

Welcome to Sulphur City

How to get the perfect mud wrap and a crash course in Maori culture

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You can smell Rotorua well before you actually set eyes on it, but don't be put off by the unwelcoming wafts of hydrogen sulphide that greet you – a paradise in the wilderness awaits. This diminutive district of 70,000 has become one of the country's most visited destinations – attracting over 2 million a year – yet has much more than tourism to its credit. It is also the aboriginal heartland of New Zealand, and with Maori art and architecture at every turn it isn't hard to see how over a third of the city could be descended from the country's native Te Arawa tribes.

New Zealand is located within the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire, the arc of volcanic hotspots and earthquake-prone areas that encircle the Pacific Ocean, and Rotorua is the country's geothermal poster child. While its long history of eruptions and tremors has created spectacular scenery centred around a large number of cool lakes, it's the region's ongoing volcanic activity that is so uniquely fascinating: exploding geysers, eggy vents and boiling mud are all part of the Rotorua experience.



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1 Maori culture and heritage gets an outing at Te Puia.

3 Whakarewarewa's bubbling hot mud – not for bathing!

2 Visitors soak it all up at the Polynesian Spa.

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immediately strikes you. Choose from more than two dozen hot mineral spring pools, offering communal mineral bathing, hotter (temperature, that is!) adult-only options, private areas, and family spas. Needless to say, there's a bewildering range of wraps, polishes and massages to try. Go for the honey, kiwifruit or lavender varieties if you're not sure about the rather acquired smell of the mud.

A few kilometres out of town is Hell's Gate Geothermal Park, an alternative area combining amazing thermal wonders with great wellness opportunities. Look out for the southern hemisphere's largest hot waterfall, Kakahi Falls, various interesting rock formations, and countless other weird – and sometimes downright dangerous looking – geothermal features.

One of the main geothermal areas, Whakarewarewa, is located within the city and boasts scores of geyser vents and hundreds of hot springs. It's home to two must-see active geysers: the Prince of Wales Feathers Geyser and Pohutu, which can reach a height of 30 metres and erupts several times a day.

Whaka, as the locals call it, is also a village where you can see firsthand how the Maoris use the vents and hot pools for cooking, washing, heating and communal bathing. You can combine your healing experience with some Hangi cuisine – an ancient Maori cooking style that uses superheated rocks buried in the ground in a pit oven. It's a great opportunity to hang with the enthusiastic locals.

Get muddy and detoxified at either of the two spas within the park, Hell's Gate Spa and Wai Ora Spa, but make sure you read the warning signs displayed everywhere. If you stray from the marked paths, you could be engulfed in boiling mud! You can happily come completely unprepared: there's swimwear and towels for hire – and, of course, full shower facilities. Indulge in an acne-bashing mud facial or try a *miri miri* massage, a de-stressing Maori healing practice. It's a good idea to book spa therapies and mud baths in advance, especially during the busy months from November to May.

MUD FOR THE MASSES

It should come as no surprise that the city's Tudor-style museum started life as a bathhouse, an effort by Rotorua's early 20th-century government to create the ultimate South Seas spa. Today, the city is positively overflowing with opportunities for a rejuvenating therapy. Whether you're having a decadent soak in a hot spring, indulging in a Maori massage or being wrapped in mineral-rich mud, you're pretty much guaranteed to go home with fewer aches and pains. Keep a towel and swimwear handy.

For the ultimate experience, try the top-of-the-range Polynesian Spa, overlooking Lake Rotorua in the centre of town. Their emphasis on quality, cleanliness and hygiene

THE TRULY GREAT OUTDOORS

For more breathtaking natural landscapes, drive 20 minutes south of central Rotorua to Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland. Arrive in the morning so you don't miss the daily eruption of the Lady Knox Geyser at 10.15am – which is induced using soap. The various walks in the reserve take you through an alien landscape of multicoloured pools, waterfalls, forests, and massive volcanic craters.

Rotorua is by no means all steam and mud though. There's natural beauty of a more conventional kind in the shape of its large freshwater lakes, wetlands, and indigenous rainforest. With the impressive scenery comes a whole array of activities, from excellent bushwalks and bike trails, bird watching and fishing to white water rafting, waterskiing, and zorbing – rolling downhill in



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a transparent plastic sphere! Your kids are sure to be entertained for hours, and you should have no problem keeping your office woes out of mind.

A trip to Rotorua isn't complete without an authentic immersion in Maori culture. Te Puia encompasses Whakarewreva Valley as well as various indigenous cultural experiences. Start with a visit to the fascinating tribal weaving and carving schools, and learn how to identify the different features of the Maori gods. There are also daytime concerts held inside the *wharenui*, or traditional meeting house, where you'll be treated to songs, performances of the complex *tititorea* stick games, and the fearsome *haka* dance form, made famous by the All Blacks, New Zealand's national rugby team.

If you've never been to New Zealand, visiting Rotorua makes for a great introduction and a memorable amalgam of culture, nature and geothermal indulgence. You might even get used to that curious sulphurous scent. **AGP**



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④ Lady Knox Geyser at Wai-O-Tapu blows its top, right on schedule.

⑤ A beautifully carved *waka*, a Maori canoe made from a single log.

PRACTICALITIES: ROTORUA

➔ How To Get There

International airlines fly into Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch. Rotorua is a 3-hour drive from Auckland and 6 hours from Wellington. Air New Zealand has flights to Rotorua from all major cities in New Zealand; the airline also flies direct from Sydney. Tours can be easily arranged.

➔ When To Go

Rotorua is a year-round destination. Each of the country's four seasons has something unique to offer. For outdoor pursuits, stick to the warm months between November and April. June to August is the winter period and the skiing high season.

➔ Where To Stay

There is a wide range of options from luxury hotels to bed-and-breakfasts. At the high end, try the Birchwood Spa Motel (www.birchwoodspamotel.co.nz) or East West Apartments (www.eastwesthomestay.co.nz) in the heart of the city. Backpackers should go for YHA Rotorua (www.yha.co.nz). Affordable B&Bs include Ferntree Cottage (www.ferntreecottage.co.nz) and Westminster Lodge (www.westminsterlodge.co.nz).

➔ Attractions

Marvel at the geysers of Whakarewarewa and learn about Maori culture (www.whakarewarewa.com and www.tepuia.com). Relax your mind and open your pores with a hot spring soak, mud bath or massage

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at the Polynesian Spa (www.polynesianspa.co.nz) or Hell's Gate (www.hellsgate.co.nz). Visit the colourful active geothermal area at Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland (www.geyserland.co.nz). Try your hand at some water sports on the lakes and rivers.

➔ Food

Kiwi food draws inspiration from European, Asian and Polynesian cuisine. In Rotorua, try Bistro 1284 (www.bistro1284.co.nz) and Abracadabra Café (www.abracadabracafe.com).

➔ Information

Tourism Rotorua Travel and Information Centre www.rotoruanz.com
Tourism New Zealand www.newzealand.com/travel

➔ Currency

The New Zealand dollar (NZD). As at September 2009, US\$1 = NZD 1.44; €1 = NZD 2.07.