



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PAGE: The fun at New Zealand's many seaside resort towns continues well into the night (*photo courtesy Tourism New Zealand, by Ben Crawford www.bencrawford.co.nz*); Take a tour of "The Shire" with Hobbiton Movie Set Tours (*photo courtesy Tourism New Zealand, by Ian Brodie*); Waimangu Volcanic Valley was formed during the huge Tarawera eruption in 1886. (*photo courtesy Tourism New Zealand, by Waimangu Volcanic Valley www.waimangu.com*)



Exposure

Looking for the zeal in New Zealand?
Venture to the North Island.

by SHANE NELSON

A DESTINATION OF SOARING, SNOWCAPPED VOLCANOES, GOLDEN VALLEYS, TWISTING TURQUOISE RIVERS, AND EVEN SEASCAPES LINED WITH WHITE SAND BEACHES, THE JAW-DROPPING BEAUTY OF NEW ZEALAND'S NORTH ISLAND IS CERTAINLY WORTHY OF ALL THE HYPE.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Maori carvings and more at Auckland War Memorial Museum (photo ©Auckland War Memorial Museum); Weta Cave is just 20 minutes from downtown Wellington (photo courtesy Weta Workshops); Viaduct Events Centre in Auckland (photo courtesy Tourism New Zealand, by Bob McCree).



But travelers don't need to spend their visit hauling over-burdened backpacks up steep mountain trails and camping in drafty tents to enjoy the spectacular natural attractions, because the North Island is also home to an ample supply of the finer things, including some well-placed luxury lodges, top-notch restaurants and wineries and superb cultural experiences.

PHOTOGENIC METROPOLIS

Gateway to New Zealand, Auckland may not be ground zero for the destination's most spellbinding natural splendor, but it's still a gorgeous metropolis, spread across a thin isthmus separating Manukau and Waiheke Harbours.

Even more accessible to Hawai'i residents

today, thanks to new nonstop Honolulu-Auckland service launched in March by Hawaiian Airlines, the city is home to a host of photogenic vistas, particularly from the public park atop Mt. Eden, the nearly 650-foot dormant volcano sitting just a few miles south of downtown's central business district. Panoramic views of the city's sprawling harbors, often busy with sailboats, and many of Auckland's 48 volcanic cones, some of which are still active, can also be enjoyed from the observation level of the iconic 1075-foot downtown Sky Tower (www.skycityauckland.co.nz/attractions/skytower).

Some of city's most unique high-end accommodations can be found just a short walk north from the Sky Tower at the 25-room luxury boutique Hotel DeBrett (www.hoteldebrett.com).

A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE, TONGARIRO NATIONAL PARK—WHICH IS NEW ZEALAND'S OLDEST AND A LITTLE OVER AN HOUR'S DRIVE SOUTH OF HUKA LODGE—FEATURES THREE ACTIVE VOLCANOES...



hoteldebrett.com). Appointed with colorful, eclectic furniture and original New Zealand artwork and photography, each of the property's individually designed guestrooms and suites exudes a playful, chic vibe within the historic building, first opened in the 1840s, in the hip fashion district of High Street.

Epicureans will want to reserve a table at Kitchen, the Hotel DeBrett's acclaimed atrium restaurant, which turns out contemporary New Zealand dishes made from locally sourced produce and seafood, but a trip down to the Foodstore (www.thefoodstore.tv) in Auckland's trendy Viaduct Harbour, again just a short walk from the hotel, should also be planned. Home to terrific steak and fresh salmon, diners shouldn't leave without sampling the Foodstore's

chocolate fondant dessert. And wine lovers might consider a daytrip via ferry to Waiheke Island, just a 35-minute boat ride from Auckland's downtown wharves, to tour the collection of wineries there, particularly Man O' War vineyard (www.manowarvineyards.co.nz) on the island's east coast.

Just a few blocks south from the Hotel DeBrett, folks can spend an afternoon at the Auckland Art Gallery (www.aucklandartgallery.com), which houses a collection of more than 15,000 examples of historical, modern and contemporary New Zealand artwork. Occupying a building first opened as a public library in 1887, the museum underwent a four-year, \$121 million renovation in September 2011 and is now an award-winning contrast of contemporary and historical architecture, exhibiting a vibrant array of paintings, sculpture, cutting-edge installations, photography and a permanent collection of Maori portraits that shouldn't be missed.

And don't let its name fool you, the Auckland War Memorial Museum (www.aucklandmuseum.com), located only a few miles south of the city's downtown business



FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: Black water rafting is one of Waitomo's signature experiences (photo courtesy Tourism New Zealand by Tourism Holdings www.tlnz.co.nz); The Cornerbar at Hotel DeBrett (photo by Keiran Scott); At Huka Lodge, dining on the terrace is a way to appreciate the perfectly groomed riverside environment. (photo courtesy Travel New Zealand by Huka Lodge www.huka-lodge.co.nz)



district, features a terrific array of Maori exhibits and a daily traditional cultural performance, combined with fascinating natural history information, offering wonderful insight into the evolution of New Zealand's native plants and animals and the two-island nation's turbulent geological past and present.

FURTHER SOUTH: GEOTHERMAL WONDERS AND ACTIVE VOLCANOES

Geothermal fans will want to head south from Auckland to the North Island's Rotorua region, an area rich with geysers, mud pools, steaming vents, and kaleidoscopically-colored thermal springs. A stop at Wai O Tapu Thermal Wonderland (www.waiotapu.co.nz), a Rotorua area reserve managed by New Zealand's Department of Conservation, offers traveler's a close-up look at punctual Lady Knox geyser, bright green and orange thermal pools, and an audibly gurgling patch of mud pots. Rotorua visitors can also enjoy a relaxing soak in public or private baths heated by the Te Manaroa spring, New Zealand's largest single source of naturally boiling water, at the nearby Waikite Valley Thermal Pools facility (www.hotpools.co.nz).

An hour's drive south from Rotorua, travelers can pamper themselves at one of New Zealand's most renowned luxury accommodations, the 17-acre Huka Lodge (www.hukalodge.co.nz). Founded in 1920, the property has hosted big names like Barbara Streisand, Bill Gates, Michael Douglas, and even her majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and consists today of 18 junior lodge suites, a full suite, two cavernous, self-contained cottages, and a full-service dining experience, all nestled within the North Island forest lining Waikato River.

The lodge's showpiece is, without a doubt, the Owner's Cottage: a collection of four spacious en-suite bedrooms surrounding a gourmet kitchen, an indulgently appointed



central living room and a cozy den—not to mention the sprawling outdoor deck area, featuring elevated views of the river, a private infinity pool and heated spa.

Only 350 yards from dramatic Huka Falls, a 30-foot drop over which 54,000 gallons of the Waikato River plunge every second, the luxury lodge also offers guests assistance with an array of activity options, including everything from fly-fishing excursions to helicopter winery tours and skydiving.

Lord of the Rings fans might want to consider another tour option Huka Lodge helps arrange for guests: a guided trek along the Tongariro Alpine Crossing (www.tongariro-crossing.org.nz). The 12-mile mountain trail provides hikers with remarkably intimate views of Mt. Ngauruhoe—the 7,500-foot active volcano that starred as Mordor's Mount Doom in the Peter Jackson films.

A UNESCO World Heritage site, Tongariro National Park, which is New Zealand's oldest, and a little over an hour's drive south of Huka Lodge, features three active volcanoes: Ngauruhoe, the 9175-foot Mt. Ruapehu, and 6450-foot Mt Tongariro, which has erupted twice since last August. Often described as New Zealand's best day hike, the Tongariro Alpine Crossing gives travelers an opportunity to see all three, provided the conditions are right, climbing up to the base of Ngauruhoe after a relatively flat 90



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Grasmere Lodge (photo © Grasmere Lodge); a 900-year-old crater in Rotorua bubbles with carbon dioxide (photo courtesy Tourism New Zealand, by Rob Suisted); waterfalls at Whirinaki Forest Park (photo courtesy Whirinaki Rainforest Experiences).

minutes through Mangatepopo Valley.

Travelers interested in tackling the trail with an expert guide, which requires approximately eight hours to complete, can book a day with a range of companies, but Adrift Outdoor Guided Adventures (www.adriftnz.co.nz) provides transportation to the trail head and pickup following the excursion, along with everything from warm clothing, waterproof gear, hiking boots and a picnic lunch—plus all sorts of geologic, cultural, botanical and birding insight.

Challenging and terrifically steep in many places, the entire 12-mile trail should only be attempted by folks who are physically fit, but the highlights, which include not only outstanding Ngauruhoe vistas but also views of the Emerald Lakes, geothermal vents, and possibly Lake Taupo, most definitely make all the effort worthwhile. ■

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Zhou Ling 周菱 Profile

Zhou Ling was born in Tianjin, China in 1941 and is one of the acknowledged leaders of the Heavy Color/Yunnan School of Chinese contemporary painting. She has become one of the premier woman artists in the United States today. Her paintings are strong and expressive images that blend the subject matter and techniques of ancient Chinese art with those of Western art.

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