

LAND OF THE LONG WEEKEND

FROM MUD WRAPS TO OSTRICH WRESTLING, **SADHBH WARREN** SPENDS THREE DAYS GETTING TO KNOW THE QUIRKY SIDE OF NEW ZEALAND'S NORTH ISLAND.



Where else can you eat breakfast with an ostrich, shave a bunny at high noon, swim through glow-worm-infested caves before dinner and still squeeze in sailing, picnicking and a spa treatment before the weekend is over? The answer is Auckland and the surrounding regions on New Zealand's North Island, where there are weird, wild and wonderful experiences to be had. With the beautiful Bay of Plenty and volcanic Rotorua just a stone's throw to the south-east, and Waitomo caving country, near Otorohanga, to the south, a long weekend using Auckland as your base offers more thrills than bungee-jumping from the city's Sky Tower.

DAY ONE :: AUCKLAND TO THE BAY OF PLENTY

My journey begins in Auckland, known as the City of Sails for the hundreds of yachts that dot the twin harbours, and the first thing on my to-do list is a spot of early-morning sailing. The city is a sailor's paradise and I'm joining the locals for an aquatic adventure on an authentic former America's Cup yacht. Landlubbers get the chance to experience these sleek racing boats on the America's Cup Sailing Experience with Sail NZ. With the sun shining on the water and the breeze in your hair, this is the ideal way to take in the sights of Auckland.

Under the watchful instruction of the skipper I get a chance to test my mettle, working up a healthy sweat on the winches and grinders that hoist the sails. I also learn to steer the yacht and, remembering the scrapes I inflicted when learning to drive a car, I ask how much it would cost to repair a vessel like this. Amused, the captain asks if I have a spare few million in my back pocket. I gulp, shake my head and hand the helm back.

After completing a lap of beautiful Waitemata Harbour I'm back on shore by midday and all that sailing has made me hungry. Picking up some fresh seafood and more-ish delicatessen nibbles from Auckland Fish Market, I head off for a relaxing picnic atop a volcano. Don't worry – Mt Eden, about 15 minutes' drive south from the fish market, is dormant. Its grass-lined crater offers a choice of several peaceful picnic areas with spectacular panoramic views of Auckland and it's the perfect spot to stop for a leisurely lunch before we strike out for the Bay of Plenty. ▸

PHOTOGRAPHY: GUS O'NEILL; NZ JAMES NEW ZEALAND. ISTOCKPHOTO, PHOTO NEW ZEALAND, PHOTOLIBRARY, POLYNESIAN SPA



This image: Sail an authentic America's Cup yacht in Auckland. Left: from top: The City of Sails; Enjoy a relaxing massage at Polynesian Spa in Rotorua; The seafood at Auckland Fish Market is ready when you are.

The three-hour drive south-east from Mt Eden winds through lush farmland, past reflective lakes and through dramatic mountainous landscape before emerging in Tauranga on the east coast. There's plenty of time to tuck into a delicious dinner of crab and prawn cakes at nearby Mills Reef Winery Restaurant (accompanied by the winery's Elspeth chardonnay or award-winning reds) before a blissful night's sleep.

DAY TWO :: THE BAY OF PLENTY TO WAITOMO

A new day brings a new adventure and plenty of surprises. Today I'm off to Rotorua, about one hour's drive south from Tauranga. My first surprise is zorbing. Ever considered what it's like to be a hamster in a ball? How about a big, wet hamster in a washing machine? Well, zorbing will give you a good idea. I crawl into a zorb (a massive transparent globe with a little water inside), slip and then spin down the hill. It's probably the most fun that two semi-clothed adults can have in public. You will, however, be in need of a restful experience in Rotorua to recover afterwards.

Geothermal activity probably isn't the first thing you'd think of as a cure-all for your complexion, but nearby Polynesian Spa uses the local volcanic mud to soothe your skin. I opt for a full-body thermal mud wrap that



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exfoliates my skin, followed by a full-body massage to stimulate and replenish it. One hour later I'm making my way to the venue's deluxe Lake Spa, where I unwind even further in its warm mineral waters.

Like my newly polished skin, the day feels young. I still have plenty of time to take in the alien-like volcanic landscape of the natural Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland, 25 minutes' drive south from Rotorua. These pools are not for bathing, though. The turquoise waters of the temptingly named Champagne Pool are boiling-hot and acidic, which means a dip would result in a different type of toast than its namesake.

A short trip back up the highway to Rotorua brings me to my last stop of the day, Rainbow Springs Nature Park. I'm keen to meet Jenny, the resident kea. These intelligent native parrots are known for their cheeky nature, and Jenny is certainly an entertainer, playing peekaboo and trying to steal my handbag, squawking loudly in protest when I claim it back.

The kiwis are lively too. In the wild these birds are nocturnal, but here their enclosures are darkened to give visitors a daytime peek at the national icon. It's a rare chance to see this shy bird, so we crane our necks for a look. It shuffles closer and suddenly emits a call so piercingly high-pitched that it could be a car alarm. ▶



Ears ringing, it's time to go. Two hours' drive west from Rotorua brings me to Otorohanga, where I check into the cosy Big Bird Bed & Breakfast.

DAY THREE :: WAITOMO TO AUCKLAND

The next morning I look out the window and straight into the beak of a giant bird – but what did I expect at the Big Bird Bed & Breakfast? It's located on an ostrich farm where the birds graze just outside your chalet. According to the owner, visitors of all ages adore both the ostrich tour and the mini-pony rides. I'm disappointed to be told, over my scrambled ostrich-egg breakfast, that the mini-ponies are only two feet high so I'm definitely too big to ride one.

Instead, I decide to photograph an ostrich, realising all too late that the bird isn't posing – it's eyeing up my camera. Wrestling it from the bird, I'm hoping that's the last animal encounter of the trip. However, while driving to my next stop I spot a sign that says: 'The Shearing Shed: Bunnies Shaved Daily at 12.45.' I check my watch – it's 12.30. I can't resist.

The bunnies in question are angora rabbits. Bred for their long fur, they're like cute, twitchy-nosed sheep. They, too, need shearing to stay cool and comfy. Their coats are so long that they can only breed after

NORTH ISLAND ROAD TRIP

:: Auckland Fish Market
+64 9 379 1490
www.aucklandfishmarket.co.nz

:: Big Bird Bed & Breakfast
+64 7 873 7459
www.waitomobigbird.co.nz

:: Hotel on Devonport
+64 7 578 2668
www.hotelondevonport.net.nz

:: The Legendary Black Water Rafting Co Waitomo Caves
+64 7 878 6219
www.waitomo.com/black-water-rafting.aspx

:: Mills Reef Winery Restaurant
+64 7 576 8800
www.millsreef.co.nz

:: Polynesian Spa
+64 7 348 1328
www.polynesianspa.co.nz

:: Rainbow Springs Nature Park
+64 7 350 0440
www.rainbowsprings.co.nz

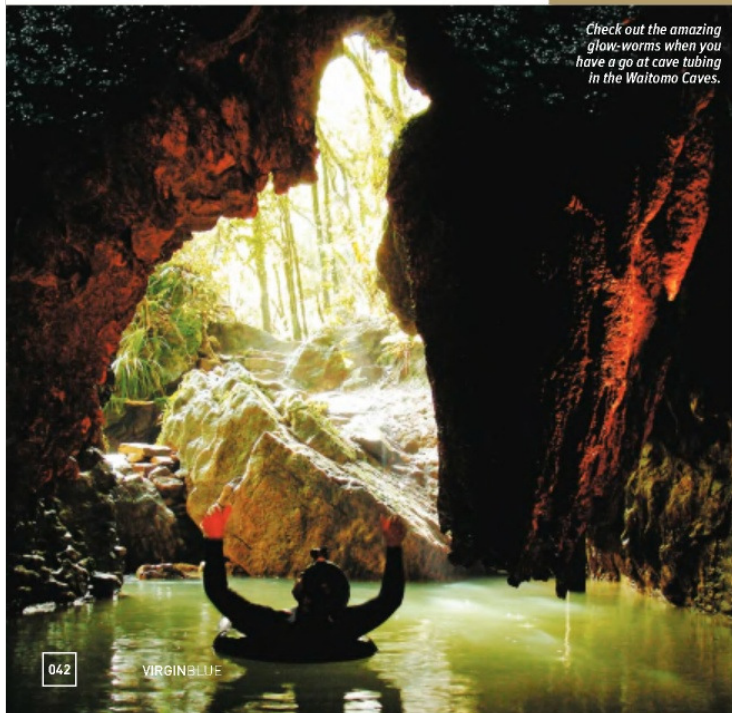
:: Sail NZ America's Cup Sailing Experience
+64 9 359 5987
www.explorenz.co.nz

:: The Shearing Shed
+64 7 878 8371

:: Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland
+64 7 366 6333
www.waioatapu.co.nz

:: ZORB Rotorua
+64 7 357 5100
www.zorb.com/zorb/rotorua


“ I realise all too late that the bird isn't posing – it's eyeing up my camera. ”



Check out the amazing glow-worms when you have a go at cave tubing in the Waitomo Caves.

they've had a haircut, which may explain why they seem so cheerful when the shears come out.

There's little time to linger, as I have a blackwater rafting appointment, 15 minutes' drive south-west of Otorohanga. Run by The Legendary Black Water Rafting Co, the Black Abyss tour includes five hours of caving, abseiling, climbing and cave tubing. You don't need to have experience, just a sense of adventure and the ability to ignore how silly you look in a wetsuit.

The tour includes a ride on a flying fox and a fast slide into a dark cave. We go on to explore the intricate subterranean world, our way lit only by our helmet lights and the luminescent sparkles of thousands of glow-worms. However, after spending three weird and wonderful days exploring Auckland and its surroundings, not even this spectacle surprises me. 

Getting there :: To book your direct Pacific Blue flight to Auckland from Brisbane, Sydney, Gold Coast, Melbourne, Wellington, Dunedin, Queenstown or Christchurch visit www.flypacificblue.com or call 13 16 45 (in Australia) or 0800 67 00 00 (in New Zealand). Blue Holidays offers return airfares to Auckland and three nights' accommodation at Rydges Auckland from \$626pp.* Book at virginblue.com.au/holidays or call 13 15 16 (in Australia) or 0508 13 15 16 (in New Zealand).

*Ex Melbourne. Twin share. On Sale until 28 February 2010 for travel until 30 June 2010.