

# SLEEPING GOD CANYON

***(Coromandel's best-kept secret)***

I eased myself over the edge and into the bowels of The Funnel, grateful that the sticky rubber soles of my 5:10 canyoning shoes were keeping me from slipping down the greasy rock. The full force of the waterfall was soon pounding down on my helmet, and the finger-thick rope that stopped me plunging into the bubbling pool below seemed awfully inadequate. But there's a big difference between 'what seems' and 'what is' ... thank goodness!

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The Coromandel, with its beautiful beaches, fishing and bush-clad ranges, is not really known as an extreme-sports destination. Aside from the few days of BIG surf each year, most adrenalin-junkies head south for their fix. Places like Rotorua and Queenstown have plenty on offer for those who enjoy extra spice in their adventure.

Whether it's something traditional – like mountaineering, or bungee-jumping, or something more modern like FMX (Freestyle Motocross) – New Zealand has it all. We even have EI – Extreme Ironing, with the enticing catch-phrase: “*the latest danger-sport combining the thrills of an extreme outdoor activity with the satisfaction of a well-pressed shirt!*” (Google it if you think I'm joking ...) We're arguably the extreme sport capital of the world!

by Mike Cooney



And since no one is here to argue with me, I'll claim it as fact.

But back to the Coromandel: If hitting the big surf isn't your thing, fear not. You don't have to head elsewhere for your dose of high-energy fun. In a picturesque little valley near Thames, there's a relatively unknown stream which runs into the Kauaeranga River. And if you've ever done the Pinnacles walk and come back down the 'Billy Goat Track', you would've hiked alongside it for a while.

You might've even caught a momentary glimpse of a spectacular waterfall through the bush – and perhaps even peered over a large bluff, eager to see more.

The Atuatumoe Stream is home to one of the most remarkable natural features in the Coromandel – *The Sleeping God Canyon*. The Peninsula's best kept secret, it has a vertical descent of more than 300 metres via a bunch of waterfalls, and is absolutely amazing. Seriously! This dramatic canyon is unlike anything else you'll see – and, the tricky thing about it is, you can't 'just see' any of it ...

Well, that's not entirely true. You can ... if you fly over it. But the only way you can truly experience it, up-close-and-personal like, is by donning a harness, grabbing a rope and abseiling down ... or, in other words, by doing a spot of *canyoning*.

**C**anyoning, essentially, is travelling in canyons (*go figure!*) that require technical descents – things like abseiling (rappelling), rope work, technical climbing and jumps. They're frequently done in remote and rugged settings (like the Sleeping God) and require a reasonable degree of fitness and good abseiling skills – although some of

the required skills can be offset by using reputable guides.

So, it was with luck that I met Russ and Wayne (through a mutual friend) – and, during the course of some intelligent conversation, I found out they'd just acquired a business called *CanyonZ* and were going through the final change-of-ownership.

I felt a plan forming ...

*CanyonZ* is the only licensed operator for the Sleeping God Canyon ... and, therefore, my ticket into Atuatumoe Stream and a chance to see it in all its glory.

The weather finally played ball (canyoning isn't much fun when rivers are in full flood), and it was a beautiful Thursday morning when I made the drive over the hill and into Thames. Russ and Wayne were there to meet me, along





with the previous owner, another guide and four Australian clients. We had a quick briefing, grabbed a coffee and then hopped into vehicles for the drive up the Kauaeranga Valley and the start of the ... walk?

I often remind my kids (who love downhill mountain-biking) that to go *down*, you first have to go *up*. And, on that day in the Coromandel, to enjoy a 300 metre *descent*, we first had a 40-minute *ascent* up the appropriately-named Billy Goat Track! Loaded with wetsuits, helmets, ropes and harnesses, we slowly picked our way along the remnants of an old tramway line used during the kauri-logging days of old – and finally made it to the top of the canyon. The views here were quite literally breathtaking (or maybe that was from the climb up!) and we soon found a spot by the edge to get ourselves sorted.

The stream at this point was gentle and slow-flowing – carefully disguising what was to come. Once our wetsuits and harnesses were on, we went over the safety procedures, had a quick abseil practice, then scrambled down some rocks for the start of our adventure proper.

The first challenge was a 30-metre waterfall (or 100 feet, old-school), finishing in a deep, dark pool at the end. I was first to step off the edge – something I'd done plenty of times before, but never with a waterfall as my abseiling partner! This was pretty surreal ... and way cool! But, once we reached the bottom, we were immediately faced with our next challenge: a large, multi-pitch descent, 80 metres down a spectacular curtain-like waterfall.

Multi-pitch simply means one rope wasn't long enough – but, thankfully, this giant cascade had two tiers, allowing us



some brief respite to clip into another rope. Oh, and did I say it was spectacular?

It's hard to explain in words what this place looked like (and even photos don't do it justice): the vast rocky bluffs that surrounded us ... the native scrub and regenerating kauri clinging to their faces ... the views down the canyon into the Kauaeranga Valley ... and Table Mountain in the near distance. It was truly awe-inspiring!

But my sense of appreciation grew even



larger when someone mentioned: *more people have reached the summit of Everest, than have ever been down this canyon!*

I felt like an honoured guest ...

**W**e had a couple more abseils – including a zip-line, a water-slide, and a 10-metre cliff-jump for the thrill seekers – before stopping for lunch. Stretched out on a rock, in the sun, with a great choice of yummy sandwiches and sweets, it was a sublime place to be.

As a matter of interest, Russ and Wayne had us rigged up in simple, idiot-proof gear – including a figure-8 descending device and a safety lanyard (used to clip onto the safety ropes that *Canyon*z had rigged up around hazards). The great thing about heading out with these guys is they provide all the equipment, take the photos, give you the necessary training, and do everything in their power to ensure your safety and enjoyment. You just need to turn up.



They also throw in a few bad jokes for free ...

We had another short abseil or two (it's pretty easy to lose count!) before hitting *The Funnel* ... a 50-metre beast that, moments after you start your descent, swallows you into its belly of plunging cold water. It's called *The Funnel*, they tell me, because it's so much fun. (Get it? *Fun-nel* ...? Oh, never mind.) Anyway, that's exactly what it was!

The grand-finale was a *Tyrolean traverse*

down yet another impressive waterfall. This is basically just a fancy term for 'flying fox' and similar to the zip-line mentioned above. The boys had set this one up with a short abseil to start – before plummeting to the pool below, and finishing with a splash.

It really was a great way to end in style ... some doing it more stylish than others! And the only thing left after that was a picturesque boulder-hop out of the Atuatmoe Stream and on to the Pinnacles track – just a few minutes from the carpark.

An epic adventure? For sure ... and definitely one to add to your bucket-list. Just don't leave it too late!

And listen: if I was God, this canyon is probably where *I'd* come to sleep too! 🐾

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