

'We'll never get a chance like this again'

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on tourism around the globe, and Waiheke's tourism operators are feeling the full force of the tap being suddenly turned off on domestic and world travel.

Owner and director of Potiki Adventures, Bianca Ranson works with overseas visitors and says that as soon as the borders were closed, cancellations were coming in thick and fast.

Although the business employs two full-time staff, Bianca says there are between eight and 12 people employed by the company as guides, drivers or in holding workshops, depending on how busy they are.

Winter is the busiest time for Potiki Adventures, which works with groups coming from North American universities. They were just gearing up for their busiest months, from May to November, when the pandemic arrived, and Bianca doesn't see New Zealand's borders opening for long-haul flights until the end of the year or even early in 2021.

"We have to prepare to be able to sustain ourselves for a year with little income," she says, "but this gives plenty of time to reassess.

"I think in a lot of ways it can be a really good thing for the tourism industry, particularly from a Māori perspective. Tourism and the economy have been the reverse of the Māori world view with our connection to the environment being at the top, and that guides us to the use of resources, which is opposite to the way the economy runs.

"It can be a valuable time to rethink the way that we do things and the importance



Director of Potiki Adventures, Bianca Ranson, says the sudden shutdown is an opportunity for a reassessment. "We'll never get a chance like this again."

of treading lightly on the earth."

Bianca says if we don't reassess now it will be a wasted opportunity.

"We'll never get a chance like this again, hopefully not, where we can completely see the shut down of the economy as it exists and have a chance to explore a different way of doing things.

"I don't want to see this time wasted in terms of the benefits our planet is seeing in everything being slowed down, to see that the world doesn't end if we slow down."

She says the question is how do we do that so we don't just go back into what has been the norm.

"Māori concepts that are thousands of years old already hold the key. There's a real opportunity to extend the invitation to people in Aotearoa New Zealand to come and experience that here."

One of the most important things is creating work for tourism operators on Waiheke as well as guides and the people that work in hospitality, she says.

"They have amazing skills across the board and it's about thinking outside what has been the norm for so long, how

can we create jobs and opportunities without being reliant on our borders being open."

For Bianca, this means shifting attention to the domestic market and what those tourism experiences and products will look like for local travellers, and then once the borders reopen, she says those products will be attractive to overseas visitors too.

"There are going to be a lot of people interested in coming here. The government's response to Covid-19 has been very successful. Aotearoa New Zealand is going to be considered a very safe option for people to travel to. Ultimately, on the other side of this we will be in a good position for people to come here."

Waiheke as an island is in a situation where people can come together to say what they want for the future, she says.

"We've seen what it's like when our island can have a rest from everyone rushing around in buses and vehicles. How can we protect what we have while we have the chance? How do we want it to look? How can we have a tourism industry that is less frantic, more gentle on the whenua."

Potiki Adventures celebrated its 16th anniversary in February.

"The goal is to make it to 17." • Erin Johnson

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