



STEAMING:
Wairakei Terraces, just north of the town of Taupo, offer reinvigorating hot pool baths.



✦ For thrills a minute you must experience the Huka Jet Boat ride when you visit Taupo.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED



Taupo the Maori way

Learning and enjoying the culture of New Zealand



TRAVEL
with John Bishop

THERE'S much more to New Zealand's Lake Taupo than the traditional fishing and boating experiences, and a group of Maori tourism operators are leading the way in showing just how enjoyable interacting with Maori culture can be.

Here are some of the special experiences I was fortunate to try.

The first suited my appetite when we prepared a traditional hangi.

It's the traditional Maori feast where food is steam cooked in the ground over hot stones – and it is even better after you have played a part in laying it down.

Now to be fair my part was pretty modest; shovelling some earth on to the box of food once it was placed on the hot stones and covered with wet cloths, and then shovelling the earth back off again before we tucked in.

It's one of the hands-on activities offered by Native Xperience, a new Maori tourism operator in Taupo.

They use their own land and traditions to offer half day and whole day experiences to international visitors, particularly the backpacker and independent traveller market.

Fly fishing on the river helps when you can cast properly. Ngahere Wall, our host, was much better.

Out on the river just a few kilometres from the family settlement, the sun beats down through the trees, and the trout sit in the shallows, clearly visible but untempted by our flies.

Meanwhile back by the lake the hangi is quietly cooking. We'd made our own selections for dinner – chicken, pork, lamb chops, various root and green vegetables. Pack those into a cardboard container, put your name on the tinfoil lid, and all the packs go into a big steel basket with greenery on the bottom to prevent burning.

About three or four hours later the basket is lifted and it's all cooked and ready. We eat as the sun sets by the lake side disturbed only by a gentle warm breeze.

Fancy a nice cruise on a lovely spring morning on a beautiful calm lake with someone cooking breakfast while

you cast a line over the side in the hopeful expectation of catching a good-sized trout?

Chris Jolly Cruises runs a brunch cruise on Lake Taupo with calls at the Maori rock carvings installed in 1980 by the local Tuwharetoa tribe and representing many of their legends, and at the "devil's staircase", silica formations which cascade like so many stacked plates. (These are all natural).

For a more adrenaline-pumping ride try the Huka Jet.

Jet boat drivers are always cheeky outdoor dudes who delight in doing giant 360-degree turns at high speed to create waves that splash over the passengers. They positively enjoy the screams of delight, and are happy to do it again and again.

This little baby had two 520HP Buick V6 engines which pick up and push out 200-300 tonnes of water a minute, "like a giant vacuum cleaner", Liam the driver says as he powers up the river.

But it's not the scenery that is the appeal; it's the sense of safe adventure and excitement that comes from powering along at 70kmh, and on the signal of an upright hand twirling, getting ready for another spin around when the driver cuts the power, pulls the wheel sharply and generates the joy of a spin. That's what 35,000 passengers pay for each year.

At the Taupo Nui a Tia High School we were welcomed onto the grounds by the school's kapa haka group before being fed and entertained.

These guys and gals (aged 13 to 17 years) are good; they've won regional and national awards.

During the show members of the audience get up and practise their stance for the start of a haka – legs apart, bent at the knees, hands shaking by one's side, and then tongue out, head on the side with a fixed glare of the greatest ferocity one can muster.

A good gutsy roar and then into the haka itself.

At the Wairakei Terraces, just north of the town, the walk around the geothermal area is just one part of a package of experiences.

Visitors can be welcomed to what is described as a "bastion of Maori culture", Ngati Tuwharetoa country (the local tribe), in a traditional way with a challenge preceded by a maiden's call to come onto the land.

There are displays of weaponry, oratory, tattooing and weaving as well as dancing and a hangi, and also traditional massages followed by a soak in the (very) hot pools.

* John Bishop was a guest of Maori Tourism New Zealand and Destination Great Lake Taupo.

SAIL AUSTRALIA



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GRAB the experience of a lifetime sailing on board the iconic Australian-built replica of Captain James Cook's HMB Endeavour.

The Australian National Maritime Museum is calling on adventure seekers to join the crew of its magnificent replica 18th-century vessel when it begins a new sailing program in 2016 to Victoria and South Australia.

Late next month Endeavour will embark on a three-month voyage calling in to Geelong, Adelaide, Port Lincoln and Portland. Voyage legs range from five to 12 days and at each port Endeavour will be open for locals to step on board this national treasure.

The 44-metre ship is sailed by a professional crew of 16, assisted by 40 paying voyage-crew who learn first-hand what it was like to sail the oceans during the great era of European exploration. Voyage crew sleep in hammocks, learn how to set sails, steer the ship and stand watches. Full training is provided. But if you prefer a more leisurely sailing experience, sign up as one of four supernumeraries on each voyage.

As a supernumerary you can choose your level of involvement while enjoying the privacy of your own cabin, one of the gentlemen's cabins on the original Endeavour inhabited by Joseph Banks and his team of artists and scientists.

✦ **MORE DETAILS:** www.endeavourvoyages.com.au or 1800 720 577.