UNDERTOW MEDIA

LEISURE & ADVENTURE
in the Big Smoke

By Mark Dawson

IMAGINE (as John Lennon might have said) Auckland without the traffic.

That was the somewhat astounding sight that greeted my children and I when we drove into the "Big Smoke" for a two-day getaway on New Year's Day.

Previous memories of gridlock and stories of hundreds of cars reduced to barely a crawl were uppermost as we swung into the city. But, hey — it's a statutory holiday, everyone's stayed home and the streets are ours. A great start to a great little break.

The traffic tales, along with housing issues and wastewater woes paint a picture of a problem-plagued city bursting at the seams, if not falling apart. Well, Aucklanders will have their own views on that, but for those of us who inhabit less-congested streams, it is a great place to visit.

Of course, the issue with a two-day flying visit is there is so much to do and not a lot of time.

We had sampled the pleasures of the Auckland Domain, the museum and the Viaduct Basin before, so our focus this time was Waiheke Island and Rainbow's End — both top attractions, though in very different ways.

Being a stat holiday, the ferries over to Waiheke were popular, so the secret was to book the tickets ahead and, after that, it was plain sailing.

The trip across to Waiheke gives one the time to take in the splendour of the Hauraki Gulf and the dotted outcrops of land that populate it — a relaxing way to start a more physically vigorous day as we were booked in for sea kayaking.

Nic Mead is a young Kiwi who has turned his passion into a thriving business. A keen kayaker who seems to have paddled in most parts of the world, a few years back he decided to see if he could earn a living from his favourite pursuit. Well, he and his Auckland Sea Kayaks company are riding a wave now as demand has seen him employ extra guides and extend his offerings.

We did the round-Waiheke trip but Auckland Sea Kayaks can now take you round Rangitoto and up to its summit; to Motukorea Island and there's even a two-day volcanic island hopping tour.

While we had all done a little paddling, we were barely out of beginner stage, but that was not a problem. Nic's craft are the luxury liners of kayaking — comfortable and with heaps of storage for bags, food, cameras, phones, etc, and you really have to work to get wet.

Waiheke is a select community that has become a big tourist drawcard with its natural beauty, growing reputation for food and wine and a micro-climate that sees it protected from winds. And in a kayak — nipping round the coastline, edging past rocks, even doing a U-turn in a sea cave — you get a unique view of the place.

With a stop for coffee and cake on a tiny sandy beach, the journey wasn't too physically demanding for the kids — or for the old man.

Next day was a complete contrast with the dizzying thrills of Rainbow's End providing a different sort of fun.

Tagging along with three teenagers, I was under pressure to prove my mettle on the more adrenaline-charged rides.

The corkscrew rollercoaster I could handle; the figure-8 Invader was a high-octane joy; the Power Surge threw me about so much I needed a good sit down; the FearFall . . . sorry, I didn't dare; and the Stratosfear was quite the scariest ride I've ever been on. So scary, I had to do it twice.

All in all, a real buzz for the end of our trip.

HOLD ON TIGHT: The Stratosfear at Rainbow's End is a nerve-shredding ride that, strangely, the kids seem to love.

CRUISE VIEWS: Getting a different perspective on Waiheke Island with a kayaking trip round its rocky coastline.

WHERE TO STAY

There's no shortage of places to stay in Auckland, but some of the hotels can be pretty pricey. We stayed at the Quality Suites Alexander Inn in the lively Newmarket suburb which is particularly handy for the city centre. With good parking off a quiet street, these suites are only five years old and their high spec is most impressive. The four of us were comfortably accommodated and with Wi-Fi and no end of power points the kids were kept happy on their technology in their downtime.