



NORTHERN





EXPOSURE

Skiing in NZ's volcanic northern resorts is set to erupt as powder hounds explore new slopes »

WORDS HUW KINGSTON



←
The high
life



Our first day in Taupō was a day for the thermals

Look Papa, look! Wow. Wow.” These were the only words my 10-year-old grandson Anders could get out. The two of us had taken the Knoll Ridge T-Bar to the top. There he’d spotted the classic crater summit of Mt Ngauruhoe (Mt Doom in *The Lord of the Rings* films) floating on a sea of clouds beyond the Pinnacles – the jagged rocky ridge that forms the eastern boundary of Whakapapa resort. His words were spot on.

Australian skiers and boarders have long been scooting across to New Zealand’s South Island for a snow fix. But rising beyond the southern shores of Lake Taupō on the North Island is the volcano of Mt Ruapehu. On its flanks are two ski resorts, Whakapapa and Turoa, which offer the largest areas, the longest runs and the highest elevation in New Zealand. These facts have slipped well under the radar of most snow watchers on this side of the Tasman. But following a \$20 million upgrade over the past two years – with further investment planned – these ski resorts are about to erupt.

The clear weather on the summit of Whakapapa was in contrast to our first day in the region. On the four-hour drive



from Auckland Airport all manner of storm and rain warnings were in place – sheep were surely blowing across the road in front of us. One guarantee about any holiday in New Zealand, however, is that whatever the season or weather, there are always plenty of options. The bad weather made our first day in Taupō perfect for exploring the geothermal wonderland of Orakei Korako. We marvelled at the bubbling geysers and melted-chocolate-like mud pools, before being mesmerised by the glass blowers at the Lava Glass Factory.

Clear skies ahead

Blue skies greeted us on our second day and we stopped off on the drive to Whakapapa to skim stones across the mirror-



Snow-capped peaks reflected in Lake Taupō. ABOVE: Orakei Korako Geothermal Area.

calm waters of Lake Taupō, New Zealand’s largest and deepest lake.

Whakapapa, on the north side of Ruapehu, is a 40-minute drive from Turangi, the nearest town of any size, and a further 40 minutes from Taupō. As with most NZ ski areas, there’s no accommodation on the mountain itself, save

for a few private club lodges. The nearest is at Whakapapa Village 6km below the resort and at the hamlet of National Park, 25 minutes away. Many stay at Taupō or Turangi after driving in from Auckland.

The ski resort itself encompasses Whakapapa and Happy Valley – a learner’s paradise >>>

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A beginner learns the ropes in Happy Valley on Whakapapa.



Happy Valley can thus be topped up throughout the season and now opens early in June

at the 1630-metre base of the resort. Courtesy of the aforementioned investment, the sheltered, wide valley now has a series of four covered carpet lifts, a double chairlift and an elevator to take you up and down to the main resort base. There's a café and ski hire too. Happy Valley is also the home of the new Snow Factory; basically a huge freezer where snowflakes are carved off and blown out onto the slopes in temperatures up to 25 degrees. Happy Valley can thus be topped up throughout the season and now opens early in June, regardless of natural snowfalls.

Heading uphill

Above Happy Valley the new Rangatira Express chair opens up a huge

area of mainly blue and black runs dropping into bowls and valleys, or slipping over volcanic ridges.

My wife Wendy injured her wrist on the first day, but was happy to sit in the Knoll Ridge Café to take in the views and watch Anders and his 12-year-old sister Anna ripping it up on Shirt Front, Gollum and other runs. The fact Anna happened to have picked Mt Ruapehu for a major school project somehow justified her missing a week of school. This was research after all ...

Off on my own, I shared a chairlift with David, who worked at Whakapapa. He told me how his German father, as an 18-year-old in Berlin, asked where the best

fly-fishing in the world was. "Head to NZ and the Tongariro River," he was told, so he did and fell in love with the area. David was glad he had.

Turoa, the other resort, is on the south-west corner of Mt Ruapehu, and can also be accessed with a Mt Ruapehu lift pass. It is accessed from the pretty town of Ohakune. At 2322 metres, Turoa boasts New Zealand's highest chairlift and the longest vertical descent at 722 metres.

Rising above this point is the true summit of Mt Ruapehu, 2797-metre Tahurangi, the highest point on the North Island.

In comparison to Whakapapa, Turoa has wider runs, allowing the kids to practice their turns with confidence down Little Bowl, Boneyard, Whynot and others. On-mountain food at both resorts was similarly priced to off-mountain – a major consideration for families. We also appreciated that food there was served using real plates and cups, rather than the throwaway variety.

The icing on the cake at Turoa, at least for Anna and Anders, was meeting Fire, the resort's search and rescue dog. As black as the lava fields of >>

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Heading uphill to Turoa's runs. BELOW: Chair-lift selfies on Turoa.



his mountain, Fire had replaced the recently retired Ice. His handler Couchy has been on the mountain for nearly 40 years. And now, as well as his dog handling role, Couchy puts his experience to use as the resort weather forecaster. It is one thing on these mountains to get computer predictions, but another to have local

knowledge. Indeed many locals told us that on the same day, on the same mountain, Turoa and Whakapapa could have very different weather. In the ski patrol room I also chatted with Tup, a mere 35-year veteran of Turoa. Tup, of Māori-Irish-Dutch heritage, was now the main avalanche forecaster on the mountain.

Rumbling away

In the days we skied on Ruapehu there was a certain vibe that came from sliding down an active volcano. Perhaps this was because we were new to snowsports on a volcano, but many local skiers and boarders told us they felt a strong affinity with that aspect of the mountain. It certainly meant a natural bubbling hot spa was never too far away to soothe ski-weary muscles. That said, the posters in the toilets advising what to do in the event of an eruption made interesting reading.

Our week at Ruapehu, and in the wider Great Lake Taupō region, had a real mix of weather. We didn't ski every day, nor did we plan to. A fantastic week not just of skiing but

of walking, kayaking, hot springs, mountain biking and much more, was best summarised by Anders. As we dropped the rental 4WD back at Auckland Airport, he announced: "I don't want to leave New Zealand. Maybe I'll just go home, say goodbye to my friends, and move here." ✈

Huw Kingston was a guest of Destination Great Lake Taupō, greatlaketaupo.com, North Island Ski Holiday, northislandskiholiday.com mtruapehu.com

Travel info

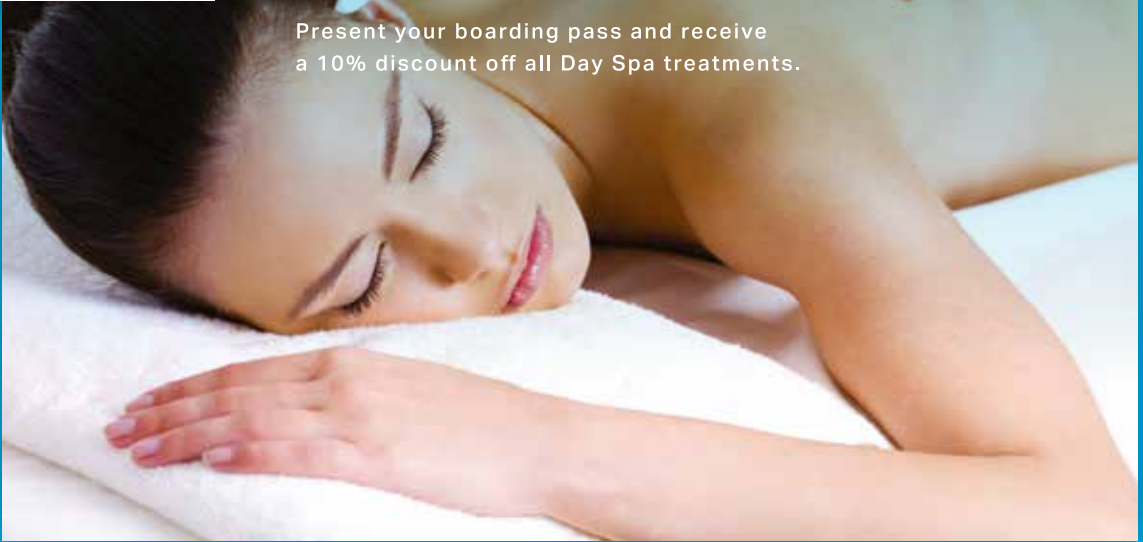
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