



Come rain or shine, Taupo has buckets of fun for everyone, writes **Belinda Henley**

A MID-WINTER break to one of New Zealand's most spectacular destinations, Taupo seemed like a good idea. That was until we checked the weather forecast the day before and saw nothing but rain.

For once the forecast delivered as promised and for 48 hours we were treated to a torrential downpour, apart from one short break which gave me a chance to walk around the lake and take in what must surely be one of New Zealand's most stunning landscapes.

Taupo has long been a favourite destination of mine; as a young person, there was always plenty to do on and around the lake. A few years later I enjoyed sampling some of the town's vibrant nightlife and now, with my own children, I have discovered another, equally fulfilling side to the resort town.

In summer it is paradise eating outside at one of the many sidewalk

cafes, swimming in the lake and taking long walks through one of the nearby forests. In Winter, however, it offers a very different but just as exhilarating break, even on the soggiest of weekends.

We were staying at the newly refurbished Hilton Lake Taupo, just off the Napier-Taupo Rd and a stone's throw from the lake. Previously known as the Terraces, the main building has been a Taupo landmark since 1889.

The Hilton has now given the hotel a classy, contemporary makeover with 113 rooms offering everything from standard guest rooms to a presidential suite.

We had a luxurious three-bedroom apartment, which was a gift, given the weather outside. There is the wonderful Bistro Lago — a Simon Gault restaurant — on site and the hotel also boasts a thermally heated outdoor pool and spa. If you aren't lucky enough to have your own heated pool

(and many Taupo hotels do) the AC Baths and Taupo Hot Springs offer a good range of outdoor and indoor heated pools and you can hire your own private pool, too. A trip to Taupo is not complete without a dip in these "healing" thermal waters.



But we had come to experience this town, so ultimately we had to venture outdoors. The town centre offers a great range of eateries (our favourite cafes were Salute and L'Arte in Acacia Bay), there are also wonderful shops and galleries. I discovered Verge; an art and design store selling a great range of Kiwi-designed art, jewellery, toys and everything in between.

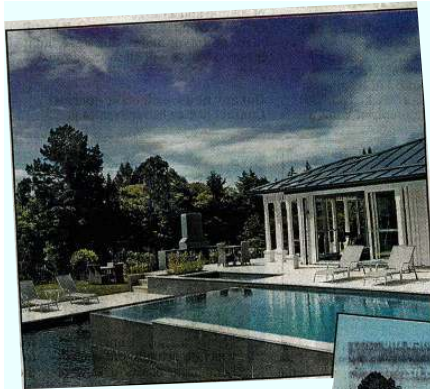
The rain was still coming down, but we had promised the 5-year-old some prawn fishing at the Huka Prawn Park, so that was where we headed. There are a number of great activities around the Huka Falls area. Make sure you stop at one of the vantage points to check out the falls, which remain equally impressive no matter how many times you have visited them.

There is also the Huka Jet, if you want to get your adrenalin pumping, and the Honey Hive, with a live bee hive for kids to learn about bees and the honey-making process. Huka prawn park is a large complex and on a nicer day it would be easily possible to spend an entire afternoon there. There is a guided tour, a wonderful restaurant specialising in prawns (what else?), trout feeding, a bushwalk, treasure hunt and of course the main attraction, prawn fishing. We took our bamboo rods and bait and headed for the shelters to try our luck. You are pretty much guaranteed a catch

(on the day we visited some youngster had caught a whopping 33cm creature) and the look on my young one's face when she finally caught her first prawn was priceless. The adults had a pretty good time too, especially when we cooked the prawns we caught and ate them just moments later.

If you are visiting Taupo in the winter months, one of its greatest attractions is its proximity to Mt Ruapehu. Whakapapa ski resort is an easy drive from Taupo; in little more than an hour you are in the car park. The helpful, largely international staff were great at helping our 5-year-old with the ins and outs of being fitted with boots and skis. We then hit Happy Valley, the gentle slope for learners. Our Italian ski instructor, Julia, spent an hour teaching the basics of moving around in skis, getting on and off the chairlift, and the importance of the snow plough (my personal favourite). And best of all, once the ski lesson is over, it's just a hop, skip and a jump into the cafe for the obligatory tub of hot chips.

Taupo offers so much for all members of the family, and its location makes it a great North Island getaway from almost anywhere. It's blessed with some breathtaking landscapes and phenomenal natural attractions and hopefully next time, some sunshine as well.



TOURIST TREATS: Relax in a pool at your hotel (above) or explore the large Huka prawn park complex.

