



TONGARIRO RIVER

TOP OF THE LAKE

Get to the heart of the North Island

JOHN CORBETT

Try your luck with a rod and lure, or get a licence, on Tongariro River; relax in the open-air thermal pools at Wairakei Terraces; Graffiti street art festival is every October; visit a field filled with giant, colourful, glass poppies.

PICTURES: GEOFF BILLING, BAREK TRACIE ANGELL/LOVE TAUPO, SUPPL

Seen from the air or perused on a map, Lake Taupo resembles the shape of a human heart. It's an appropriate image in a number of ways because the 616sq km freshwater lake, the largest in Australasia and whose Maori name means "the great cloak of Tia" (a legendary Polynesian chief), is right in the middle of the North Island.

On its eastern side are the rugged Kaimanawa Ranges which form part of the island's spine. At its northeast end is the start of the Waikato River, the island's main artery which flows 425km north to the sea near Auckland.

When it comes to matters of the heart, people have had a long love affair with the Taupo-Turangi region, starting with the indigenous Ngati Tuwharetoa people who embraced its rich natural resources 800 years ago.

For much of the past century its principal towns of Taupo (pop. 24,700) and Turangi (pop. 3500) 59km

south were old-school holiday spots, their shorelines dotted with modest fibro cottages like the ones you see on the Australian coast. In recent years, a surge of investment and optimism has transformed Taupo-Turangi into one of New Zealand's most interesting regional destinations.

Here are some highlights.

VOLCANIC VISTAS AND SOOTHING SOAKS

People tend to skim over the fact that Lake Taupo is a caldera, the water-filled crater of a supervolcanic explosion that devastated much of the North Island around 26,500 years ago. Thankfully, things have been pretty quiet since then.

Summer and winter, the broad face

of the lake is busy with a variety of craft from sailing yachts to sightseeing catamarans to kayaks and jet skis and a cute vintage steam launch named *Ernest Kemp*.

Swimming, boating, fishing and gazing at the huge skyscapes and

waterscapes are the main recreations, but the national Kiwi devotion to outdoor activities means you can also hike, kayak, whitewater raft, bungee jump, do a scenic flight and skydive to your heart's content.

If you hanker for a bit of vulcanism, the three great active volcanoes of Ruapehu, Ngauruhoe and Tongariro just south of the lake are a reminder of the enormous forces that continue to shape the region. At Orakei Korako Geothermal Park, 25 minutes' drive north of Taupo, you can see them up close. A series of silica terraces formed by hot springs flowing down a hillside,

the park has an eerily beautiful landscape of multi-coloured algal ponds, fizzing fumaroles and geysers wreathed in clouds of drifting steam.

For a more soothing geothermal experience, head for the immaculately clean, adults-only, open-air thermal pools at Wairakei Terraces & Thermal Health Spa five minutes north of Taupo. The adjacent visitor complex offers a range of

massage and reflexology treatments.
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WAIRAKEITERRACES.CO.NZ**

GARDENS, GORGES AND GROVES

“The natural environment of the Taupo-Turangi region is unique,” says Tom Loughlin, a London and Lyon-trained chef and bushman of Ngati Tuwharetoa descent who provides authentic Māori cultural, food and wilderness experiences on

tribal lands near Taupo, as well as seasonal Kai Waho Korero foraging and sustainability packages for guests at uber-posh Huka Lodge.

Logan Devine, the personable young owner of Taupo-based tour company Go Explore NZ, offers memorable vehicle, mountain bike or hiking trips into Kaimanawa Forest Park, a 77,000ha preserve of dense native beech and podocarp forests near Turangi, complete with plunging river gorges and sub-alpine uplands with stupendous views.

One of the tours offers the odd thrill of encountering Snowy River-type dams, races and electrical switching stations deep in the primeval bush. As Logan explains, they’re part of NZ’s huge hydro-electric power generation network built in the mid-1900s.

At nearby Tokaanu, a mountainside harnesses the fall of water.

If your time in the region is short, there’s a genuine slice of local wilderness on display in the grounds of the Taupo Museum. A faithful reproduction of the Ora Garden of Wellbeing, which won a gold medal at the 2004 Chelsea Flower Show, the grove of native flora is a Garden of National Significance.

Garden aficionados visiting the region can also enjoy one- and two-night Garden Lovers’ packages at Huka Lodge that include a tour of its 7ha grounds and excursions to three private gardens.

**KAIWAHO.CO.NZ, HUKALODGE.CO.NZ,
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GO FISH

Tongariro National Trout Centre, near the town of Turangi, 59km south of Taupo, is an emblem of a place with something big to promote.

In the late 19th century, rainbow and brown trout were introduced to the region from Britain and the US and just over a century later Turangi is the year-round epicentre of a world-leading wild fishery where the private jets of international anglers mingle with the Cessnas and turboprops at Taupo Regional airport.

For an expert introduction to trout fishing, local fishing guide Graham Dean can take you on fully hands-on or just-looking tours of Turangi’s rivers and lakes.

You can try your luck with a rod and lure but you must, by law, buy a fishing licence (they’re available online) and be aware that land- and water-based rangers are everywhere. Under the strict laws that protect the region’s fishery, trout cannot be bought or sold and you won’t find it on restaurant menus.

Huka Prawn Park offers piscatorial pleasure for all the family. The well established aquaculture venture in Wairakei raises giant Malaysian prawns in geothermally heated outdoor ponds and you’re welcome to bait a dinky-size line. You need patience because prawns like to display their food before they eat it and prance around like Instagram influencers. There’s gratification though in the prawn-centric menu at the park’s riverside restaurant.

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HUKAPRAWNPARK.CO.NZ**

HITTING ITS STRIDE

The annual three-day Graffiato street art festival in Taupo every October reminds you that tourist towns are often less conventional than they appear to be. Eight years ago, the town invited 10 Australasian artists to create original designs on downtown

walls, building facades and laneways. More than 180 artworks later, Taupo has emerged as New Zealand’s foremost destination for mural art.

Creative locals are also making their mark. In 2002, leading New Zealand glass artist Lynden Over and his wife, painter Christine Robb, wondered what to do with a redundant cow paddock beside their Lava Glass gallery, workshop and cafe in Wairakei. Seventeen years later, the

field is filled with giant multi-coloured glass poppies and other sculptures and is recognised by the prestigious New Zealand Gardens Trust as a “Garden of Significance”.

Across town in Acacia Bay, an extraordinary outdoor “living room” created by ceramicist Judi Brennan in the grounds of L’Arte Cafe & Gallery, features a ceramic sofa, chairs, table, floor rug and fireplace.

Some of the most exciting things in the region are happening in food. After a decade working in top US and UK restaurants, Taupo chef Jude Messenger returned home determined to give locals a “simple but nice” European dining experience with unpretentious service and affordable prices.

His award-winning The Bistro in Tamamutu St has proved a huge success, as have new cafes such as Vine in Tuwharetoa St, Cafe Baku by the waterfront and The Storehouse in Runanga St, the last sandwiched between a Beaufort outlet and an auto repair shop.

Turangi boasts the charming trout-themed Creel Tackle House & Cafe, and Rust, a first-rate licenced gastropub. At nearby Tokaanu, Lakeland House is a top-rated destination for lakeside lunches and

dinners. A thriving weekly produce market on the Taupo riverside and an expanding network of artisan growers are further signs of a region moving forward with gastronomic purpose.

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STAYS WITH HEARTLAND STYLE

If there’s one thing the Taupo-Turangi region isn’t lacking, it’s places to stay. From basic motels to world-leading luxury at Huka Lodge, there’s a big selection that takes in elegant waterside apartments at The Reef Resort, and polished four-star establishments including Millennium Hotel and Resort Manuels Taupo whose Lakefront Bar is the town’s chicest place for cocktails.

In-the-know travellers head for River Birches, a small cedar-clad luxury lodge in a leafy riverside corner of Turangi that attracts a steady stream of repeat international visitors to its elegant decor, first-class cuisine and impeccable service.

Its three spacious suites and stand-alone three-bedroom Cottage, all facing a lush and romantic green garden, are soothing retreats where you want to hole up for days – although they're also a great base for exploring the jaw-dropping scenery and eco and active pursuits of the area including Tongariro Alpine Crossing and Mount Ruapehu's skifields.

It's a similar story at Whakaipo Lodge in the secluded Mapara Valley 15 minutes west of Taupo, which has won Tripadvisor Certificates of Excellence for five straight years since 2014 as well as New Zealand's Supreme B&B Business of the Year Award in 2016 and 2018.

The winning formula created by co-owners Angie and Garth London includes solid comfort, wonderful food and wine (Angie is a great cook) and a thorough knowledge of the region's attractions. The Londons modestly don't mention the genuine warm hospitality that also puts Whakaipo Lodge into travellers' top tier, but then in this heartland region, friendly Kiwis are a common thing.

REEFRESORT.CO.NZ, MILLENNIUMHOTELS.COM, RIVERBIRCHES.CO.NZ, WHAKAIPOLODGE.CO.NZ

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF LOVE TAUPO

ESCAPE ROUTE

TAUPO

GETTING THERE

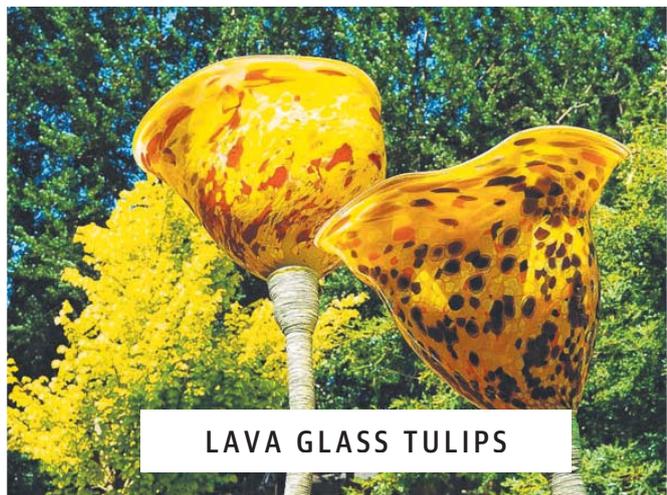
Taupo-Turangi is 3½ hours by road from Auckland and 4½ hours from Wellington. Air New Zealand Link operates twice-daily Bombardier Q300 flights from Auckland, and Sounds Air flies between Wellington and Taupo. There are several daily InterCity bus services and the Northern Explorer scenic train stops at Ohakune and National Park. airnewzealand.co.nz, soundsair.com, intercity.co.nz, greatjourneysofnz.co.nz/northern-explorer/

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GRAFFIATO



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