

## The Whanganui River Journey – January 2018 by Wade Rowston

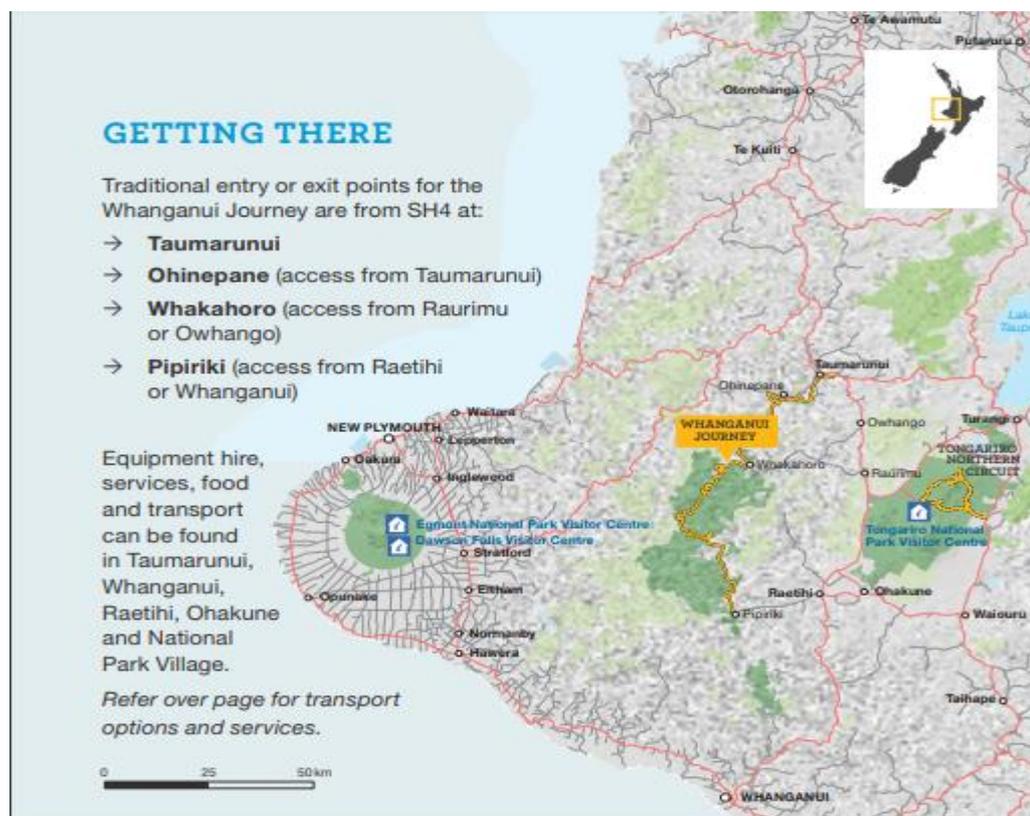
New Zealand has what they call their '9 Great Walks'. Actually, it was recently upgraded to '10 Great Walks' with the addition of a memorial walk that passes near the Pike River Mine in another amazing part of the South Island. The list of walks/hikes/tramps include the Milford Track, Routeburn Track, Kepler Track, Heaphy Track, Tongariro Northern Circuit and more.

Tucked away in the Great Walks list is the Whanganui River Journey. The observant reader would be correct in recognising that is not a walk. It is a 5 day paddling journey covering 145kms of New Zealand's longest river including 198 mostly very friendly rapids. Most visitors take a 3 day option starting further down the river to avoid some trickier sections on Day 1 of the 5 day trip. You can do it with a guide or as 'freedom' paddlers.

As walkers, Carly and I have been working our way through the list of walks in recent years when the Whanganui journey was next on the list, mainly due to Carly picking up a knee injury the year before in high winds on the Kepler Track. Not quite ready for a multi-day walk we thought let's do the Whanganui!

We have done a fair bit of flat water canoe touring in the past (we have a big double canoe tourer) and have slightly above novice level experience in white water. Even so it was with some trepidation we booked our canoe hire and headed off the NZ in January 2018. There was so much about the river journey that we did not know, particularly regarding the number or size of the rapids, but we thought if they let up to 50+ canoes off down the river daily then it must be reasonably safe.

We based ourselves at Ohakune in the foothills of the mighty Mt Ruapeho located centrally on the North Island about halfway between Auckland and Wellington. It is nice little place about midway between the start and end of the river journey by road and also the location of the canoe hire operator. In summer it is fairly quiet, but in winter apparently it is a busy resort town servicing nearby ski fields.



There are 5 or 6 canoe operators in nearby towns providing canoe hire, drop off and pick up for the Whanganui River journey. We used the Yeti Tours company who were awesome. Not the biggest but the equipment, service and advice was excellent.

As multiday walkers you learn to become minimal packers of clothing and food. So it was a delightful surprise when we picked up 5 water proof barrels and a chilly-bin from Yeti the day before starting the trip so we could pack and

buy suitable provisions. An esky ... luxury! Yeti also spent some time with us on safety and checked out our paddling credentials given we were doing the 5 day journey on our own.

The next day with barrels and chilly-bin packed to the rafters we loaded up the Yeti van and headed off to our starting point at Taumarunui feeling quite anxious. We were the only Yeti customers starting that day and were given detailed safety instructions all the way to the put in point just in a side creek. There we were shown how to make sure everything was tied into the boat and where to put the spare paddle and instructions about a rapid a couple of kms down river that had to be walked instead of taking the side shute which would wreck the boat!

So we were finally away and entered the main river and pretty quickly hit the first few rapids following the instructions i.e. identify and go down the 'V', keep to the main channel, avoid any snags and watch out for the eddies at the end of the rapid! The first few rapids were pretty bumpy and we took on some water but once we realise that there were no real life threaten danger we relaxed and enjoyed it.

Along the length of the river there are dedicated campsites and huts managed by the Dept of Conservation (same as our Nationals Parks & Wildlife). The huts have a rudimentary kitchen and dormitory bunk beds, have to be pre-booked. The campsites have toilets and drinking water.

Day 1 – Taumarunui to Poukaria campsite (29kms approx. 6hrs with lots of stops, nice sunny day) – once we settled we had a great day paddling totally on our own. The river flows through farmland and bushland. We were even able to stop at a lavender farm that has a café for a morning coffee. There was one hairy moment where there was a big log snag that caused a huge eddy that spun us around and we nearly went for a swim. Definitely the river is mostly in control going down the rapids but all is ok as long as you keep the boat straight and avoid snags. Poukaria was a lovely campsite which we shared with a German couple and 2 French girls who sheepishly declared to falling victim to the big snag. One jet boat encountered.



Figure 1 - Everything is tied into the canoe so you don't lose it if you capsize. The baler gets a lot of use.



*Figure 2 - Bush and farmland and lots of rapids on Day 1*

Day 2 – Poukaria to Whakahoro campsite (28kms, approx 7 hrs with morning and lunch stops – a bit cloudy but warm) – friendlier rapids and fewer places to stop. Winding river with lots of small gorges and cliff faces. All rapids welcomed as it meant less paddling. Some longish flat sections with only gently flow. With a fully laden canoe we could only do 5-6km an hour on flat water. It's about the journey not the destination right?

One jet boat encountered. Yes believe it or not they allow jet boats access to the river, even in the official National Park area. Paddlers are required to pull over to keep out of the way of the jet boats. Canoes going through a rapid have right of way because it is not possible to pull over to the side. The landing point at Whakahoro is muddy and slippery, then there is 400m walk uphill to the campsite which has a magnificent view. Lots of people started to arrive at the campsite in preparation for starting the 3 day version of the Whanganui journey.



Figure 3 - Lunch stop on day 2 - large pebbles (called shingles in NZ) are tricky to walk on (always point your canoe upstream when you stop)



Figure 4 - River starting to become enclosed with more cliffs.

Day 3 – Whakahoro to John Coull hut and campsite (37.5kms, approx. 8 hrs with a few stops, cloudy day). The river enters the main gorge with lots of high fern lined cliff faces and numerous small waterfalls. Stunning! This is the point of no return. You must continue through to day 5 to exit the river. It is possible to explore some small creeks but often they are jammed with flood debris so access is limited. Now there is always another canoe in sight but it is

difficult to chat with fellow paddlers along the way because there is always another rapid around the corner. Definitely need to be in a single file going down the rapids.

We have booked into the hut and are the first to arrive. We are greeted by the volunteer rangers, a lovely older couple (Pailine and Ray) who do this every year for 2 weeks. The huts and the campsites are all very social during meal- times and there is a great mix of people from around the world. Lots of Europeans escape their winter and head to NZ for extended holidays, preferring NZ to Australia because of all 'the snakes and spiders' in Australia. One jet boat encountered which we negotiated ok but another canoe pulled over to the side and the wash from the boat slammed them down on rocks and put a hole in it. Fortunately they were not far from the finish and they made to the campsite. Their canoe provider was radioed by the rangers and a replacement was delivered the next day by ... a jet boat!



*Figure 5- Photo opportunity between rapids. Dag of the Year award goes to the bloke up the back*

Day 4 – John Coull to Tieke Kainga campsite, hut and Maori marae (29kms, 8 hours with side trip, drizzly and cold weather). Similar terrain to day 3 except the gorge is becoming deeper. Simply beautiful scenery and a joy to paddle through. The side trip was a 30 minute each way walk to the famous 'Bridge to Nowhere'. It was constructed to open up land for returning WW1 veterans but the land was too wild and the scheme was abandoned. Not sure how that was ever supposed to work.

Arriving at the Tieke Kainga hut we are advised that the local Maori people are present in the marae (Maori meeting place) and a Maori traditional welcome protocol must be followed. Men are to gather together and present a gift and a spokesperson is nominated to speak on behalf of the group. The women are to get together and sing a song! It all goes off well and we are officially welcomed on site by the Maori leaders with a traditional Maori hongī (noses touch). A great and unexpected experience. We catch up with a Danish guy that we had met earlier who is now sporting bright red legs. Despite being overcast he has managed to become severely sunburnt much to his surprise. He is also a bit anxious about 3 big rapids on the final day. Just the one jet boat heading upstream to deliver the canoe today.



*Figure 6 – Day 4 - Tieke Kainga Marae where the Maori welcome ceremony was held plus random deer looking for food*

Day 5 – Tieke Kainga to Pipiriki (21.5 kms about 5 hours, misty low cloud then clearing) The river has become wider but still surrounded by high cliffs which start to break up (i.e. less continuous). There are a couple of bigger rapids. We stop for lunch at the last campsite and watch other canoes arrive. One is completely swamped by the rapid and they pull over to empty out. There has been a lot of talk about the last rapid, particularly because it is named 50/50 for good reason. Fortunately, we navigate it without an issue, but some major eddies catch out a few crews.

We arrive at the Pipiriki ramp which is a bit underwhelming given the beautiful journey we have been on. In fact I am not sure if there is much at all at Pipiriki besides the ramp, Maybe 50+ canoes, a few kayaks and a few skis arrive at the ramp over the next hour in time to be picked up by their canoe company. Vans and trailers arrive and in a very orderly manner are all loaded up. The drive back takes an hour or so along a very windy road.

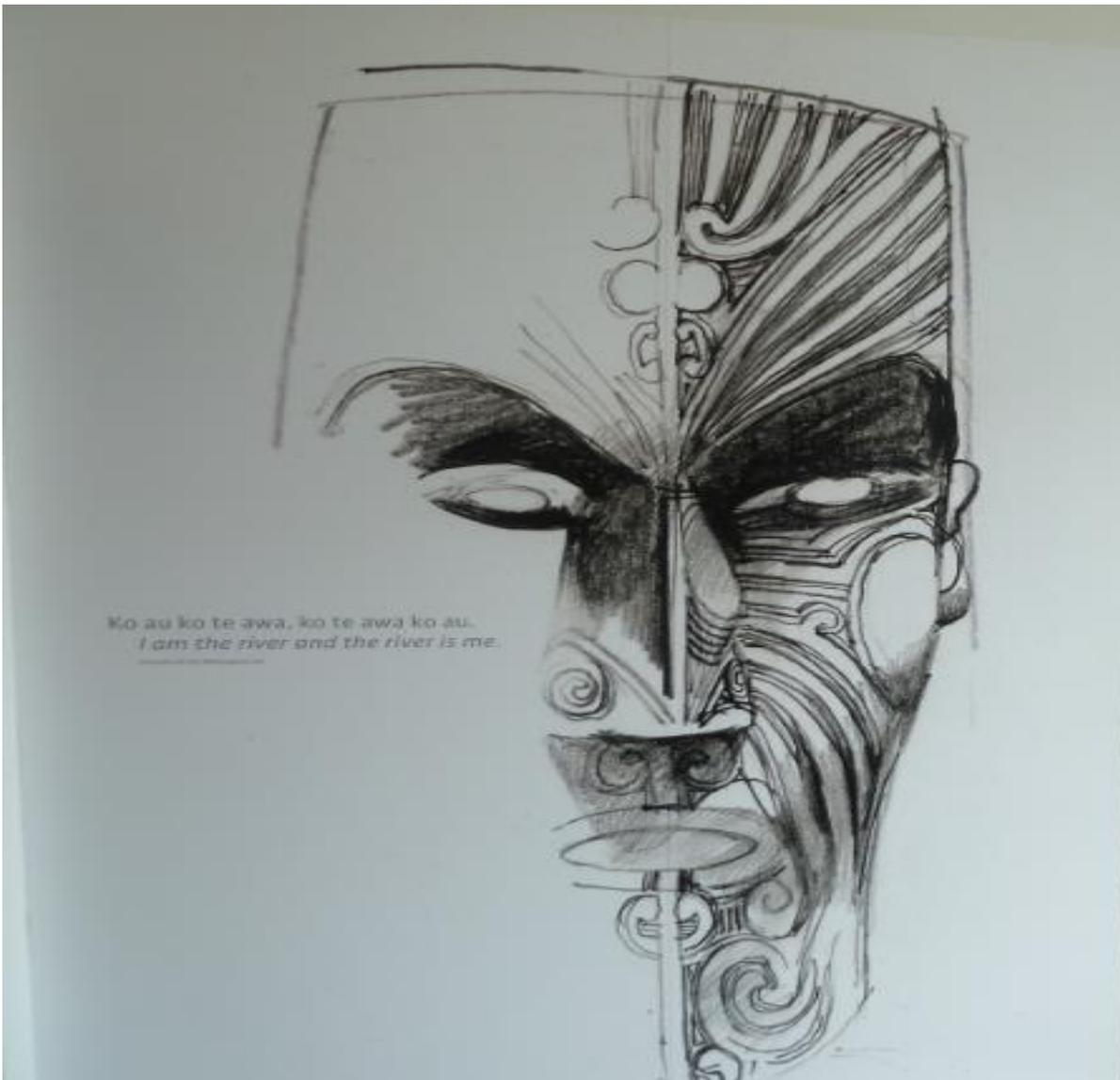


*Figure 7 - Day 5 - Lunch stop at final campsite. You can see the flood line on the cliff opposite.*



*Figure 8 - Day 5 - One of the final sections of the gorge*

Mission accomplished. A great experience that I would recommend to everyone. We would do it again at the drop of a hat. This was a great river journey. As you cruise down it you start to feel at one with the river rather than fighting it. You just end up going with the flow. There is much Maori history along the river and many people like Jeff H have had great experiences (see Jeffs earlier article). It is highly revered throughout NZ and in fact in 2017 was granted legal personhood by the NZs' parliament. The Maori proverb says it all: - 'I am the river and the river is me'.



Logistics:- We flew into Auckland and hired a car and drove from there to Ohakune. Flying to Wellington and driving from there would work just as well. We were able to leave the car safely at Yeti. You can catch an Auckland-Wellington bus which stops at Ohakune. Allow a day for the drive from Auckland. Allow yourself a whole day to pack barrels and source food before heading off down the river. There is a small supermarket in Ohakune. Canoe costs were \$200 each (2 years ago) which included the drop off and pick up.