

hot right now

Tourists have been drawn to Rotorua's intriguing mix of nature and culture for more than 150 years, longer than anywhere else in New Zealand.

Opposite page: Waiotapu thermal area. Above: A magnificent stand of towering California redwoods.

Rotorua is the birthplace of New Zealand tourism. The country's first tourist bureau opened in the town centre in 1903, and the New Zealand Government's inaugural tourism initiative, the Bath House in the Government Gardens, began taking customers in 1908.

It was a fitting place to start. When 19th-century travellers from England and Europe turned their attention to the antipodes, it was the geothermal wonders of the Rotorua region that enticed them south. Foreigners were drawn by a roiling, steaming landscape, ground that spat and cracked, spawning otherworldly natural structures like the Pink and White Terraces at Lake Rotomahana, Otukapuarangi (Fountain of the Clouded Sky) and Te Tarata (The Tattooed Rock). The terraces were considered the eighth wonder of the world. Then one night in June 1886 nearby Mount Tarawera erupted, ripping a 17km gash in the earth, leaving more than 150 people dead and the terraces gone, forever. Historian James Froude's 1885 description of Te Tarata expresses what was lost: "We could stand on the brim and gaze as through an opening in the earth into an azure infinity beyond... the white crystals projected from the rocky walls over the abyss, till they seemed to dissolve not into darkness but into light."

But the terraces left behind something almost as valuable: a tradition of welcoming. When the government got involved post-eruption, it tapped into the legacy of the celebrated guides of the terraces, like the legendary Guide Sophia of the Tuhourangi people – a host, philosopher, historian, cook, navigator and safety officer to thousands of travellers. This mode of tourism, a mix of culture, landscapes, challenge and, most importantly, storytelling, still infuses the Rotorua visitor experience.

Start the story at the Rotorua Museum of Art and History (rotoruamuseum.co.nz). Housed in the original Bath House building, the space was once outfitted to mimic the grand spas of Europe. At its height, the facility gave 30,000 treatments per year, including vibratory massage and electric baths. Today, thanks to a \$26 million upgrade, visitors can view the ageing bathtubs in their original rooms and explore the humid basement maze of pipes and valves that once fed the building its curative waters.

Other exhibits include the "Beating Hearts of Te Arawa", chronicling the history of the Te Awara people, Rotorua's first settlers. The jade adze used to carve the original Awara canoe that brought them to New Zealand is on display. And you can immerse yourself in the geology and mythology of the Tarawera eruption in the Rotorua Stories Cinema,



Clockwise from above: Mountain biking in Whakarewarewa Forest; Rotorua is a hub for adventure; Te Puia thermal valley; traditional carving.

complete with surround sound and very shaky seats.

For a more personal introduction, join Rotorua's best-informed locals Josie and Gay on a Kia Ora Guided City Walk. In an urban take on the Sophia tradition, they'll take you past city landmarks, through the Government Gardens and into Ohinemutu, the area's original village and Josie's home patch. Here, her neighbours still bathe and cook communally in natural hot pools that steam in their back yards – and sometimes pop up through floors without any warning.

Thermal wonders

Rotorua has more than 1200 geothermal features, from geysers to mud pools to fumaroles. Early Maori, who used the earth's natural heat for warmth, cooking, washing, bathing and healing, appreciated their benefits.

At the bathhouses this power was harnessed for a different reason: luxury, and the modern spas of Rotorua still turn on the thermal indulgence. The Polynesian Spa has 26 pools, including private baths and a family area, some overlooking the Sulfur Bay wildlife refuge (polynesianspa.co.nz). The most famous is the Priest Spa, fed by waters where Father Mahoney of Tauranga, after a painful multi-day tramp, found a cure for his rheumatism in 1878. The Polynesian Spa menu is full of treats, including Aix therapies, body brushing, facials and body wraps. A geothermal truth: true relaxation is being enveloped in warm Rotorua mud.

The Spa at QE opened in 1942 as a temporary convalescent hospital for WWII soldiers (spaatqe.co.nz). It still offers spa treatments, speciality massage and a body "warrant of fitness". Or try the Wai Ora Lakeside Spa Resort for cultural spa therapies, including the 800-year-old techniques of a Maori miri miri massage. waioraresort.co.nz

For a more straightforward swim and soak (though there's nothing straightforward about the stunning Spanish-style building that houses them) visit the three geothermally heated pools at the Blue Baths (bluebaths.co.nz). This was the first facility in New Zealand to allow mixed bathing, in 1933. To enjoy nature's warmth for free, head to Kerosene Creek, a heated stream pockmarked with small pools dug by bathers, or visit Kuirau Park and stop to soak walk-weary feet in the mineral foot pools.

Cultural capital

Long a national hub for Maori culture, the songs and dances, hangi meals and oral histories of Rotorua have welcomed, and fascinated, visitors since



EAT Finding good food in Rotorua used to be a chore. These days you'll be spoiled for choice.

Mokoia Restaurant Fine dining with local flavour, a Pacific Rim menu infused with indigenous herbs and spices from Rotorua. Sample kawakawa, a heart-shaped leaf from Mokoia Island, horopito native pepper, pesto made from the piko piko fern, and traditional rewana potato yeast bread. mokoiarestaurant.co.nz

Urbano Bistro Contemporary fusion cuisine with a city vibe. Their raukumara red wine venison tenderloin with smoked eel and salmon tartare was a semi-

finalist at last year's Monteith's Wild Food Challenge. urbanobistro.co.nz

Regent Room Restaurant & Wine Bar Retro glamour with a touch of mischief, including wall-mounted ceramic rhino heads. The red wine-poached pears with whipped goat's cheese are every bit as good as they sound. regentrotorua.co.nz
Pig and Whistle Classic pub fare in a landmark circa-1940 building that once housed the Rotorua Police Station, a favourite with hungry mountain bikers. Live music, hearty meals including burgers, steak and Guinness pie, and pigtail fries. pigandwhistle.co.nz

Brew Craft beers from the Croucher Brewing Co, including a Coffee Stout made with beans roasted on site. Located on the humming "Eat Street" strip, where a geothermally heated footpath keeps revellers warm on chilly evenings. brewpub.co.nz
Ciabatta Bakery Specialising in authentic artisanal ciabatta that takes 40 hours to make. Try the 430mm Long Dog followed by a vanilla-custard filled Go Nut, or dig into a paleo-diet-friendly "Cavie" tortilla. ciabattabakery.co.nz



"At the bathhouses this **power** was harnessed for a different reason: luxury, and the modern spas of Rotorua still turn on the thermal **indulgence**."



STAY Princes Gate Hotel

Built in 1897 in the gold-rush town of Waihi, the Princes Gate was dismantled board by board and resurrected next to the entrance of Government Gardens in 1917. It's a Rotorua one-off. The city's oldest private hotel, this is boutique accommodation the way it used to be, with high ceilings, leadlight windows, chandeliers and an inner courtyard with a stepped, thermally heated pool. Each room is different, and each is named after a significant figure from Rotorua's past, from pioneering aviator Jean Batten to entertainer Sir Howard Morrison. princesgate.co.nz

"Sculptures by more than 30 artists line pathways through **terraced** bush, works carved in multiple mediums."

Opposite page: The Museum of Art and History. Below: The historic Princes Gate Hotel.



tourism began. Today, the town has a thriving indigenous arts scene, one that draws from both the old and the new.

The traditional and the modern work in tandem at the Te Puia cultural centre (tepuia.com). The Te Po Indigenous Evening Experience includes a powhiri welcome, a warrior's challenge, and a concert. Guests on the daytime Steambox Experience tour choose their own ingredients for a steam-cooked picnic while Pohutu, the country's largest geyser, erupts nearby like a giant sulphurous tea kettle.

Te Puia also houses the New Zealand Maori Arts & Crafts Institute, which includes the national wood-carving and weaving schools, arts once threatened by the changes brought by Europeans, disease and war. The schools are part of their revival; students learn to use hand tools and work with traditional motifs. But there's room for modernity, too. A bronze foundry here is being used to cast an entire ornately carved storehouse for the United Nations building in New York.

The theme of new forms for old ideas is exploding in Rotorua's Maori arts world, and it's worth stepping outside the traditional cultural centres to see this in action. Adrienne Whitewood's Ahu boutique is one place to look, and a good spot to pick up a scrumptious frock (adriennewhitewood.com). She won the supreme title at the Miromoda Maori Fashion Design Awards, and her work applies Maori design concepts to modern fashion. Indigenous patterns hang side by side in her shop with colour blocks of bright pink and aqua.

Rotorua's must-do art stop, though, is carver Joe Kemp's Te Haa gallery, located behind his home at Lake Rotoma (joekempsculptor.co.nz). Sculptures by more than 30 artists line pathways through terraced bush, works carved in multiple mediums, including Oamaru stone, native totara, and Takaka marble. Self-taught, Kemp adheres to the tradition of carving as storytelling, and he uses Maori motifs: the moko, the koru, a taniwha. Yet he looks outward too: an elongated head recalls Egypt, a carved face suggests Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon". The place, more than once, has moved people to tears.

Playing outside

The early Europeans who came to Rotorua were a daring lot, enduring a long sea journey and travel by horse and carriage from Auckland. Today, the area still attracts the intrepid. A booming outdoor industry has sprung up, with visitors thronging to the hills, lakes, forests and purpose-built

adventure parks set in a volcanic landscape.

Rotorua's newest wilderness gem is the Tarawera Trail. Starting not far from The Landing on Lake Tarawera, near where Sophia would have set off with her charges, the 15km walk winds through native bush long untouched, groves of giant mamakau ferns thriving in the spongy ash-rich soil underfoot. It finishes on the steaming shores of Hot Water Beach, where campers cook trout by burying them in the sand (40 minutes for perfection) and soak in the shallow natural hot pool nearby.

Lake Tarawera Water Taxi and Ecotours (ecotoursrotorua.co.nz) picks up and drops off at Hot Water Beach. They also run historic lake tours, and an all-day Ancestral Footprints trip incorporating traditional foods and storytelling, bridging culture and wilderness, present and past.

If today's Rotorua does have an equivalent, tourism-wise, to the Pink and White Terraces, it's the mountain biking at Whakarewarewa Forest. Red Bull voted it one of the earth's eight best places to bike. The forest boasts about 145km of track for all abilities, from children to fully-padded downhillers dressed like Ninja Turtles. Riding them all would take you four days. Multi-Day Adventures New Zealand (multidayadventures.co.nz) offers guided trips in the forest. They'll set up a hire bike for your size and ability, take you riding, and point out Whakarewarewa's secrets: Maori carvings, a bubbling mud pool, and silver ferns that catch the light of headlamps at night.

As for vacation stories, get better ones at the Agroventures Adventure Park (agroventures.co.nz). Activities include Freefall Xtreme, a vertical wind tunnel with a 220km/h updraft. Guests don a flying suit (there's a Superman cape for kids!) and hover. And the Shweeb is the world's only human-powered suspended monorail. A sort of recumbent bike inside a hanging pod, it has received a one-million-dollar Google award to research its potential as sustainable mass transit.

Finally, Rotorua Canopy Tours is a guided tour through a 500ha virgin forest that has never been logged, done from up high (canopytours.co.nz). Groups navigate the treetops via a 1.2km network of swing bridges and ziplines, the longest one travelling 220m through the canopy. The highlight? Standing on a platform up a rimu tree nearly 1000 years old, pre-dating human occupation of New Zealand. Imagine the stories it could tell.

STORY LAURA WILLIAMSON

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