

A ZEAL FOR THE NORTH

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UNEARTH'S A FEW SECRETS
IN NEW ZEALAND'S
NORTHERN ISLAND

It is like being in the midst of a medieval fairytale, although one that is the slightest bit dark and scary. I am floating on a boat under a canopy of twinkling stars, sparkly despite their tininess. My mind refuses to process this display of star power in the middle of the day; have I not just stepped in from the bright summer sunshine of the Antipodes?

Deep inside the Waitomo caves of New Zea-

land – just two hours south of the capital city of Auckland – it is always night, and a brilliantly starry night at that. These little stars that shine in this subterranean sky are, in reality, clusters of glow-worms clinging on to the rock surface. The *Arachnocampa Luminosa*, a species of glow-worm that lives only in New Zealand, inhabit these caves, their larvae glowing like burnished dewdrops, in a natural phenomenon known as bioluminescence. And because even slight winds can easily damage

their webs, these glow-worms only live deep inside caves or rainforest regions, sheltered from harsh natural forces.

There are supposed to be over 300 such caves in the Waitomo area, although only three are open to visitors. And I am inside one of the most popular of these caves, being ferried around on an open boat along with a small group of tourists. Although there are longer and more physically challenging activities at Waitomo that involve caving and abseiling, I have chosen the

A SIGHT TO BEHOLD: Sunrise at Cathedral Cove, Coromandel



easier option of a guided tour on a boat.

Before we begin the ride, I am slightly miffed by the fact that photography is not permitted inside the caves. But once we are on the frigid waters, I can only gape in wonder at these lustrous strands of larvae, the camera long forgotten.

The next couple of days bring us – my husband and I, who are on a long road trip through this stunning country – close to more of the north island's natural wonders. The first of these is at Lake Taupo, New Zealand's largest lake, created by a volcanic eruption over 2,000 years ago. The highlight here is a detour to nearby Huka Falls, where a large boat takes us right up to the spot where 220,000 litres of water thunders down the face of the solid volcanic cliff every second. We are immediately soaked to the skin, and return to shore happy and drenched.

From Lake Taupo, it is on to Rotorua, where the pungent smell of sulphur follows us everywhere. Perched atop a volcanic zone, Rotorua is a hotbed of geothermal activity.

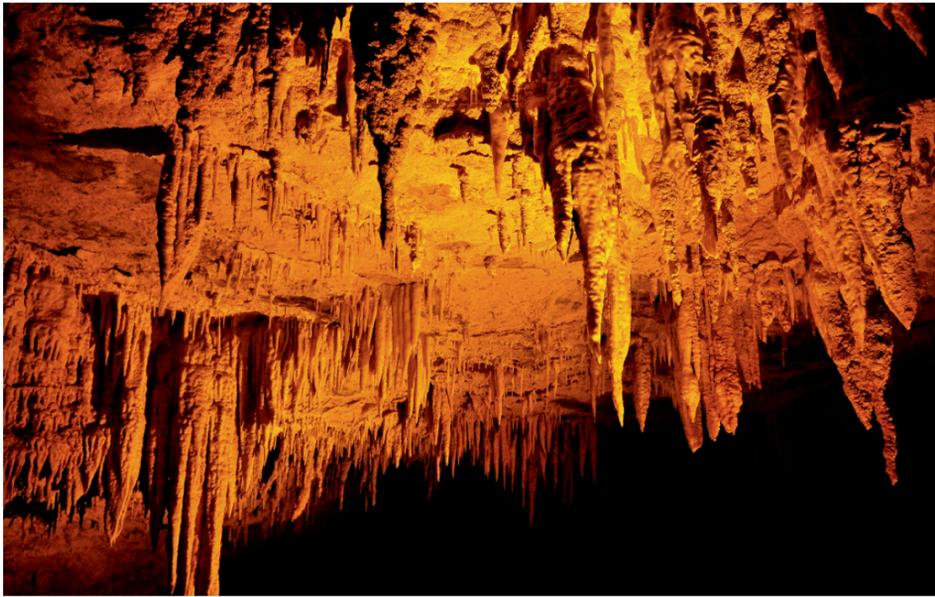
And there is plenty of evidence for this fact wherever we turn, in the form of squirting geysers, steaming hot springs and bubbling mud pools. We discover right away that it is not confined to a specific area, but happens right in the backyard of our guesthouse. Everything is quiet one minute, as we step out early in the evening for dinner, and the next, a geyser erupts in front of us, spurting hot water a couple of feet up in the air.

However, the best place to view these gurgling geysers and spouting springs in all their glory is the Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Valley. It is easy to see why the Maori, New Zealand's indigenous Polynesian people, thought of Rotorua as a blessed place, going so far as to name this part Wai-O-Tapu, or Sacred Waters.

The valley is a protected natural area, spread over 18 square kilometres of rocky terrain. It is home not just to the dozens of regular hot springs common to the province, but absolute wonders like the Lady Knox Geyser, that erupts every morning like clockwork, and the Mud Pool area, literally named after the constantly bubbling and exploding blobs of mud. The latter seems straight out of a B-grade horror movie, with only a creepy-crawly monster missing from the scene. With the very ground we are walking on smoking all the time, it is not possible to forget for a single moment that right under our feet, there is a stunning range of volcanic activity going on.

Along with the hot springs, Rotorua is also known to be the hub of ancient Maori culture within New Zealand. It is said that the healing and cleansing properties of the hot water naturally found in this part of the country initially attracted the Maori settlers. It was the Maoris who gave New Zealand the mellifluous name of Aotearoa, or the Land of the Long White Cloud.

Out of nowhere, I have a flash of memory from childhood – reading about the old Mao-



THE GUIDING LIGHT: Waitomo Glow Worm caves in New Zealand

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ri settlement known as Whakarewarewa – a word (and culture) that fascinated me endlessly during my school days. Obviously, I cannot leave town without at least a glimpse of this culture. And so, leaving behind the heat and haze of the geysers, I head straight to the Te Puia Maori Cultural Village, where a small but significant slice of indigenous culture has been preserved for curious visitors.

At the gate, we are received by a couple of Maoris in traditional costume; I jump slightly as one of them throws a spear at my feet, as the other chants (what I hope is a warm welcome) in a deep baritone. The rest of the day passes by in a blur of carving and weaving demonstrations, and music and dance performances.

Back in town, I make my way to the luxurious Polynesian Spa for a spot of kicking back and reaping the therapeutic benefits of the very same water that Rotorua is known for. Of course, I also see this as a way of rewarding

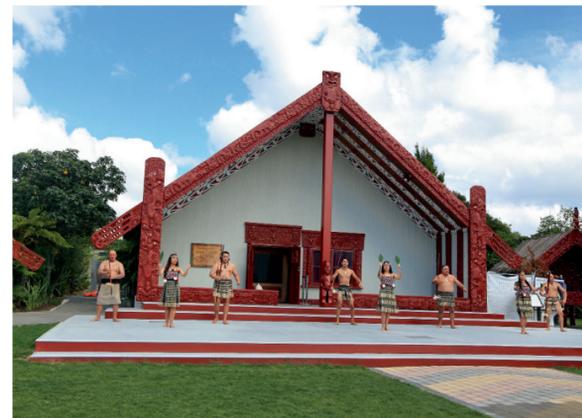


WARM AND FUZZY: Boiling hot springs and geysers can be seen everywhere in Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Valley (Photo: Charukesi Ramadurai)

myself for putting up with the smell of rotten eggs through the day.

My indulgent evening at the Polynesian Spa begins with a leisurely soak in the hot water pools, of which there are several strewn across. There is a choice of temperatures, ranging from the mildly warm to the scalding hot, and I dip into each of these by turns, turning up the heat just a bit more each time. The water in the pools also comes with the promise of both natural acidic and alkaline traces, perfect (I am told by the attendant) for chasing away those niggling aches, as well as for nourishing the skin. I follow this up with a signature Aix Therapy, where, once again, I lie on my back and let the magic of hot water wash away the strain of a day out in the open.

On our way back to Auckland, we decide to drive along the Coromandel Peninsula. It is a long and winding route, a journey where we have the road to ourselves most of the time, with only the occasional car or campervan for company. We make the best use of a road trip,



HOT SPOTS: (top) At Hot Water beach on the Coromandel Peninsula, you can dig for your own little hot water pool; (middle) Huka Falls, close to Lake Taupo; (above) A slice of Maori culture is preserved at the Te Puia Cultural Village (Photos: Charukesi Ramadurai)

stopping wherever the fancy takes us. And on this route, it turns out to be pretty much every few hundred metres.

After a night at the quaint coastal town of Coromandel – oh, the stunning sea views! – we drive on towards the scenic Cathedral Bay, taking a midday break at the very popular Hot Water Beach. It is a mild autumn afternoon, and families are out in full force at the beach, busy digging (or trying to dig) their own mini hot water pools, kids squealing in delight each time a splash of warm water appears from beneath the sand.

As we drive away, I am struck again by the fact that New Zealand's beautiful north island manages to hide its secrets well, content to let the picturesque south islands revel in all the attention and appreciation. W

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