

baching it **piha**





# *preserving* **Piha**

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Sandra Coney has been holidaying at Piha in the board-and-batten bach built by her father Tom Pearce and her Uncle Bryan for as long as she can remember. Every May, August and summer holiday as well as most weekends, the Pearce family (Tom, mother Doris, Sandra and sister Helen) would load up the car and negotiate the twisting metal road (and bouts of carsickness) that led to the rugged west coast.

Now under the stewardship of the two daughters, the bach is little changed since 1941. “We’ve had to resist the temptation to introduce mod cons,” says Sandra. “We don’t keep the same standards here as we do in town. It’s all a bit rougher, a bit simpler.”

And that’s important. After all, the place is prized primarily as a space to retreat from the bustle of the modern world. Piha bestows time to reflect, to recharge the batteries and recall the days when life was a whole lot slower.

Besides, “improvement” can be in the eye of the beholder. “Everything we want to do with the bach creates some family argument or other,” says Sandra. The sun-drenched deck with its prime outlook to Lion Rock is a perfect example. When a couple of its boards rotted the builder ended up replacing half the matai deck with pine. No one is sure what possessed him and everyone is thoroughly unimpressed that the once-handsome deck is now disfigured.

Sandra’s best guess is that this deck-butchering took place somewhere around 1965. Her partner Peter Hosking: “I met Sandra in 1981 and they were talking about what to do about it then.” Clearly its reinstatement as a thing of beauty won’t happen over night.

That’s entirely in keeping with the mindsets around here anyway. Piha types are fiercely possessive of their domain and their desire to protect this authentic beach community from the dual forces of commercialism and progress is paramount. Conveniences taken for granted elsewhere are staunchly resisted.

Electricity may have arrived in 1956, putting an end to kerosene fridges and bottled gas for cooking, and the Piha road might have been sealed by 1983, making it a 45-minute whisk from central Auckland, but enough is enough. There’s only so much civilisation Piha devotees can take. There’ll be no curbed and channelled footpaths here thank you very much.

“We don’t want Piha to turn into just another suburb of Auckland,” says Sandra who became an Auckland Regional Councillor to prevent just that.

So when property developers spy dollars in them there hills, their plans are swiftly quashed. The Aman Resort people were also given their marching orders when they came to assess the region as a likely setting for one of their luxury playgrounds. Beachside communities everywhere may be undergoing



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## “Piha attracts strong-minded, opinionated people who have a sense of ownership of the place”

gentrification but the not-in-my-back-yard principle rules at Piha.

“We had such a wonderful time growing up here we don’t want things to change. Piha is a place that Aucklanders can come for a slow-paced experience. It’s about rejuvenation, getting away from it all.”

It wasn’t always that way. Sandra’s childhood here was less about getting away and more about getting up to goodness-knows-what. “We’d roam around in big groups,” she says. They’d pack slices of meatloaf, tins of salmon and lashings of neon-coloured fizzy drink and go exploring.

“A friend and I found an old abandoned bach up in the bush and claimed it as our own,” says Sandra. Making illicit use of other people’s baches is something of a Piha tradition. Evidently George Wilder (a one-time prison escapee on the run) achieved legendary status by overnighing wherever the fancy took him (the Pearce’s bach included).

In an effort to put the kibosh on her intrepid daughter’s explorations, Doris would occasionally tie Sandra to whatever sturdy object was handy. Locals well recollect the wee toddler

being tethered to a fence down at the beach. These days 91-year-old Doris still visits the bach which has had ramps installed for her wheelchair. Sitting on the deck smoking a cigar is now a favoured pastime – and her youngest daughter may roam freely once more.

Movies at the Piha Hall were big in Sandra’s youth. “I remember crying like mad in ‘Lassie Come Home.’” And if the projector broke down as it was wont to do a near riot ensued. Much like the time a chap from the surf club let a bucket-load of frogs loose in the cinema.

Back then there was a “permanent party place” nicknamed the Rat Hole where rum-and-cokes and vast amounts of beer were swilled. “Women tended to drink spirits,” says Sandra who was a gin-and-gingerale girl herself.

For the card-carrying Piha gentry there’s a sense of nostalgia about the fifties, a belief that this era was the settlement’s true heyday. It was a quintessential time of drinking competitions for the blokes, surf queen carnival contests for the girls and working bees at the local surf club for everyone.

Working is still part of the deal here. It’s certainly not all



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sipping sauvignon blanc and watching the fiery sunsets. For Sandra and Peter, Piha weekends mean backbreaking work clearing gorse and planting natives. Their bush regeneration project is a top priority since the 10-hectare Pearce property has been ravaged twice by arson. Five-hectares of bush was lost in 1994; two went in 1998.

So what's on the agenda once the goggles, gloves and work-boots come off? "Friends might come over for a roast lamb or pork or else we shower and go to the surf club for tea."

The surf clubs, RSA, bowling club and general store are about as civilised as it gets around here but old-timers fear there'll be increasing demand for more services such as a petrol station, video shop or (heaven forbid) supermarket. "Those with a long association tend not to want those sorts of things." Even so The Rough Guide to New Zealand warns that Piha 'feels on the brink of change', that its rustic appeal is about to be diluted.

Controversy constantly rages in one form or another. The current hot debate concerns the positioning of a sand fence erected to protect the dunes. "There's always something like that on the go," says Sandra. "Piha attracts strong-minded, opinionated people who have a sense of ownership of the place."







## FACT FILE

### THINGS TO DO

**Walks** At low-tide you can walk around the rocks at the south end of the beach to the Gap and take a swim in the Blue Pool (a swimming hole formed as the tide goes out). Piha's classic walk is the steep climb up Lion Rock; a rock fall has blocked access to the top but great views can be enjoyed from the halfway point. The main departure point for tracks into the native bush-clad Waitakere Ranges is at the end of Glen Esk Rd. The Kitekite Track leading to the spectacular Kitekite Falls is recommended.

**Picnics** Sandra Coney's website (see below) lists 4 picnic spots: the far north end of North Piha, the Piha Domain (by the lagoon), the end of Glen Esk Rd (across the stream) and by the lily pond in Garden Rd.

**Piha Surf Shop** Long boards, short boards, body boards and surf gear to hire or buy. Also offers custom-made surfboards and surf lessons. 122 Seaview Rd, tel (09) 812 8723, email [info@pihasurf.co.nz](mailto:info@pihasurf.co.nz) or see [www.pihasurf.co.nz](http://www.pihasurf.co.nz).

**West Coast Gallery** Community-run exhibition of local artists. Open Friday, Saturday and Sunday 11am-5pm; weekdays by appointment. 24 Seaview Rd, tel (09) 812 8029.

### SPECIAL EVENTS

#### Annual Anzac Day Parade

Parade to Lion Rock where a service is held. Meets at the RSA at 1.45pm, 25 April.

### TOP EATS

**Ironsands Lounge** Bar and restaurant with blackboard menu. Fish and grilled steak a speciality; also vegetarian and children's menus. Visitors must sign the visitors' book. Open summer Monday-Thursday 5.30pm-10pm, Friday and Saturday 5.30pm-midnight, Sunday 5.30pm-9.30pm; off season Wednesday and Friday-Sunday only. Meals from 6.30pm.

**Piha Surf Life Saving Club** 23 Marine Parade South, tel (09) 812 8059, email [pihaslsc@ihug.co.nz](mailto:pihaslsc@ihug.co.nz).

**RSA Café** Blackboard menu changes weekly. Vegetarian and children's meals. Dinner Thursday and Friday 6pm-9pm. Sunday brunch 11am-2pm. Piha RSA, 3 Beach Valley Rd, tel (09) 812 8138

**Piha Store** Groceries, milk, bread, takeaways, sandwiches, filled croissants, pies, quiche and cakes. Open 7 days 8.30am-7pm summer, 9am-5pm off season. 15 Seaview Rd, tel (09) 812 8844.

**Bon's Seagull's** Takeaway bar beside Piha Surf Life Saving Club. Burgers,