

# New Zealand Travelogue 2004

## Installment two: Sulfur, So Good

February 29-March 2, 2004

Tena Koutou! It's fun to be on vacation. Clearly we need to revisit our national obsession with work. The only people I've met so far with shorter trips here are a guy from Singapore and another American couple. Europeans and Australasians measure their vacations in months, not weeks, and they don't use fractions. Good thing - I went to public school.

Anyway. I only have 3 weeks, so rather than spending the whole thing talking about how much MORE vacation I need, let's cut the shuck and jive and get on with the travelogue. (Apologies to Charlie Papazian.)

*29 Feb 04*

When I left you dear readers last I was holed up in Auckland, waiting for my car to arrive. In the meantime I sampled the take-out Thai cuisine of Auckland and discovered first-hand what others had told me about eating out in NZ: portions are huge, even by American standards. The food was good enough that I didn't mind having the same thing (red curry) for dinner too. But I am jumping ahead.

You may have heard in the news about the flooding in New Zealand, particularly on the North Island. Yes, the island I'm on. Well, shortly you'll be able to see pictures. Once the car arrived... oh, wait, another little "quirky NZ" story. I had booked the car through the hostel, so I didn't know where they were - I assumed the airport, which is a good \$40 cab ride away. As it turns out, the car place was maybe 8 blocks from where I was waiting. Had I only known I'd have left Auckland hours earlier, but apparently it's common to just wait around for things to happen here. They call it "kiwi time" and it is a reminder to slow down, mate. Slow down.

Ah, but they haven't seen me drive. Good thing. This left-side of the road thing is going to get me killed. Anyway. Off I went, heading south, into nice blue skies, down to Waitomo on the west side of the island, to glide on rafts through darkened underground caves lit only by glow-worms. On the way I noticed fields filled with murky brown water, rising higher on the shrubs and trees and signposts, increasingly approaching the roadside until it completely covered the road in spots. I began to think about those underground caves and how water, you know, basically flows down, and how underground caves are, well, down. Sure enough, I pulled into an empty parking lot at the caves and a sign saying, Sorry. Sigh.

So I pushed on, intending to cut south then across to Rotorua, on the eastern side of the island. As I continued south, the roads became wetter and then, ultimately, closed. Time

to back track. A helpful highway patrol woman directed me along a particularly gorgeous route through what I can only describe as the Misty Mountains, for you Lord of the Rings fans, and a bit of Mirkwood. Fog lined the top of rolling blue-green hills in the distance, and tall hairy trees planted thickly along the highway formed a dense canopy that occasionally made this midday ride feel like night.

I arrived in Rotorua around 8 PM and went immediately to the hostel's common area where Jo, a very friendly British woman (age: late 30's, SWAG - but since her birthday is today, let's be nice and say 35) who gave me tons of travel tips. She should have tons. She's been traveling since LAST JUNE. 7 weeks in NZ alone. But I don't want to get started on that again. Anyway, we made fast friends and decided to head to Waiotapu together the next morning.

*1 Mar 04*

Waiotapu is sort of a mini-Yellowstone, with boiling mud pools, an impressive 40ft geyser that erupts daily (with a little nudging from park staff, who trigger it with a couple handfuls of soap at the appointed time), steam vents, craters, etc. Like many such areas in NZ, it's fairly well laid out with trails that you **MUST** stay on, both for your own safety and for the probably more directly relevant reason of preserving the fragile place for the future. Although I can't reconcile the prevailing eco-sense here with the dumping of soap into a geyser. Call it ecological appreciation and move on, I guess. There was steam and the smell of sulfur everywhere. I hope my photos captured the eery magic of the place.

My afternoon was supposed to be spent in a Polynesian spa, but they were booked up, except for mineral baths which I already had access to (and had already taken advantage of) at the hostel. (These are pretty nice hostels.) So I took a drive north of town and found a short hike to Tutea Falls, a very impressive waterfall that was, for some reason, being almost completely ignored this fine day by kayakers, rafters, and hikers. The falls were raging, probably much higher than normal, and I could imagine this waterfall dunking even the most experienced whitewater freak. I was suddenly happy for all the rain and enjoyed this jewel all to myself. There was also a cave there which supposedly is where women and children hid during Maori wars. These must have been fierce wars they wanted to escape, as they would have had to climb down a sheer cliff face by rope to get to them.

Monday night I joined Jo and 3 others from the hostel on a bus to a Hangi, or Maori feast and concert. The first thing that happened when we arrived was the selection of the "chief" of our "tribe" - i.e. the visitors to the Maori site. The Maori greeter said it had to be a male. Well, guess who. Live life fully, I always say. So I led our group to the hangi site and sat up front as the Maori warrior performed a dance of greeting, complete with the baring of teeth, sticking out of tongue, stabbing of spear, and finally, laying down an offering of peace - a fern branch. My job was to accept the offering, then give an extemporaneous speech in response - "whatever comes into your heart," our greeter said. OK, no problem - it just amounts to talking, right? I have only the generous feedback from my "tribe" to tell me how I did. Anyway, it was fun. Then came more dancing, and

then the feast - tons of smoked food, and I mean SMOKED. Smokiest flavor I've ever had. I'm not a huge fan of smoked food, so I reached my limit before I was completely full, but even the BBQ fans there were commenting on the rauch-flavor. After dinner we walked through the dark forest, with the chief pointing out various native fauna, some glow-worms, and finally a really cool eel pond. I went through lots of film and camera memory this night.

*2 Mar 04*

This morning I headed out early to Matamata, a town of 6000 (average for NZ) north of Rotorua and the site of Hobbiton in the Lord of the Rings. It was a great day for it, as the movie's successes at the Oscars the night before were emblazoned proudly across the NZ Herald. Most of the site had been "renaturalized" (destroyed) per the original agreement between New Line and the owner of the sheep farm on which it was located. But bad weather caused the demolition to stop, and they just never got around to finishing before popular demand suggested the idea of a tour site. It doesn't look like the movie set now, and by contract it can't - but it's cool to stand inside Bag End and see Bilbo's view of the Shire out the round windows.

This afternoon I drove to Taupo, about an hour south of Matamata and an hour west of Rotorua, and another hour north of the edge of Tangariro National Park, where there is an awesome day-long trek to be taken, once the weather permits. Tomorrow it won't. Hopefully, Thursday. On the way I took a short hike to another waterfall - Huka Falls - where the jetboaters got close but decidedly did NOT go over. This is another raging falls on a very wide river, with deep blue-green water surrounded on both sides by lush, almost tropical greenery. Then I popped over to Craters of the Moon, another geothermal park (this one, free though), with hot, sulfury steam blasting your face as you try to photograph the bright red, yellow, and black rock of the many craters and caverns.

Tonight in Taupo I went grocery shopping (always an adventure when overseas) and used the cramped hostel kitchen to make up a big ol' stir-fry, and it came out really well, which shouldn't have surprised me but it did anyway. And this hostel, unlike the last one (which had its own liquor license) allows us to BYOL which was a nice bonus at dinner. I decided to extend my reservation another day, with hopes for Thursday night dashed by the fact that they're already booked. However, it might be the night to break the tent out for the first time. Ah, yes, the famous tent. I need to use it after all of its adventure at the airport.

Next - off to one of Taupo's nightspots, while I contemplate tomorrow's options: whether to jetboat, rope-swing, kayak, or skydive. Yes, skydive. The clouds are calling me.

Ka kite ano,

Gary