

A scenic landscape photograph of Lake Taupo. The foreground shows a grassy shoreline with some rocks. The middle ground is the dark blue lake with a few small boats. The background features a range of mountains, some with snow on their peaks, under a clear blue sky. The text 'The Taupo Trail' is overlaid in large white font.

# The Taupo Trail

Lake Taupo backed by snowcapped mountains

# A week in New Zealand's North Island offers the visitor geothermal treats and a whole lot more

by Tony Begbie

**I am in Wanganui**, a mid-autumn day, the sky is blue and the wide river shimmers in the early morning sun as it flows past the city and down to the sea. My guide Ed and I are about to head for Lake Taupo, four hours northeast in what seems to be the geographic centre of New Zealand's North Island. We are en route along the Taupo Trail — my label, not NZ Tourism's — starting here on the west coast and ending on another coast, to the north, facing the Bay of Plenty. It promises to be a green delight all along the way.



The first thing I notice as we drive through rolling hills and lush pastureland is what I now think of, looking back, as "the hedge effect". I saw this from a distance, flying down here from Auckland yesterday, but up close it is an absolute delight — the kind of neatness I saw years ago in Switzerland - with fields divided by hedges as diverse as a narrow row of tall evergreens or a long line of pampas grass, whose feathery plumes wave to us as the car rolls by. It's an endlessly shifting scene that seems designed and landscaped to impress. And this ordered neatness doesn't end with these handsome dividing barriers. Bales of hay are placed in neatly ordered rows; sheep



Green New Zealand: Cattle, sheep, pines and pampas plumes define the landscape



are dazzling white against green fields (compared to the grubby grey sheep one sees in Australia) and groups of Holstein cattle create stunning back and white tableaux against the hills and pastures that flash by on either side of the road, until we arrive in Taupo.

This is my first visit to New Zealand, and I'm as interested in its history as I am in its visual impact. I know, for example, that the ancestors of the Maori people were Polynesian, arriving in Aotearoa, the "land of the long white cloud" by boat, probably around 1350 AD but a lot of this history is still the subject for debate. These Polynesian settlers arrived to discover the Moa, a large flightless bird, which is now extinct. The word *Maori* in its first usage meant the original people; when white European *pakeha* settlers arrived, it became an adjective to describe the people and their culture.

There is a museum here in Taupo, next to the Information Centre, which is the perfect place to get to know the region and its history. Afterwards, I visit Wairakei Terraces, not far from town, which offers the visitor not just extraordinary thermal sights but also an opportunity to experience Maori custom and culture, participate in a traditional welcome, explore a Maori village and watch carvers, weavers and tattooists at work, enjoy traditional Maori cuisine and listen to Maori song, dance and *haka*.

The geothermal activity here, most extensive in the country, is mind-blowing; silica terraces gleam wedding-cake white against azure water pools ranging from warm to hot and close by, boiling water explodes into the air, releasing clouds of steam that drift up into the sky. It's a stunning sight, and this "heat beneath your feet" is linked to the adjacent Wairakei Geothermal power plant which very cleverly generates electricity from the continuous supply of super heated energy drawn from deep inside the earth's core. Take a tour if you have time.



Maori warriors paddle their war canoe; steam rises at the Craters of the Moon

Close by, the Craters of the Moon walk (about a hour over a slightly raised timber walkway which means it is wheelchair-accessible) takes you to a different thermal experience — less dramatic, perhaps, but no less impressive. It's a relatively easy walk to view bubbling craters, mud pools and steam vents. Along the way, you'll see ground-hugging plants that have adapted to thrive in the hot, steamy conditions. The walk is open 364 days a year.

Back in Taupo, we drive past a wide expanse of dark blue water that's

white-capped now; a strong breeze whips up the action, disturbing even the golfers who stand at lakeside trying to lob golf balls onto a floating pontoon "green" — a seemingly lunatic occupation even in placid weather. But they appear to be having fun. This huge trout-filled lake (surface area 616 sq km) is the largest in New Zealand; it was created over 25,000 years ago after a massive volcanic eruption and there have been eruptions since, one of which, in the year 180, gave Roman and Chinese citizens some spectacular sunsets. The volcano is currently considered

dormant, not extinct.

There are lots of walkers getting exercise today; the lakeshore makes a fine promenade. I take time to explore the town, which is neat and clean — why should I be surprised? — and very upmarket, with lots of stylish boutiques and eateries (wonderful kebabs here!) Taupo attracts over a million tourists a year from all over the country — and all over the world— so I see lots of motels, hotels and guest houses. The area has a temperate climate, with day temperatures ranging from 24°C in January to 15°C in July.

I head for the Hilton Lake Taupo which sits astride a hill overlooking the water and the mountains in the distance, several of which are snow-covered. This is the region's only 5-star hotel, and the view from my room offers me all I could wish for and more. Facilities here include tennis, pool, spa pool, sauna, steam room and a fitness centre; when it's time to eat, *Bistro Lago* is the place to be. It's all very luxe and the town is a walkable distance away, if you're feeling energetic. Later, I'll stay at the Auckland Hilton, which echoes the Taupo style in a more dramatic way as it juts 300m out into the harbour from Princes Wharf, like a ship setting out to sea. Close to city shopping and ferry terminals to surrounding islands and bays, this contemporary boutique hotel offers what the Hilton brand offers to visitors in most parts of the world— attention to detail and a sense of "coming home". Who could ask for anything more?



Huka Falls



Hilton Lake Taupo offers great views to lake and mountains

Just behind Taupo township, Huka (foam in Maori) Falls thunders out of the Waikato River and is one of the most visited and photographed attractions in New Zealand; water volume is often enough to fill two Olympic swimming pools per second! There are viewing platforms so you can experience the full watery drama of the falls.

We head northeast now, via Rotorua, to Whakatane, which is sometimes known as the birthplace of Aotearoa; it was here that the great Polynesian navigator Toi te Huatahi first landed. Rotorua is, of course, a well-known geothermal region, but what I have seen in Taupo — all that bubbling, gurgling, steaming and boiling — is enough for this visit.

So we drive on, as the afternoon shadows lengthen, through pine forests and rolling green countryside, past lakes, past a tall Maori "lucky" tree, past little farms with *feijoa* fruit for sale to Whakatane, a peaceful fishing port looking out onto the Bay of Plenty.

The remains of the first Maori *pa* — or settlement — can be found on the highest point of the Whakatane

Heads; it is known as Wairaka Marae — *marae* being a Maori sacred place. Two centuries after Toi te Huatahi came here, another great Polynesian canoe arrived — Mataatua — landed bringing with it the *kumara* plant (orange sweet potato) which became the staple diet of the Maori throughout New Zealand, and today is a popular vegetable.

With magnificent beaches and bays, Whakatane enjoys a reputation as one of the three sunniest spots in the country. Many of the activities for the visitors centre on the water. Yet the town also gives ready access to other unique attractions in the area. From Whakatane, visitors can take a scenic flight over volcanic White Island, or experience the haunting beauty of the



Feijoa



Welcoming Wally

Urewera National Park, the largest protected native forest in New Zealand's North Island.

The sun is setting now, as we arrive at one of several pier-based fish restaurants — simple, practical, accessible and inexpensive. The one we choose is called Wally's On The Wharf (Wally being a friendly cockatoo who sits outside in a cage.) The fresh catch is marked on a blackboard. I choose snapper and it comes with a generous portion of fries; the fish was fresh from the sea, probably caught a few hours ago. It's delicious. Boats moored close by rock gently as we sit and munch, some canoeists paddle by, the water turns gold as the sun sinks on the horizon. It is, truly, the perfect way to end a journey along the Taupo Trail.



Heading for Whakatane: tree ferns en route and sunset at Whakatane as the fresh fish fries behind us