefront, where trampers can stay over. Shania Twain, Dennis Conner and Dave Dobbyn have all lain their heads here.

Native bush is left behind on the final day of the walk up to the Muriwai tablelands. The walk ends at the gannet colony at Otakamiro Point, the headland between Maori Bay and Muriwai Beach, where the birds nest on columns of pillow lava.

Eventually, the ARC hopes to extend the trail another 30km along the black sands of Muriwai to the windswept South Head, at the entrance of the Kaipara Harbour.

All of the tracks along the Hillary Trail have been in existence for up to 80 years, but the ARC has now upgraded them to international standard. Sandra Coney, chairwoman of the ARC’s Parks and Heritage

Committee, says the trail embodies self-discovery and adventure, and was created to draw the “average Kiwi” out into the wilderness.

“This self-guided trail is designed to build confidence and skills, and inspire people of all ages to experience walking, tramping and camping in our region. Introducing young people and families to overnight tramping, connecting to public transport, and emphasising accessibility and affordability are values and aspirations that we feel are in keeping with the great Hillary name.”

To protect and manage the park and its tracks, the ARC will keep an eye on numbers on the trail at any one time. Walkers can book their spots at the Karamatura, Pararaha and Craw Homestead campgrounds on the ARC website ([www.arc.govt.nz](http://www.arc.govt.nz)) or by phone (0800 80 60 40).

“This trail has been long overdue,” says Harvey proudly. “It’s a glorious coastline that needs to be loved and appreciated. In honouring Ed, it gives it a very special significance.”

Photograph of Sir Edmund Hillary Popperfoto/Getty Images

