Te Iti Kahurangi

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Connecting people the highlight

You only have to read Mahanga Maru's top 10 checklist for flying Air Ruatoria to realise that this owner and pilot of one of Aotearoa's smallest private airlines has a keen sense of humour. But there's far more to this effervescent, Ruatoria-raised Ngati Porou tāne.

Mahanga's business career advising businesses how to work effectively with whānau, hapu and iwi has grounded him for more than two decades ... and enabled his childhood aviation dream to be realised.

The first sparkle of his foray into his beloved world of flying began as a tamariki in Ruatoria, where he 'fell in love watching aero club planes, topdressing planes and anything that made aircraft noises in the sky'. Fly-Ins bringing aircraft in from across the country were a particular highlight.

Mahanga Maru.

An AFS scholarship to the USA complemented his Ngata College education, leading him into a mixed bag of work and study from the police and a Massey business studies degree to the energy sector and work for the Civil Aviation Authority itself.

"At 23, I gained my private pilot's license and set about gaining other qualifications that would lead me to an airline career."

The idea of an East Coast airline was not new when Mahanga set up Air Ruatoria in Covid-stricken 2020 with his six-seater Cessna 206. Fifty years earlier, Ruatoria Aero Club entrepreneurs Hughie

10 top tips for Air Ruatoria passengers

- **Please don't be late** – especially at Ruatoria as we may miss our departure slot!
- **Carry on** – whānau, it's pretty simple. Leave the kitchen at home, the sink too.
- **Safety stuff** – listen to your crew. If in doubt, ask plenty of questions and keep your tatua firmly fastened at all times.
- **Book ahead** – helps everyone to manage expectations and keep on schedule
- **Language** – Te Reo is our go-to but our German and French needs work. English is fine too, just no F bombs.
- **Koti club** – our exclusive lounge access is limited to Ruatoria customers only.
- **0800 944 834** – We don't have a call centre (yet) so if I don't pick up, please text us!
- **Kia ora** – It's universal so use the kupu liberally and your flight will be more enjoyable.
- **Hydration** – It's good to drink lots of fluids, but remember we don't have a toilet on board (yet).
- **Kai** – If you aren't a good flyer, ration your kai input.

Hughes, Eric Preston and Des Williams had sought government approval to start an airline to open up the East Coast. The club had more members than Rotorua's at the time. Flight instructors flew in from Rotorua to teach the growing number of students at Ruatoria.

Since 2020, Mahanga has navigated the complexity of CAA regulations, growth and operating in an unrelenting East Coast environment. He started with charter and scenic flights out of Ruatoria –highlighting the beauty and culture of the East Coast – and in 2025 branched out into Te Waka-a-Toi/Bay of Plenty, operating Whakaari-White Island Flights from Whakatāne with two additional aircraft, and from 1 March will begin tourism flights out of Rotorua Airport.

Now living where flights take him between Ruatoria, Gisborne, Ohope and Rotorua, Mahanga gained national fame in 2022 for using te reo Māori in his safety briefings to passengers and for challenging Air New Zealand to do the same during Mahuru Māori (Māori Language Month). His Civil Aviation Authority-approved safety briefing cards are bilingual.

Uncle John Reuben opens a hangi with (at left) hungry pilots Phil Prouse and Ray Barrett, Ruatoria Aero Club president, and a group of student teachers, 1969.

"Te ao Māori, tikanga Māori and te reo is a big part of our kaupapa, particularly with our growing tourism market," he said. "Our overseas manuhiri really enjoy our experiences, and we enjoy their company as we share the beauty of Aotearoa. They love the chance to learn about our culture and history with a dash of manaakitanga on our flights.

"We are working with our Te Arawa kin to ensure the korero about Tarawera maunga and their taonga is authentic, tika and pono."

Air Ruatoria is not just about tourism. It's also a key connector for people in good and bad times.

"We have been lucky to support whānau at home after tropical cyclones Hale and Gabrielle, and during the January 2026 Pukeamaru slip at Te Araroa. It's a part of Air Ruatoria that I really enjoy the most – connecting whānau and people across the motu."

Whakaari White Island.

Future-proofing air access to East Coast

It looks like a spider web – lines drawn on a map with numbers – but it's actually an instrument flight path for instrument-rated aircraft to use when flying in poor weather.

When NZ Aviation Federation's head suggested establishing an instrument approach at Ruatoria aerodrome a few years ago, Mahanga jumped at the 'no-brainer' proposal. He knew the instrument approach would be a game breaker for East Coast communities, enabling air access during poor weather conditions.

With federation support, he called Mark Adeane of Aeropath, which designs and tests instrument approaches before being used by aircraft. Turns out Mark knew more about the district than expected as his late father, former District Court judge Tony Adeane, had frequently held sessions in the Ruatoria District Court.

Mark and his team went on to design the instrument approach

enabling aircraft to fly safely in poor weather conditions to a point near an aerodrome for a safe landing.

Designing this for the Coast was special for Mark, who had grown up in Gisborne. And he and his team were delighted with the results, accompanying the aircrew testing the Ruatoria instrument approach. This now-published approach was made available in November 2025 for aircraft to use.

As part of this work, an off-shore IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) route has also been set up to allow rescue helicopter aircraft to access all East Coast communities, thereby future-proofing air access to the East Coast.

Mahanga said that with a new instrument-equipped rescue helicopter in the pipeline for the East Coast, this infrastructure in the sky will be of huge benefit for the people of the East Coast and wider Tairāwhiti.