

Long haul

New Zealand's best kept secret (not for long)

On Monday, the royal tour moves to the Abel Tasman National Park. It's a hiker's paradise, says **Amanda Linfoot**

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex may be off to Abel Tasman, but that's not the reason I find myself approaching New Zealand's smallest national park by boat. No, I am here because of a simple conversation starter: "If you could go on holiday anywhere, where would it be?" I'd asked Pip Casey from the country's tourism board. After the slightest hesitation — to apologise mentally to her family for blowing the secret of their blissful summer breaks, I imagine — back came: "Abel Tasman."

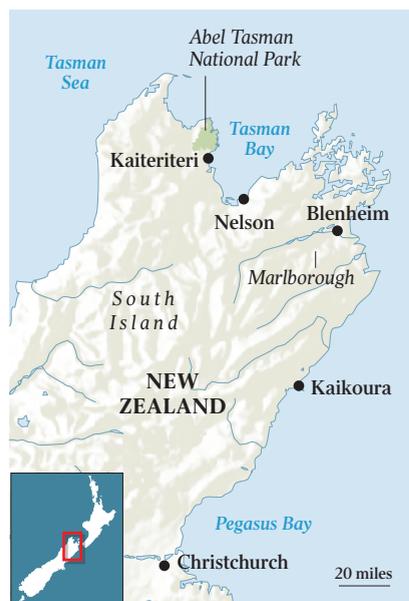
And goodness, it's a stunner. On the northern tip of South Island, its granite headlands covered in beech, manuka trees and tree ferns are interspersed with sandy beaches and estuaries. There's a lot of photogenic loveliness packed into its 37 miles of coastline. And the good news is that a well-formed, easy walking track means that just about anyone can get in on the action.

The park is minimally accessible by car, so the only ways to explore the park are by foot or kayak. Walkers can do it independently — there are overnight huts and campsites to break up the hike, from NZ\$15 (£7.50) a night per person (greatwalks.co.nz). But if you don't want to carry all your stuff and like a shower and a comfy bed, you are better off with a guided trip.

The Wilson family have owned land along this shoreline since 1841, a century before the park's establishment in 1942, and have parlayed their local knowledge and two separate homesteads into slickly run, but unregimented walking breaks. These can be up to five days long, depending how leisurely you want be, but they all begin with a boat pick-up from the beach at Kaiteriteri for a cruise through the marine reserve to Totaranui. The group I join for a three-day walk comprises four Kiwis, another Briton and a couple from Colorado, plus our guide, Irwin.

Ten minutes into the boat journey we reach the landmark Split Apple Rock — a giant boulder that was cracked open by ice — where the roll of the sea 160ft offshore suggests that this is going to be a bumpy couple of hours. And so it proves. The swell ensures that the boat can't make it on to the beach at Totaranui, so we divert to Awaroa.

This effectively means that we have



skipped the opening day's two-and-a-half-hour, four-and-a-half-mile walk, because we have landed a stone's throw from the Wilsons' Meadowbank homestead, but Irwin comes up with a plan B: a five-mile loop round the Awaroa estuary.

While the boat heads off to the homestead with our bags, we marshal ourselves on the pristine sand. Awaroa holds a special place in New Zealanders' affections — a crowdfunding appeal in 2016 raised £1.3million to take the half-mile beach out of private ownership and secure it for the park. With the tide in retreat and vast sand flats starting to dry in the sun, it reminds me of the Camel estuary in Cornwall, but with more substantial hills (honestly, take a look on Google Maps Street View — someone has photographed the whole path).

Meadowbank sits right on the beach, a reproduction of the original home that occupied this spot, built using reclaimed materials, so the 13 en suite rooms have all the period details, but good showers and wifi too. A barking presence on the lawn is Wallace the terrier.

Dinner is prepared by Craig, a scion of the Wilson family, owner of Wallace and an excellent cook — which is not surprising, given that he used to tour the world as a personal chef to Paul McCartney, Pavarotti and the like. The meal is homely, but good: pumpkin and

turmeric soup followed by a pork chop or salmon with a salad using figs from the tree behind the house, then lemon cheesecake.

Day two brings the only testing hills of the walk. From Meadowbank we head south over a headland called Tonga Saddle. It's an early warm-up, but when we stop to catch our breath we have the glorious sight of the tide racing into the estuary behind us.

We dip down to the wide sandy beach of Onetahuti Bay and begin a stiffer climb that cuts into the forest. To give us a breather, Irwin stops to point out different trees — mamaku (the black tree fern), ponga (the silver fern, which provides New Zealand's motif) and wheki (the golden tree fern). There is also the velvety black beech, which is covered with sweet, sticky honeydew, excreted by a scale insect that lives in bark. As the honeydew collects on the trunk, sooty mould grows on it, turning the tree black. Also sprouting from the tree are microfine hairs, which turn out to be the insects' colons, each with a droplet of honeydew on the end. I take Irwin's word for it, when encouraged to give it a try, that this is the nectar of the gods.

We crest the hill and head down to Bark Bay campsite for lunch. Irwin whips out a kettle for a brew — the Wilsons' staff have got there by sea before us to light a

Need to know

Amanda Linfoot was a guest of newzealand.com. A three-day guided walking break with Wilsons costs NZ\$1,470 (£735), including all food and accommodation (abeltasman.co.nz). The seven-hour wine and art tour in Nelson costs NZ\$325 (wineartandwilderness.co.nz). A half-day guided biking wine tour in Marlborough costs NZ\$95 (exploremarlborough.co.nz). Rooms at Hapuku Lodge cost from NZ\$1,027 a night half-board (hapukulodge.com). Rooms cost from NZ\$165 at the Grand Mercure Nelson (monacoresort.co.nz) and from NZ\$400 at The George in Christchurch (thegeorge.com)

fire — and we're offered the chance to skip the afternoon's five miles by catching the boat to our overnight stop, but there are no takers.

In the afternoon the track winds slightly inland, over footbridges, through wetlands and across Falls River, with its 150ft swing bridge. The photo opportunities are endless — sun-dappled tree canopy, picturesque streams and hillside vistas of little coves. There's scarcely a passing boat or walker to ruffle the tranquillity.

After 14 miles, eight and a quarter hours and climbs totalling nearly 2,000ft, we walk down the final hill to the Wilsons' second homestead. Originally the family's beach house, Torrent Bay Lodge is yards from the high-tide mark. The theme is nautical — each room is named after a boat — but the timber-clad rooms bring to mind an alpine chalet.

The banter notches up a level or two at dinner. But we're pretty knackered, and after tomato, goat's cheese and egg salad, followed by tarakihi (a sort of sea bream) or rib-eye steak with a baked potato, we hit the sack — partly because we have the prospect of an early start to beat the tide across Torrent Bay.

The next day is more gently undulating, but the coastal views are even better. Initially it is a long, gentle climb to the day's highest elevation of 360ft, winding inland through wooded gullies, then down

