



TOP TOWN 2008

NEW PLYMOUTH

Take a bow, New Plymouth, you've won *North & South's* Top Town crown. In our 17-page special feature, we reveal why the Taranaki city is the best place in New Zealand to call home – plus we take you to 14 other hot spots to live, love, work and raise a family. Stacey Anyan reports from New Plymouth.



† Confessions of a Top Town judge

Put yourselves in our shoes, New Zealand. *North & South's* Top Town judges had a daunting task selecting the 2008 Top Towns from scores of terrific contenders.

So, how did we choose our winners? Let me start by pointing out that staff relations at *North & South* are normally as harmonious as a Buddhist peace fellowship's. Yet the moment we began attempting to whittle down the more than 50 Top Town contenders into a shortlist of finalists, dissension broke out within our ranks. Take how, at first, we Auckland staffers had the temerity to rate our city's natural environment above Wellington's. "How could you?" scolded our Wellington judge, skiting he could run from his front door to a seal colony (a seal colony!) in only 20 minutes.

Crestfallen, we returned to our Excel spreadsheets to rethink our rankings. "When I close my eyes at night," confessed our spreadsheet-meister, looking up momentarily from the thousands of statistics she'd collated from the Top Town entries we received and independent experts' reports we'd read, "all I see is spreadsheets." Oh, yes, we felt the pressure all right.

Seriously though, we know how much Top Town honours can mean to towns keen to lure new settlers. *North & South's* last Top Town competition – comparing towns on everything from their water quality to their work and lifestyle opportunities – was held in 2000 when Wellington took home the title. North Shore City won in 1994 and golden-bayed Nelson in 1989.

As we did in the last contest, we split the competition into two categories: the Top Town with at least 40,000 people and the Top Small Town with fewer than 40,000. But this time we also decided to do a few things differently, for example, judging Auckland as one city instead of seven separate council-run territories.

To compile a shortlist of contenders we asked councils to cough up screeds of statistics, plus information on their "town jewels". We didn't ask them to proselytise on what it was that gave their town a heart and a soul. Instead, we left that to our judges to discern.

Several councils deserve mention for the charm – and cheek – of their entries. Invercargill bowled us over with its enthusiastic championing of this town's gutsy life force – its people. Its written entry, entitled "We Are Invercargill and We Are Proud", came out tops. As for its larrikin mayor, Tim Shadbolt, well, he tried the flattery-might-work-wonders approach by attaching a photo of himself holding up our mag. Nice try, Tim.

We divided our Top Town judging criteria into three categories. The "critical" factors (local economy and work opportunities, housing affordability, educational opportunities, natural environment and climate) we assigned the highest weighted number of points. "Important" factors (such as entertainment, culture and arts and ease of transport in and out of the town) didn't count for quite as many points, but did earn more than the "nice-to-haves" (such as having a proactive council). From all the number-crunching, we aimed to distil the two stand-out winners who had it all.

Judgment Day arrived. We gathered with our spreadsheets around a table to wrangle over the final ratings. After many hours, New Plymouth emerged as our unanimous choice for Top Town, and Waikanae for Top Small Town.

So, New Zealand, maybe you think we're bang on with our Top Town titles, maybe not. But perhaps the point is this: pretty much every Kiwi can echo the refrain of Rotorua's *Daily Post* newspaper: "We live here because we love it." Aren't we the lucky country?

CAROLINE COURTNEY



It's a darn sneaky place, New Plymouth. Quietly developing an internationally renowned contemporary art gallery (the Govett-Brewster) and a coveted knowledge and heritage centre (Puke Ariki). Gradually acquiring key events (like one-off concerts by Elton John and REM, the international music and dance festival WOMAD, and the ITU Triathlon World Cup). Restoring civic pride by opening up waterfront access and providing ample opportunities for the community to get together. Boosting New Zealand's economy with its booming dairy and oil and gas industries. All the while remaining an affordable, family-friendly town.

And lording over the district's 72,400 inhabitants (50,400 in the township) is the sneakiest of them all, Mt Taranaki, which hides behind a cloudy shroud until she deigns to give you a glimpse of her stunning beauty.

Nestled on the northern circumference of Taranaki's 250km coastline, New Plymouth seems to have it all: mind, body and spirit catered for in a natural environment that encapsulates the best Aotearoa has to offer.

To top it off, it's got its own jaunty jingle, where the chorus builds to the catch-cry, "Turn it on, New Plymouth".

Turn it on indeed. "The Pulse of the Energy Province," declare New Plymouth's welcome signs and, fittingly, the mayor, Peter Tennent, emits a high-wattage puissance that could power the town tenfold.

A statuesque Buzz Lightyear lookalike, he rapidly reels off New Plymouth's achievements. The council's AAA credit rating from Standard and Poor's. The perpetual investment fund that has generated \$21.5 million towards council spending in recent years. Achieving his Mayor's Task Force for Jobs goal by reducing the region's under-25s registered unemployed from 1064 in 2002 down to seven. The award-winning Rewa Rewa agreement, under which the council

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Mt Taranaki provides a towering background for players at Fitzroy Golf Club. Below: The Festival of Lights in Pukekura Park has attracted thousands of visitors a year since it started in 1993.

and Ngati Tawhirikura opened a large block of coastal land to the public and are planning its cultural development.

Scoring tennis's Davis Cup ("We grab events by the throat"). The generosity of philanthropic local corporates, including Todd Energy, Port Taranaki, Taranaki Electric Trust and the region's success story TSB Bank (the only bank to have branches dotted throughout the suburbs).

Seemingly unable to help himself, Tennent also divulges the town's tender for the International Liveable Community Awards (his hunch is confirmed a week later; New Plymouth is the only New Zealand city shortlisted as a finalist for the Whole City Award, and the 7km Coastal Walkway, which revolutionised the town's foreshore accessibility, is shortlisted for the Environmentally Sustainable Project Award).

Often referred to by locals as the best ambassador for the town, Tennent loves conducting the six-monthly "Welcome to New Plymouth parties" for newcomers.

The council also funds Venture Taranaki, a clever "one-stop shop" for anyone wanting to visit, live, work or run an event in the region.

PIP GUTHRIE, VENTURE TARANAKI; ROB TUCKER



COUNCIL EMPLOYEE Rhys Williams enjoys the flexi-hours offered in his role as technical officer: he can surf at lunchtime for two hours and make up the time later.

It wasn't hard for New Plymouth native Rhys, 39, to sell his Napier-raised wife Keryn on the town when they returned from their OE in 1995.

Says Keryn: "The things we love – the

beach, the mountain – are close. There's so much on offer. Our kids are active, and it only takes five minutes to drive anywhere. People take pride in their homes; everything is kept trimmed and neat."

In 1995, the couple bought their 1914 three-bedroom villa, with sea views from the backyard, in the suburb of West Town for \$81,000. "We paid too much." Today it's



The photo gallery in the rumpus room of Keryn and Rhys Williams and their children Meg, 12, and Jack, 10, is testimony to the family's passion for enjoying the myriad sporting opportunities in and near New Plymouth.

worth \$385,000. It's a safe 1km walk for 10-year-old Jack to St Joseph's Primary School; 12-year-old Meg takes a \$3-return bus across town to Sacred Heart Girls College.

The Williams actually live the town's oft-touted "ski in the morning, surf in the arvo" cliché – and then some. The rumpus room wall is chock-a-block with photographs of the family's sporting endeavours, and the garage resembles a sports shop.

Rhys's prime passions are surfing and snowboarding, while Keryn, 43, a self-employed accountant and software consultant, loves cycling – especially the annual

Round the Mountain Relay: "The elevated countryside gives great sea views and good speed."

As for the kids – well, you couldn't name a sport they haven't tried. And why not when it's so cheap, says Rhys, who buys extra gear from the local hospice so the kids' friends can join in their activities.

How cheap? The sub and season pass for the Manganui ski field, 45 minutes' drive away, is \$224 a year for the family (less than a day's skiing at Mt Ruapehu) and a handful of coins buys a ride on the new waterslide at the Todd Energy Aquatic Centre – billed as

the country's tallest, fastest waterslide.

Membership at the hospital rec centre around the corner – offering a pool, squash, basketball, volleyball, badminton – is \$80 a year, and the sub at the boardrider club is \$50. And it costs zilch to go cycling and rollerblading along the coastal walkway.

The Williams lap up the events on offer: the All Blacks' recent test against Samoa, the Triathlon World Cup, the annual Festival of Lights at Pukekura Park (whose cricket ground was named one of the world's top six in 2007 by cricket "Bible" *Wisden*), the Festival of the Arts, WOMAD, Elton John.

The town has evolved, says Rhys. "I've travelled, but I want to be here. Things are easy here. We're in the provinces, but it's a city that's moving forward."

IT SURE IS. Economic consultant Business and Economic Research Ltd (BERL) forecasts New Plymouth's growth rate will continue to exceed the national growth rate (the August 2008 National Bank Regional Trends report found Taranaki was the best-performing region in both the June quarter and year-on-year to June 2008). Furthermore, the region requires an additional 880 fulltime employees a year from now until 2026 to meet the demand caused by economic growth – the key drivers of which are "white and black gold".

The region's oil, natural gas and petrochemical industry is thriving, having attracted in recent years an ever-increasing number of local and foreign-owned companies in onshore and offshore exploration. The industry currently contributes about \$1 billion a year to the nation's economy; the amount is set to soar as four major offshore oil and gas projects get under way in the next year or so.

A significant and innovative engineering industry has evolved in response to the needs of the oil and gas developments, resulting in the creation of New Zealand's leading engineering consortium, Engineering Taranaki, and CApENZ – the Centre of Applied Engineering New Zealand.

Taranaki's temperate climate and fertile soil has fostered a burgeoning dairy industry. Twenty per cent of New Zealand's milk is produced here, and the region is home to the \$3 billion Kiwi Co-operative Dairies Ltd, one of the largest dairy manufacturing sites in the world, processing almost four billion litres of milk a year into 300,000 tonnes of dairy products.

The region's economic growth means skills shortages are a challenge, says Venture

Taranaki CEO Stuart Trundle, who explains that rather than focusing on attracting the principal breadwinner of a family, Venture Taranaki targets "trailing spouses" too.

"That's why we've invested in a vibrant, diverse events strategy. It's not just the 40 hours a week at work that's important, it's the total experience of living in a community that gives you affordable housing, a safe environment and a rich cultural society."

In the past decade the population hasn't budged much numerically, but the oil and gas industry has imported a plethora of foreign employees. New New Plymouth devotees include lashings of Brits, like Puke Ariki's Scottish manager Bill McNaught, who was handpicked for the role. The lifestyle, environment and Puke Ariki's world-class facilities – a striking central city landmark that incorporates a library, museum and iSite – won him over.

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery director Rhana Devenport is a newcomer too. Two years ago she and her partner swapped inner Sydney for a lifestyle block 20 minutes' drive from New Plymouth, where he con-

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tinues to work as a video artist in Australia courtesy of broadband and Skype.

Devenport says she has more contact with international artists now than when she worked at Sydney's Biennale Art Festival. "The contemporary art world cares about this gallery. They're intrigued it's happening in a provincial city."

That's right – it's not just a cow town, says proud local Roy Weaver, the Port Taranaki CEO. "And because everyone knows everyone, people work well together and get stuff done three times faster."

And that means more time for lifestyle. Having recently returned from 15 years overseas, Fitzroy Yachts' operations manager and former Hamiltonian Wayne Smallwood is a New Plymouth convert.

"Here, you get time to see your kids growing up."



† Top Facts

1. Mt Taranaki is New Zealand's most accessible alpine area, with more than 300,000 visitors a year for skiing, tramping and mountaineering.
2. The average house sale price is \$317,058 (according to the latest update from Quotable Value, dated August 2008). Waterfront homes cost millions, but there are plenty of tidy suburbs with solid homes, five minutes' drive from town, for \$250,000 to \$400,000.
3. The CBD is refreshingly "low-rise". Depending on the business zone, building heights can be no more than 10, eight or seven metres. Residential restrictions are five to seven metres.
4. The community-owned Port Taranaki has increased container trade from 6000 to 60,000 in the past six years. Eighty per cent of the country's energy is imported or exported from the Newton King Tanker Terminal.
5. Puke Ariki contains priceless taonga such as the only Polynesian dogskin cloak in the world (1780), the anchor stone for an ancestral waka and what is believed to be the oldest photograph of Maori.
6. Driving around town is a breeze – it takes five to 10 minutes to get to most places. Admittedly, "rush hour" traffic is building, which the council is looking to remediate with the New Zealand Transport Agency. Many commuters use the cycle lanes and the numerous interconnected walkways that hug picturesque streams and bush.
7. 82 per cent of the community lives within 400m of a public park or reserve.
8. There are plans for a dedicated centre to exhibit the works of renowned artist Len Lye, which are currently housed in the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. His design for a 45m-high kinetic sculpture – the *Wind Wand* – was constructed as a millennium project for New Plymouth's waterfront walkway.
9. Taranaki's climate provides ideal conditions for rhododendrons, which are celebrated in the annual Rhododendron and Garden Festival. The 360ha Pukeiti Gardens south of New Plymouth boast the largest collection in New Zealand.
10. The New Plymouth District Council has an electric bicycle for staff to use to get to appointments around town.
11. The \$25 million Salperton, built by Fitzroy Yachts, was voted best sailing yacht in the 30-44m class at the 2008 World Superyacht Awards in Italy – a coup for the six-year-old firm, which has about 200 staff and an annual turnover of \$35 million-\$40 million.