

Matariki: How to Experience the Māori New Year in New Zealand

This guide focuses specifically on Matariki, the Māori New Year, and its cultural, astronomical, and seasonal significance in Aotearoa New Zealand. Other natural and astronomical phenomena are covered in separate guides.



Photo: Matariki Puanga Dawn Cruise; Credit Mark Russell

Matariki in New Zealand: At a Glance

- **Phenomenon:** Matariki — the rising of the Matariki star cluster, marking the Māori New Year
- **Best time:** Late June – July (official public holiday date varies each year; in 2026: Friday 10 July)
- **Best locations:** Nationwide, with strong experiences in dark-sky regions such as Takapō (Tekapo), Aoraki Mackenzie, Wairarapa, Auckland maunga, and regional centres hosting public events
- **Why New Zealand:** Matariki is unique to Aotearoa as a nationally recognised Indigenous celebration, combining astronomy, mātauranga Māori, remembrance, and renewal

What is Matariki

Matariki, also known as the Māori New Year, is a star cluster that rises in Aotearoa New Zealand's early morning midwinter sky between late May and early July. Its appearance is timed differently across regions and iwi and marks the end of one year and the beginning of the next in alignment with the maramataka, the Māori lunar calendar. The season of Matariki is a time for people to gather with whānau to remember the past, reflect on the year that has passed, and look ahead with hope. The star cluster is best viewed just before dawn in the northeast sky, and because the celebrations follow the lunar calendar, the date of Matariki changes each year.

Why Matariki matters in Aotearoa New Zealand

Mātauranga Māori, translating to ancestral knowledge and wisdom, lies at the heart of Matariki, guiding the way communities across Aotearoa honour remembrance, celebrate the present, and look to the future as the star cluster rises and marks the Māori New Year. Recognised as an official public holiday in 2022, Matariki became the first national holiday to acknowledge *Te Ao Māori* and one of the world's first reintroduced Indigenous celebrations. During this time, people come together to reflect on loved ones lost since the last rising of Matariki, give thanks for the abundance and connections they have now, and set intentions for the year ahead. For travellers, visiting New Zealand during Matariki offers a unique opportunity to experience these celebrations firsthand—through community events, dawn gatherings, storytelling, kai, and cultural performances that share the richness of Māori tradition and the spirit of renewal that Matariki embodies.

When to experience Matariki

In 2026, Matariki will be celebrated on Friday, 10 July. The star cluster becomes visible in the predawn sky between approximately 5:30am and 6:00am.

Traditionally, Matariki is observed over a period rather than a single day. Many iwi hold gatherings, remembrance events, storytelling sessions, and ceremonies in the days before and after the heliacal rising. Travellers can expect community festivals, cultural performances, astronomy workshops, shared kai, and dawn events across the motu throughout the season.

How to find the Matariki star cluster

- Matariki typically becomes visible on the northeastern horizon
- 45–60 minutes before sunrise, when the cluster shines brightest during its heliacal rising
- Clear skies and low moonlight

Where to experience Matariki in New Zealand

Matariki can be experienced throughout New Zealand as communities come together to honour the Māori New Year through remembrance, storytelling, shared kai, music, and the retelling of ancestral traditions. Many towns and cities host dawn gatherings where people view the rising star cluster, offer karakia, remember loved ones, and celebrate the year ahead, while festivals, feasts, lectures, and cultural performances take place nationwide. Visitors can join locals in enjoying seasonal food, watching traditional kite flying, attending community events, or simply reflecting with whānau, making Matariki a uniquely meaningful and accessible celebration for anyone travelling in Aotearoa.

Ways visitors can experience Matariki

Matariki is a time to connect with nature, reflect, and gather with whānau. Across Aotearoa, there are countless outdoor experiences that align beautifully with the festival's themes of renewal and celestial connection.

Stargazing and dark-sky experiences

- **Stargazing Tours:** Join guided stargazing experiences at one of New Zealand's renowned dark sky locations, including the Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve and the Dark Sky Project in Takapō.
- **Climb One of Auckland's 48 Maunga:** Auckland's volcanic cones offer some of the best vantage points to watch Matariki rise on the northeastern horizon in the predawn sky.
- **Visit One of Auckland's Hauraki Gulf Islands:** Waiheke, Motutapu, Rangitoto, and Aotea/Great Barrier Island offer darker skies and minimal light pollution for stargazing and sunrise viewing.

Outdoor and journey-based experiences

- **Nighttime Kayaking with [Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland Sea Kayaks](#):** Paddle beneath the stars and learn about the Matariki constellation on a guided night tour.
- **Stay in a Backcountry Hut:** Many of New Zealand's remote huts offer pristine night skies and breathtaking predawn views — ideal for spotting the Matariki star cluster.
 - **Maketawa Hut, Taranaki** — a short, family friendly walk with excellent night sky views.
 - **Powell Hut, Wairarapa** — east facing and ideally positioned for the rising of Matariki.
 - **Rod Donald Hut, Banks Peninsula, Canterbury** — panoramic vistas on a gentle 50minute walk
 - **Jubilee Hut, Otago** — remote, peaceful, and rewarding for experienced trampers.
 - **Luxmore Hut, Fiordland, Southland** — high altitude, uninterrupted skies on the Kepler Track.
- **[Great Journeys Matariki Rail Experience](#).** Rail journeys incorporating storytelling, astronomy commentary, and landscape viewing as part of the Matariki celebration period.

Expert perspectives on Matariki

Victoria (Tori) Campbell (Kāi Tahu), General Manager of Dark Sky Project, leading the integration of Western science and Māori celestial knowledge in Takapō (Tekapo)

Why is Matariki a good time to visit New Zealand and the Aoraki Mackenzie Dark Sky Reserve?

Matariki is an exceptional time to visit Aotearoa New Zealand, as communities across the country come together to celebrate the Matariki public holiday. Visitors can experience rich local culture, mātauraka Māori, and genuine manaakitaka (hospitality). The Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve is internationally recognised as a leading centre for astro-tourism and public education, offering some of the clearest night skies in the world and a unique way to connect with the stars.

What tips do you have for visitors trying to spot the Matariki cluster?

The Dark Sky Project offers night tours to Ōtehiwai / University of Canterbury Mount John Observatory and Cowan's Observatory. Nothing compares to seeing the stars with your own eyes—our powerful telescopes offer a unique connection to the sky and planets. Experiencing this in person, alongside the stories shared by our kaimahi (guides), creates a truly memorable connection to the night sky. We will also have our guides sharing their expertise on how to spot Matariki as it rises in Aotearoa's pre-dawn sky.

How can tourists get involved in Matariki celebrations this year [if there's anything happening at Dark Sky Project this year]?

Alongside Dark Sky Project tours The Matariki Mackenzie Festival returns this year, offering a range of activities including unforgettable stargazing experiences.

How would you explain the significance of Matariki to someone visiting Aotearoa?

Matariki is a unique time across the Pacific, often referred to as the Māori New Year, marking the beginning of a new cycle within a lunar-solar calendar followed by many iwi/people. The Matariki public holiday provides a special moment each year to connect with the stars, engage with astronomy, and appreciate the brilliance of the universe—just as generations before us have done.

If an international visitor took away only one thing from experiencing Matariki, what would you hope it would be?

There is nothing more spectacular than experiencing the stars within a Dark Sky Reserve. I encourage everyone to take time to connect with the natural beauty of our universe—what better time to do so than during Matariki.

Nalayini Brito, Royal Astronomical Society of New Zealand

Where is the best place to see Matariki in New Zealand?

“Matariki can be viewed in skies free of cloud of a bright Moon from any uninterrupted view of the East which allows the rising of the Pleiades cluster to be seen naked eye (better still through a pair of small binoculars). The chances of seeing Matariki is enhanced as New Zealand is recognised globally for its exceptionally clear night skies, with several regions holding official Dark Sky Reserve or Sanctuary status making many places fantastic viewing points for Matariki. For example, Wairarapa, recently named one of the world’s top destinations for stargazing by Lonely Planet, offers minimal light pollution, stable atmospheric conditions and dedicated astro-tourism experiences. This makes it an ideal place not only to observe Matariki but to appreciate the wider celestial environment that has long been central to Māori astronomy and cultural practice.”

What tips do you have for visitors wanting to experience Matariki?

The special nature of Matariki is at its best when one combines the sighting of Matariki (the Pleiades) with the related cultural experience. Joining a dawn ceremony involving the local mana whenua would be a great experience where the Māori protocol is followed, the cultural aspects of Matariki is explained, time allowed to remember one’s ancestors who has passed, and the community gathering is wrapped up with kai. There are increasingly many such opportunities available around New Zealand since Matariki became a public holiday.

In your opinion, what would you say is one of the most unique ways to experience New Zealand’s Dark Skies?

Dark skies offer the unique experience of seeing a starry sky with the Milky Way and some special celestial objects with the naked eye. One third of humanity cannot see the Milky Way anymore whereas 10,000 generations of our ancestors saw it on every clear night. The night sky unlike the terrestrial part of the Earth has not changed over humanity and remains the same for everyone world over. As such a reconnection with the starry sky that our ancestors experienced and experienced by others around the world is almost a spiritual experience. Of the developed world, New Zealand has the darkest and easiest to access of such skies.

As for special celestial objects, New Zealand’s latitude makes it possible to see two satellite galaxies, the Large Magellanic Cloud and the Small Magellanic Cloud, with naked eye in a dark location. The dark nebula, Coal Sack Nebula adjacent to the Southern Cross can also be seen naked eye. Further the best globular cluster, Omega Centauri, can be viewed through a small telescope or large pair of binoculars. The bright stars of Southern Cross on the New Zealand flag and the Pointer stars are visible even in urban cities.

The 10 certified international dark sky places offer not only such skies but also serviced of astrotourism operators to guide and make the experience truly memorable. There are also astrophotographers who offer astrophotography experiences and workshops

Matariki events across New Zealand

Regional Tourism Organisations that have had strong Matariki programmes in past years

- Auckland
- Wellington
- Rotorua
- Bay of Plenty
- Christchurch
- Northland

Keep up to **date with events nationwide via the official [Matariki Events page](#).**

Food and Beverage Traditions During Matariki

Sharing kai is central to Matariki celebrations. Eating together symbolises unity, remembrance, and abundance for the year to come. Four Matariki stars relate directly to food sources: Waitī — freshwater foods; Waitā — kaimoana; Tupuānuku — food grown in the soil; Tupuārangi — food grown in the trees or taken from the air. Creating a feast that incorporates ingredients from each of these domains is a meaningful way to honour the season. Be inspired by Matariki and dine at some of Auckland's most exciting restaurants:

- **kingi (Britomart):** sustainably caught kaimoana celebrating New Zealand's coastal bounty.
- **Ahi (Commercial Bay):** Ben Bayly's fire focused kitchen champions Aotearoa's finest growers, fishers, and producers — an exceptional place to connect with ingredients at their source and honour the spirit of Matariki through kai of true New Zealand origin.
- **Velskov: Hinerauwhārangī Dining Experience (Waitākere Ranges):** A private Māori-led eco dining experience hosted by **Neria Brewerton**, blending foraging, mātauranga Māori, and open fire cooking in native forest surroundings.
- **Cassia** - Cassia's modern Indian-New Zealand cuisine celebrates bold flavours and seasonal produce — a perfect fit for Matariki, a time to honour fresh beginnings and shared feasting.
- **Paris Butter** - With its imaginative, season-driven tasting menus, Paris Butter reflects the spirit of Matariki by elevating local ingredients and celebrating the stories they carry.
- **Forest** - Forest's plant forward dining champions sustainability and creativity, aligning beautifully with Matariki's themes of renewal, respect for the environment, and gratitude for the harvest.
- **Mr Morris** - Mr Morris' refined yet warm approach to New Zealand cuisine makes it an inspiring spot to reflect on Matariki's focus on togetherness, hospitality, and reconnecting through kai.
- **Tala** - Tala's evocative, fire driven Samoan inspired dishes highlight tradition, storytelling, and manaakitanga — values closely linked with the cultural significance of Matariki.

- **The Engine Room** - This beloved North Shore favourite celebrates honest, beautifully executed seasonal food, making it an ideal place to embrace Matariki's call to gather and share comforting kai.
- **Amano** - Amano's dedication to daily changing menus and local produce reflects Matariki's celebration of seasonal abundance and the deep connection between whenua and food.
- **Ki Māha (Waiheke Island)** - Set by the sea with a focus on seasonal, locally sourced dishes, Ki Māha captures the essence of Matariki — a moment to pause, reflect, and honour the gifts of land and ocean.
- **Depot** - Depot's lively, ingredient led approach to New Zealand kai makes it a welcoming place to celebrate Matariki's spirit of community, generosity, and shared tables.
- **Blue Rose Café:** pick up a signature hāngi pie for a contemporary take on traditional kai.