

LET'S Travel

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SMALL TOWN GROWN UP

By Gary Dickson



It's fair to say that Taupo, when I was a lad, was a bit of a sleepy hollow. We only ever went trout fishing, gazed in awe at Huka Falls or visited Orakei Korako. One thing I do recall is taking in that amazing view as you come over the hill on State Highway 1 (coming in from the north, that is).

Today the "village" of Taupo is no more. The place is a thriving enclave of tourism and there are many, many operators, hotels and restaurants enjoying the additional visitors that increased investment has brought into the region.

Getting the adrenalin pumping can be as easy as a visit to Taupo Bungy. Personally speaking, I prefer my adrenalin rush to be sated by a helicopter ride. To me, there is nothing better than a quick 15 minute helicopter ride when I arrive in a new location. The perspective you get on the region is amazing, and it's something I try to do within my first few hours of arrival. My 15 minute trip with Helipro took me out over Huka Falls and Maori Rock carvings and gave me an appreciation of the actual size of the lake itself.

Helipro have an extensive range of tours to choose from, from a brief 8-minute whirl over town to a 3.5-hour White Island/ Mount Tarawera volcanic experience. If you're keen to take control of a helicopter yourself, you should try Helipro's U-fly, a one-on-one flight with a qualified instructor.

If speed in a straight line rather than aerially is your thing, I can highly recommend Formula Challenge where you can get behind the wheel of a single seater race car and a V8 all in a couple of hours. Now, before you ask ... they have Ford AND Holden. Safety is paramount with the team at Formula Challenge, but excitement is the order of the day. Once you've completed your training, you can take a passenger along in the V8 car with you. The challenge is to ensure that your time gets faster and faster as you complete each of your ten laps.

Two names have endured the passages of time in Taupo – Orakei Korako and Chris Jolly.

Orakei Korako - The Hidden Valley - is well worth the 25-minute drive out of town. The owners have recently spent oodles of money upgrading the visitor centre and car park



surrounds, and the place looks a million bucks. But it's the hot springs, gushing geysers and silica terraces that people come to see. Over 20 million litres of hot water a day flow over the terraces and the novelty of the brief ferry ride across Lake Ohakuri certainly adds to the experience. The highlight for me was the rare geothermal cave. The bush and surrounds are so originally preserved that scenes from "Walking with Dinosaurs" were filmed at Orakei Korako.

Chris Jolly seems to have been taking both tourists and locals alike fishing and hunting in this region since ... well, forever. His company, Chris Jolly Outdoors, specialise in all things outdoors in and around Taupo and, along with their varied scheduling and their operation 364 days a year, there's bound to be something that tickles your fancy – fishing, hunting, hiking, cruising...it's all there.

Two of the newer ventures that have sprung up over the past while are Wairakei Terraces and PureORA walks. Culture vultures should definitely book into both!

As the name suggests, you'll find Wairakei Terraces near the Wairakei Resort, on SH1, as you leave Taupo heading north. The recently opened geothermal pools and walkway are well worth a visit – and, with rates from as low as \$10, a visit will hardly dent the budget. The pools may be man-made, but the waterfall and stream are all natural and you can learn of the importance of Tia to the region. An ancient ancestor to the local tribe, his name is preserved in the names of many surrounding places but none so importantly as the full Maori name for Taupo, Taupo Nui-a-Tia (the great cloak of Tia). Allow about 30-minutes for the walk, as the route is dotted with points of interest, but give yourself time to relax in the pools afterwards.



For a spot of leisure, enjoy a round of gold at Wairakei Golf Course, sprawled on over 450 acres within the geothermal park. The course was designed by Commander John Harris who used the volcanic contours to sculpt fairways, elevate tees and greens and to bury the hazards. The result is a very unique championship course. Owner Gary Lane has installed a 5km "Xcluder" fence

that keeps out predators such as rats, mice, stoats and possums, turning the landscape into a sanctuary for wildlife, and planted some 30,000 trees. The result is a wildlife sanctuary where you can spot fallow deer and stags, coloured pheasants and tuis and it's hoped they'll release kiwi here in the future.

PureORA walks offer an indigenous guided walking encounter



FACTS:

My thanks to Maggie Sando and her team from Destination Great Lake Taupo and the team at the Hilton Lake Taupo (www.hilton.com/laketaupo) for making my latest Taupo experience a memorable one.

For a wealth of information and the best place to start planning your next trip to Taupo, visit: www.laketauponz.com or www.greatlaketaupo.com

Things to do:

Helipro, www.helipro.co.nz
 Formula Challenge, www.fcr.co.nz
 Orakei Korako, www.orakeikorako.co.nz
 Chris Jolly Outdoors, www.chrisjolly.co.nz
 Wairakei Terraces, www.wairakeiterraces.co.nz
 PureORA Walks, www.pureorawalks.com
 Wairakei Golf & Sanctuary, www.wairakeigolfcourse.co.nz

Food & Drink:

L'Arte Café, www.larte.co.nz
 Bistro Lago, www.bistolago.co.nz

that guarantees a first class experience. Their walks range from 3 hours to 3 days and all are within one hour of Taupo. The Tongariro Alpine Crossing is apparently not to be missed and local guides and owners ensure an authentic walk, whichever one you decide is for you.

Feeling peckish? Pop into L'Arte Café where your taste buds will be treated with the utmost respect and you'll be wowed by the art on display. The gardens are a delight and are dotted with mosaics, pottery and sculptures by Judi Brennan and other NZ artists. And fear not, there are pieces for sale, so it's not all about just looking!

Wow, I was glad I'd made reservations at Hilton Lake Taupo – I was knackered after all this adventure! Just minutes from the town centre, with sweeping views over the lake, I could hardly wait to drop my bag and relax ... the hardest decision was whether to head for the fitness centre and pool and work off some calories, or just to head straight to the cocktail bar before making my way to Bistro Lago! In the end, the addition of calories won over their reduction! Bistro Lago's menu was the creation of Simon Gault and, as expected, delivered in terms of quality. I loved that there was a roaring open fire for the cooler months, but with the option of outdoor dining in the summer.

I really only scratched the surface on things to do in and around Taupo these days – how different it is compared to my childhood memories! Had I known what was in store for me, I most certainly would have booked in for longer. ❧



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Hilton Lake Taupo

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