

## LIGHT HOUSES OF NEW ZEALAND

# CAPE REINGA K3688



**Latitude: 34°26' South**  
**Longitude: 172°41' East**

The light was lit for the first time in May 1941, and the keepers were withdrawn in 1987. The light shines from a 10 metre-high tower, and is 165 metres above sea level. Its white light flashes once every 12 seconds, and can be seen for 19 nautical miles (35 kilometres).

Cape Reinga was the last watched lighthouse built in New Zealand, in 1941. It is one of the first lights that shipping observes when arriving from the Tasman Sea and north Pacific Ocean. The Cape Reinga light replaced the lighthouse on nearby Motuopao Island off Cape Maria Van Diemen, which had been built 1879. Access had always been a problem with the Maria Van Diemen light. In 1886, because of the difficulty of getting a boat across the rough seas, a flying fox was built from the island to the mainland. Although this was meant to be only for supplies and mail, keepers and their families also

slipped across the channel in the basket.

In 1933 the assistant keeper's wife was swept off the rocks near the lighthouse. The radio operator jumped in to rescue her, but they both drowned. It was five years after this accident that it was decided to move the lighthouse to the mainland.

In May 1941 the new concrete Cape Reinga lighthouse, complete with lantern fittings from Motuopao Island, was operational. It was powered by electricity from diesel generators. A small automatic light beacon was established at Cape Maria van Diemen.

Due to war restrictions the light saw little use until 1945. Threat of an invasion was a very real fear for the keepers at Cape Reinga. In 1918, during World War One, the German raider Wolf was seen anchored in Twilight Bay, only months before the passenger ship Wimmem was sunk by a mine 29 kilometres off the Cape, killing 26 people.

In the same year a mine drifted onto the mainland opposite the lighthouse. Although the keepers reported it during the night, it exploded before the army arrived to investigate - cracking the windows of one of the keeper's homes. However, it was unlikely the enemy would bomb a lighthouse - they were as much help to an enemy ship as to an allied vessel.

The light at Cape Reinga was much more accessible than Cape Maria van Diemen. Throughout the 1960s, during December through to February, the keepers estimated that as many as 200

people visited the station each day. Cape Reinga is also the place from which Maori spirits of the dead depart on their journey to the next world.

A school was established at the Cape in 1959, but owing to staff shortages and falling numbers of students in later years, the school was closed a decade later. After this, children from the light station traveled to a local school nearby.

In 1987 Cape Reinga Lighthouse was fully automated, and the keepers withdrawn. The light is now monitored electronically from Wellington. The tower is a well-known New Zealand landmark and remains a popular tourist attraction.