Visitors to New Zealand may catch glimpses of Māori culture, tattooed on passersby and tucked around every corner, never realizing the strong influence the culture has had on the past, present and future. Through chatting with locals and immersing themselves in tourist attractions, visitors can see all the Māori have to offer.
ome people choose to etch their story on their skin, mixing ink with blood. A select few of those people choose to etch their life’s journey on their body’s canvas with Tā Moko, Māori for the body art, to honor their ancestors and continue a Māori tradition hundreds of years old.

New Zealand’s indigenous population, the Māori, use nature-inspired designs to create sacred tattoos. Like fingerprints, Tā Moko identifies his/her and their story using unique combinations of patterns. Different symbols represent different aspects, such as knowledge, skills or new beginnings.

Often, Tā Moko incorporates lineage with different sections dedicated to different family members. In the end, the ink is a personalized scrapbook crafted from the partnership of artist and client.

“The bark of a tree identifies what kind of tree it is just as his Moko identifies who he is,” said Elias Tyro, a tattoo and Moko artist for Expressions tattoo studio and art gallery in Christchurch. Up a flight of creaky stairs, looking down onto the colorful buildings of New Regent Street, Tyro worked on an intricate design for his Māori client, Ricky Bidois. Rock music filtered over the buzzing noise of tattoo pens at work as the chemical smell of disinfectant hung in the air.

Tyro bent over Bidois’ right leg as he textured the tan skin. Tyro put in more than 50 hours into Bidois’ Moko as lines swirled from above his knee up above his glute, a history book curling along his contours.

“My life has been a long journey,” Bidois said. “[This] represents it.”

Tyro was mostly self-taught, starting Tā Moko after getting his own Moko on both his legs. Some symbols printed into Bidois’ leg included a trail of triangles representing shark teeth and strength or swirls for water. Depending on different iwis, or Māori tribe, symbols will have different meanings and uses. Tyro has created Tā Moko for seven years now and said he still has a lot to master.

“It’s a visual language,” he said. “I still consider myself a student. I have a lot to learn, which I guess we all are students of life.”

Pip Hartley became a Moko artist at Karanga Ink in Auckland out of a desire to learn. She said she never aspired to be a tattoo artist, but followed her path.

“I wanted to learn more about my culture and my roots, then one thing led to another,” she said.

Hartley had an apprenticeship on the South Island where she learned the art and how to do it with the traditional tool. Unlike the modern pen, an uhi, the traditional chisel used to create Tā Moko, engraves the skin. Using an uhi can take twice as long and is rarely used.

Hartley said she likes using the traditional method even though most people do not request it. She said getting Tā Moko has a spiritual element to it. Typically it is earned and symbolizes some type of passing, whether through a personal challenge or the loss of a loved one.

“We are translating their story and showing what they hold close to their heart,” she said. “The biggest challenge is when people are in their mind too much and not trusting the process.”

At Karanga Ink, Hartley gave Kevin Swank Tā Moko using a mixture of the old and new tools. Swank, an American, had studied in New Zealand and learned about Māori culture through his time abroad. He wanted to commemorate his experience and the culture by getting a tattoo at the Auckland parlor.

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“It’s cool to know the stories, then to take home something to show and share the culture,” Swank said.

While Tā Moko is a Māori art form, there is an increasing popularity of the tattoo with tourists and mixed feelings about it in the Māori community.

Tucked across a bungy jumping store and off a sidewalk busy with foreigners, Otsurashi offers hosting Māori souvenirs in Queenstown. Tamati Rahaatia has been doing it for the past 10 years and is part of the staff at Otsurashi tattoo parlour. Rahaatia said he is not bothered by people without Māori heritage getting their style of tattoos. There is a version of Tā Moko called ohuau, which Rahaatia said means to draw on skin, that still uses elements of Tā Moko without the sacred significance.

Rahaatia knows some people who are upset by foreigners getting the tattoo because they feel like people are stealing the cultural meaning. “To sort of get our art form out there,” Rahaatia said. “The symbols do have meaning. Don’t just come over and get it done because it looks cool—try to respect it.”

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after people,” Tania Tapsell-Bennett, a sales and marketing person for the Tamaki Māori Village, explained. “So whenever people would come over, we would always look after our visitors, put them up and feed them. Tourism just evolved from our natural values here.”

Tapsell stated that the Māori got along so well with their visitors they didn’t sign the Treaty of Waitangi, the Māori and European equivalent to the Declaration of Independence.

“It was to say, ‘let’s get along and be peaceful,’” Tapsell stated. “But we were already peaceful and we had really well established businesses.”

According to oral history, the Māori originally came to New Zealand in seven canoes, each with hundreds of people aboard. Upon arrival they branched into countless tribes, and from there Māori tradition rooted itself deeply.

In some instances, Māori traditions and stories aren’t common knowledge, as many are passed down orally. While in recent years, full immersion Māori schools are more common, and Māori teachings have made their way into public curriculums, for many the best way to learn about the fascinating ins and outs of Māori culture is a tourist venture.

“When the Europeans arrived, our race was rapidly becoming a dead language, a dead culture,” Rawhira T ekeeti, a Tamaki Māori Village tour guide explained. “We couldn’t really hold onto all the knowledge, and so now, the knowledge that we do have, people feel like they can’t share it because it’s too sacred.”

Despite how far relations between the Māori and other Kiwis have come since recent years, the Māori people do still face discrimination from some outside of their culture. Tapsell said that statistically, Māori are convicted of crimes more often than other New Zealanders.

“There is still discrimination even going through school,” Teketi said. “People just are not wanting to understand. I don’t dwell in the past. In this environment, being here and moving here has definitely helped.”

For the Māori there is a lost generation. Grandmothers, grandfathers, even parents were not allowed to speak the Māori language growing up. In the 1970s and 1980s, researchers there was a resurgence of Māori culture and language through the arts. Youth today will not experience the cultural drought that plagued the previous generation.

“That’s how fresh our culture is,” the Tamaki’s chief explained to visitors.

Those in the Tamaki Māori Village are excited to teach willing visitors the intricacies of their past.

“It means the world to me,” Rangatira Simon, a cultural performer for the Tamaki Evening Experience stated proudly. “It’s something to be ashamed of. It’s something to be proud of really. To be able to stand and portray our culture to people around the world and for them to take it back to their homeland is a big thing for me. Not only am I a face of Māori, but I’m a face for my people and my tribe. So for me it’s everything. It’s not only a part of me, but it’s pretty much all of me.”

Being involved in the ceremonies help the Māori stay connected to their traditions.

“We get to practice our own culture and our language every single day.” Nepia Takuira-Mita, a Tamaki Māori warrior, said of the Tamaki Village Evening Experience holding out his weapon. “It challenges us to find new ways to portray our culture and to find better ways. So I will go back home after this and I’ll practice [the performance] with this weapon and find new ways to do things. I think doing that helps me find out a little bit more about who I am and where I fit in my culture.”

In the tribe, there is a specific role for everyone; this is how it has always been. Tourists can involve themselves in the three and a half hour experience with the tribe by purchasing a ticket at tamakimaorivillage.co.nz. The ticket price includes a traditional hangi dinner and transportation to and from your Rotorua accommodation.

An overnight stay is also an option for an additional fee.

“Those of my friends who don’t do this stuff [tourism], do contribute to the Māori world in other ways,” Takuira-Mita said. “They teach at schools or those sorts of things. I think we all, as a Māori people, are doing something to help promote the Māori culture.”