

The Business – Potiki Adventures

When Melissa Crockett, Co-Director of Potiki Adventures, stood up to accept the award for 2006 PATA Young Professional of the Year, little did she know the impact it would have.



Photo Potiki Adventures

“The PATA Award has been huge,” she says. “I had international buyers that I met at TRENZ call me after the award and say they definitely want Potiki in their brochure.”

Operating small group tours in Auckland from a Māori perspective, Potiki Adventures cover a range of activities, from urban exploration and shopping, to personalised itineraries for those who want a tailor-made tour.

Although the PATA Award was a publicity and credibility boost, the company had hardly been struggling til then. The owners, young entrepreneurs Melissa Crockett and Bianca Ranson, have instead taken Potiki from ‘zero to a hundred’ in only two and a half years, using their instincts, knowledge of Māori culture and some good old-fashioned research.

The two had been friends for years before deciding to set up Potiki Adventures.

They say their research showed them a gap in the available tours of Auckland.

“We thought, hang on, we could make money out of this! The more we looked, the more we realised that there didn’t appear to be anything around like what we now do.

“We found that people were crying out for it.

And we were sure we had the product to meet those needs.”

The tours endeavour to give visitors a real taste of contemporary Māori culture.

Melissa says that their visitors love meeting ‘real’ people. “We aim to give them a sense of how Māori people live today.”

For this it is vital to have the right guides. Melissa and Bianca are guides, but they also employ additional guides when necessary.

“We do choose our guides very carefully,” says Melissa. “They must understand tikanga Māori and speak Māori. Many have also studied Māori art, so they can ask prompted questions to help explain to visitors more about what they are viewing. They are all enthusiastic, personable people that are good representatives for Māori culture.”

One of the most popular Potiki tours is the ‘Urban Art’ tour. Part of this tour takes visitors into artists’ homes to see their work in progress, and meet the creators.

“Visitors don’t just want to go into a souvenir shop,” says Melissa. “They want to be able to meet the artist and get to know a bit about them. They get a thrill out of commissioning or buying something from someone they have met.

“But it is not a sales pitch,” she adds. “There is absolutely no pressure to buy anything.”

The Marine Reserve tour is Bianca’s ‘baby’. From a background in outdoor education, Bianca’s love of the outdoors, and her in-depth knowledge of Māori legends and myths, makes the role a perfect match.

“The Māori aspect of our tours is integral to the experience,” she says. She refers to trips where karakia were not said because

of time constraints, with negative consequences. “It really is important,” says Bianca. “It keeps us true to what our business is about, and has a positive influence on the trip and on the clients.

“The stories are not told as myths – they are actually relevant. When we talk about the land, we have our feet on the ground. When we talk about the ocean, we have our feet in the sea. It really brings our culture to life for people.”

Giving back to the community is also an important part of the kaupapa (philosophy) of Potiki.

Both Bianca and Melissa dedicate much of their spare time to community projects.

“The Potiki business gives us the opportunity to do the other things we want to achieve in life,” says Melissa. “We are also hoping to encourage more Māori into this type of business.

“We have a Pakeha business model alongside a Māori kaupapa. We want to be socially and environmentally responsible. The concept of kaitiakitanga (guardianship) is integral to our culture and our business.”

Both of Māori descent (Nga Puhī, Ngati Kahu and Te Rarawa), Melissa and Bianca take the representation of their culture very seriously. “We are constantly aware of the obligation this entails. We are aware that sometimes we are visitors’ only interaction with Māori.

“But we also want to show Māori that it’s not just okay to work for a company like ours, but that it’s actually cool to be Māori and that visitors will pay money to learn about it.”

Above left Melissa Crockett and Bianca Ranson.

The Experience – Potiki Adventures



Photo Potiki Adventures

With his face almost totally covered in the moko, Blaine Te Rito may look a bit daunting to some Pakeha. As we pull up to his Glen Innes state house I have more than a little trepidation.

This is put to rest as we walk in the door, and his welcome, albeit low-key, is made obvious.

“Blaine is a renowned carver and a *Toi Iho* artist and his works are in great demand internationally.”

Normally working from the local marae, the socio-economics of this area are made plain by the current lack of electricity which has left Blaine working from home. But this is deceiving.

The walls of his home are brightened by kauri moko masks with beautiful detail – Blaine is a renowned carver and a *Toi Iho* artist and his works are in great demand internationally. He has been carving since he was 11 and has fascinating insights for this Pakeha into

definitions of traditional and contemporary Māori art.

He is but one of the artists on Potiki Adventures' Art Tour, one of four small group tours giving visitors a Māori perspective on Auckland. The advantage of the small group tour is the feeling of intimacy and involvement that it engenders in its participants. The van is small enough to hear the driver, Bianca Ranson, Co-Director of Potiki, without a microphone, as she points out sites of interest and their Māori history and interpretation on our way to Blaine's house.

We are today experiencing a shortened version of the tour, which involves visiting two artists, and some of the stores and a café that Potiki Adventures normally go to.

The enthusiasm and knowledge of the guides is obvious as Bianca and Melissa provide an ongoing commentary on Auckland's geography, flora and fauna and history. Their connection to

their community is reflected in their welcome at the local café, where they are well-known, to the extent that their brochure features as wall décor.

“One of the nicest things about the tour is that all the artists and retailers involved have a genuine liking for our guides, and an appreciation of what they are doing to raise the profile of their businesses.”

The tour then sets off to meet artist Sofia Ranson, a strawberry-blond, freckled woman of Ngati Porou descent. The 21 year old's mix of Irish/Swedish and Māori heritage is stunning, and with it comes an enviable artistic talent.

We are invited into the beautiful white-washed and stainless steel family home complete with electronically locked gate. Doubling as her showroom, enormous canvases cover every wall, and mean that taking visitors and potential buyers through her home is a part of her and her family's daily life. A contrast, yet not a contradiction, to the work of Blaine, her work focuses on the earth and sky, on Rangī and Papa and their tortuous separation. Her works are contemporary and her success is evident in her upcoming international exhibitions and the publicity gained for her work.

One of the nicest things about the tour is that all the artists and retailers involved have a genuine liking for our guides, and an appreciation of what they are doing to raise the profile of their businesses. And they are varied – from Phoenix, a New Zealand-created cosmetics company, to Native Agent, a Māori-inspired clothing, art and artefact store.

The designs were unique, the products were high quality (I struggled to keep my wallet in my bag) and the people were welcoming. This obvious spirit of manaakitanga makes one feel welcome not just as a visitor, but as a person, and gave me, as I imagine it does other visitors, another way of looking at Māori art and retail.

www.potikiadventures.co.nz

Above left Blaine Te Rito at work.