

New Zealand: Stating the obvious

If Cook had his way, I suspect he would have called himself Navigator, James Navigator. Cook is for cooks. This matter-of-fact personality trait, perhaps gene, undoubtedly helped his map-making but it did nothing for his imagination. Nearly all of the 80-odd names he thrust on New Zealand show no sign of creativity at all and the remainder show only the slightest pulse of spontaneity.

Cook's first voyage to New Zealand, where he inflicted most of the country with his dreary names during a five-month circumnavigation, started in Gisborne. Today, people go there for many reasons but one of the most popular is the surf. It's a big thing, and for those fortunate enough to live there, surf is not just a lifestyle, it's the lifestyle.

In October 1769, Cook was getting grumpy and shooting locals because he couldn't get water, food, or anything but grief, but he did find some surf. Searching for fresh water on a Tuesday morning, he grumbled, "I rowed round the head of the bay, but could find no place to land on account of the Great Surf which beat everywhere upon the Shore." So what does he call this place? Poverty Bay.

This inflamed his imagination the following day as the Endeavour sailed around Mahia Peninsula where he observed a cape "of moderate height, makes in a sharpe Angle, and appears to be quite flat on Top".

Of all the land forms that Cook must have seen over his years on the sea, this one really caught his eye, and the multitudes who are obsessed with household furniture will understand why he called this Table Cape.

Rounding the peninsula, Cook explored a large bay over the next few days in which he found "everywhere good anchoring". Also, 160 Maori in seven canoes performed a war dance at the stern of the Endeavour in which, "great savageness was expressed", and Cook fired cannon for the first time in New Zealand.

But none of this registered when it came to naming the bay. Instead, Cook's mind swung to First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Edward Hawkes. Perhaps he had a list of mates he was determined to write on a map ... somewhere ... anywhere. But it hardly matters, especially after a few glasses on a Hawkes Bay wine trail.

Heading north around East Cape a few days later, Cook couldn't help but notice that another white cliff resembled, "at the very point hath to the Gable end of a House". With a stroke of ingenuity, he called it Gable End Foreland.

Even with something as volcanic and volatile as, say, a volcanic island in the middle of the ocean puffing ash and smoke, Cook's imagination had trouble in finding something more inspiring than White. Landing on White Island in a chopper is certainly more exciting than its name suggests.

Like many New Zealanders today, Cook was determined to land on Coromandel Peninsula. Near Whitianga, that small, remote town full of trendy cafes and craft shops that promises a summer just like it should be, is where Cook anchored in November.

The locals were astonished as he dragged ashore a theodolite, plane table, brass scale, dividers, proportional compasses, telescopes, micrometer, astronomical quadrant, thermometers, barometer, and clocks.

He was here to observe Mercury transit the sun and nothing was going to waver him from calling this bay after that planet. Not even the fact that local Maori thought Cook and all aboard the Endeavour were goblins.

About a week later, at the base of the other side of the Coromandel Peninsula, Cook's party rowed up a river on what would be Cook's longest inland excursion in New Zealand. He stepped ashore after 22km and found, "a Tree that girted 19 feet 8 inches. It was as Streight as an Arrow and Taper'd but very little in proportion to its length".

Cook had stumbled across giant kahikatea and kauri trees, one of New Zealand's great natural resources that would equip the British Navy with unequalled timber for decades. Coromandel offers pockets of these mighty forests today but one can only imagine at what Cook would have seen.

And one can only imagine that either London was heavily forested in kauri and kahikatea in 1769 or Cook couldn't see the forest for the trees because he named this river Thames, "on account of its bearing some resemblance to the River in England".

After a few days' sailing north, Cook saw a rock with a hole through it. Today, hordes of visitors boat out to this hole-in-a-rock from Paihia and, for a thrill, go through it. In a rare, perhaps unique (for him), play on words, Cook called it Piercy, after his mate Rear-Admiral Sir Piercy Brett.

Cook had an eventful few days in the bay by this rock. While on Motuarohia Island, Cook's small party was surrounded by 600 Maori, more than four times the number of any previous confrontation.

The British repelled several attacks by firing muskets but were only saved from an almost certain death by the Endeavour scattering the Maori with cannon fire. However, this didn't stop him from calling this bay of islands the Bay of Islands. So it's hardly surprising that when he saw a sandy bay further north, he called it Sandy Bay.

On January 13, 1770, after two weeks of sailing down the North Island's west coast, Cook spotted, "2 Small Islands near to a very remarkable Point of the Main that riseth to a good height".

So remarkable were these islands, in fact, that Cook felt compelled to call them after the world's most common metaphorical feature, a sugar loaf. In New Zealand alone, there are 29 mountains, peaks, islands, passes, trigs and rocks that take the name of the conical shape of a sugar loaf.

We can only be thankful that Cook found a recipient for the sugar loaf title before he remembered to name something after his mate, the Earl of Egmont, otherwise dozens of people would be climbing Mt Sugarloaf every day during summer. Either way, it would still be the most summited mountain in New Zealand.

Two and a half weeks later, Cook and a small party climbed the highest point of an island, hoisted a Union Jack, and did something he hadn't done before, nor would do again in New Zealand; he named something after a woman. Well, a queen actually.

For two weeks, Endeavour had been anchored in what Cook thought was a, "collection of some of the finest harbours in the world". But for the whole, Cook wrote, "I dignified this Inlet with the name of Queen Charlotte's Sound."

Walkers of the Queen Charlotte Track will know of the other names Cook, with his usual flair, bestowed on this area, like Ship Cove, where Endeavour was scrubbed, caulked, and repaired, and Cannibal Cove, where he found proof of cannibalism.

Cook did show some prescience in naming an island (now peninsula) that he thought, "hath more appearance of barrenness than fertility", after Joseph Banks. On the face of it, Banks, a botanist and Fellow of the Royal Society who had sunk ?10,000 into this voyage of discovery, was anything but barren. Then again, he had no children.

A few days later at dusk, Cook named Dusky Sound. But he wasn't satisfied with that and came back on his second voyage three years later to have another go, bestowing 40 more names within it like Duck Cove, Goose Cove, and Supper Cove.

Cook finally left New Zealand on March 31, 1770. But he had his way one more time by naming Cape Farewell. If I had my way, I would have called him Obvious, James Obvious.

About the Author

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