



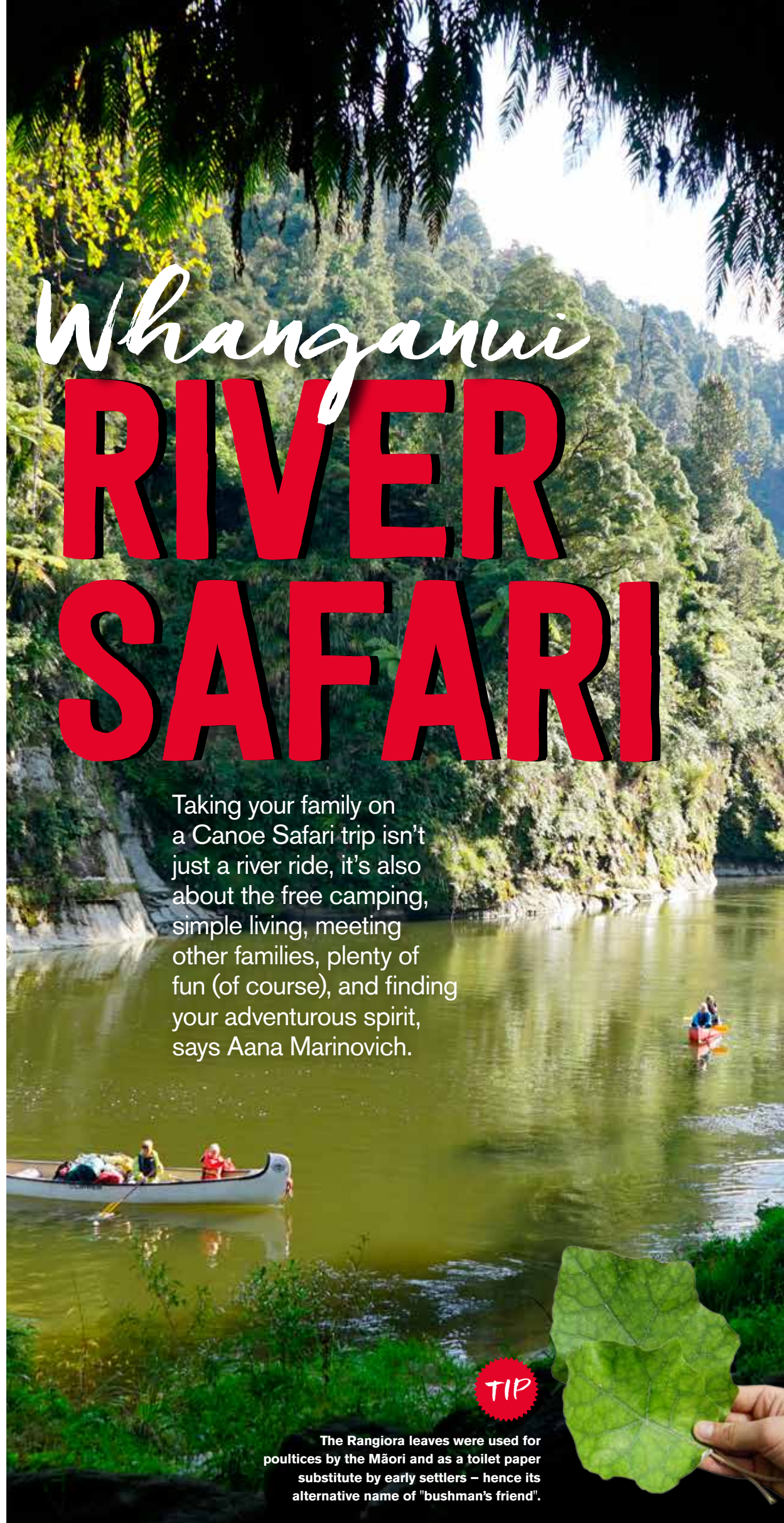
Our kids loved time "in" as much as "on" the water.



Dress the kids in layers, as they soon warm up, even on a chilly morning.



Each canoe carries barrels to keep all of your gear water tight
Right: Tamatea's Cave.



Whanganui RIVER SAFARI

Taking your family on a Canoe Safari trip isn't just a river ride, it's also about the free camping, simple living, meeting other families, plenty of fun (of course), and finding your adventurous spirit, says Aana Marinovich.

TIP

The Rangiora leaves were used for poultices by the Māori and as a toilet paper substitute by early settlers – hence its alternative name of "bushman's friend".



"THE MOVEMENT OF A CANOE IS LIKE A REED IN THE WIND. SILENCE IS PART OF IT, AND THE SOUNDS OF LAPPING WATER, BIRD SONGS, AND WIND IN THE TREES."

*Sigurd Olsen
(defender of the wilderness)*

A million years ago, the vibrant green and lush Whanganui National Park was formed, with a beautiful river that forged its way through 87km of native forest, from the alpine mountain streams to the Tasman Sea. It's where Maori cultivated sheltered terraces, brown kiwis call out at night, where the water sparkles and reflects the land, and gentle rapids are bubbling over the smooth river stones protected by River Canoe kaitiaki (guardians).

CANOE SAFARI

This was our first overnight river experience, so we decided to book in with Canoe Safaris (canoesafaris.co.nz), and take a guided trip down the river that included their larger Canadian canoes and waterproof barrels for all the gear. You can choose how many days you want (two- to five-day options), but with kids, I recommend five days, so you have less time paddling each day and more time at camp having fun with other families. On longer trips, you also get a mix of camping, huts, and possibly a night at the Bridge to Nowhere Lodge (book well ahead for this).

The kids loved being at the campsites, because the simplicity felt like the ultimate freedom. They get to swim, run around, and play. There's so much to see and do, it's really a full nature adventure, and not just about the paddling. And at camp, when there are tents to pitch – it's all hands on deck!

The guides at Canoe Safaris (canoesafaris.co.nz) helped with the equipment, cooking, and organisation, as well as navigated us down the river and paddled with our younger kids – lovin' that! If you are used to basic camping food, then you'll be super-impressed with the meals that they prepare with such limited equipment. I was in awe... While sipping my wine.

Your trip will be well organised, the tricky details covered, and any concerns about paddling experience can be set aside. Taking a guided tour makes this trip so enjoyable and much easier with kids.

Don't want a guide? You can rent the canoes and barrels – even the large family-sized canoes. The Whanganui is not a difficult river (only grade 1), but all the same, if you have kids, it would pay to have someone with river experience on the trip with you. Canoe Safaris have a lodge in Ohakune where you can stay the night before an early start.

WALK TO THE BRIDGE

Most of the adventurers on the river are heading to the Bridge to Nowhere, a long-forgotten connection between the 1930s Mangaparua Farming settlement and Taumarunui. Those farms were abandoned in the Depression, now it's all part of the Whanganui National Park, but the bridge without a purpose has become a secret discovery only accessible by a lovely bush track from the riverbank.



Bigger kids paddled in their own boat while the younger ones were in with our guide.



The walk to the Bridge to Nowhere. Above: Ice cream by headlight while snug in a merino Monsie.

GET THE GEAR FROM TORPEDO7.CO.NZ AND MONSROYALE.COM



All little hands on deck pitching tents at the John Coull Campsite.

TIP

A great way to get kids to notice their surroundings is to play games like "Eye Spy" on the river. Here are more to try:

ALPHABET SPY
Name everything you can see that starts with an A, then B, C, etc.

NAME OF THE GAME
Choose a word rule, like the word has to have a double letter "ee" or "tt", then say the kids, "The tea trees have it, but the ducks don't!" (This will stump them for ages, trying to figure out what the rule is.)

MEMORY
"We're early settlers travelling down the Whanganui River, and in our canoe we have a barrel." Next person: "We have a barrel and a billy", etc.

FINISH WITH A JET BOAT

If you're going for the weekend, include a jet boat ride at the end. This means you get to see the whole 87km of the Whanganui National Park, and it's an exciting way to end the trip. Joe Adam, a local in the area, runs the boat along with Bug (a cute little Terrier our kids were enamoured with) and transports canoeists and mountain bikers up and down the river. If he doesn't have too many canoes and bikes on the back, he'll thrill you with a few 360s along the way. (bridgetonowhere.co.nz)

KEEP IT SIMPLE

This is a rustic family adventure – not all camps have running water or power, so keep your packing to the basics. Kids will LOVE the simplicity, as less luxury means less rules. If there's no running water – no showers! No electric light – parents aren't watching table manners! No mirrors – no hair brushing!

FIVE- TO EIGHT-YEAR-OLDS

Kids of this age are not reliable paddlers, so are best with a guide or experienced parent in one of the bigger Canadian canoes where they can paddle when they feel like it, rest and chat in the boat, and enjoy a bit of floating. Our young ones would launch into action in the "massive rapids" (actually these were gentle eddies). Very exciting. They also became the official Viking navigators and named all of the

boats in the competition (everything is a race, of course!). You need them to be water confident as, although they are wearing life jackets, the river is on your doorstep for the whole trip. This trip is not recommended for under fives.

KIDS' FAVOURITES

- ★ Playing Eye Spy ("sparkles" was the winning word)
- ★ Meeting other kids on the riverbank and having a skimming stones competition
- ★ Floating down the river in our lifejackets
- ★ Stopping along the river to explore (like Tamatea's Cave)
- ★ Arriving at a new camp each afternoon
- ★ Pretend farting competition between all the kids' tents at night
- ★ Sharing a bag of chocolate fish on the Bridge to Nowhere
- ★ Showering under the waterfall
- ★ Paddling over the rapids and eddies
- ★ Jet boating with Bug (the dog)