



# RotoVegas

## on a budget

Liz Light finds her 'austerity programme' is no issue in Rotorua where there are lots of free and fabulous things to do.



Government Gardens looking springish

Our Apollo, pretty in rhododendrons



“Lizzie, don't forget about our austerity programme,” my husband Sam reminds me when we arrive in Rotorua. “That means we can't do anything that costs money.”

Right. Clear. I am temporarily glum. No Luge, Zorb, Gondola and Skyline Restaurant, Whakarewarewa, Rainbow Springs, Hell's Gate or white-water rafting; none of those costly, but fun-filled activities.

But I discover that the good old cliché still stands true: all the best things in life are free. The first gorgeous free thing we notice that Rotorua offers in abundance, are rhododendrons. Many suburban streets are lined with lollipop-shaped 'rhodos' in full scarlet flower; and the pavements beneath them are also carpeted in scarlet. We drive around a few of Rotorua's best 'rhodo' roads, then treat our Apollo motorhome to a photoshoot surrounded by flowers. We enjoy it and hope our travelling home does too.

Government Gardens cover 20 lake-side hectares in central Rotorua which are a treat whatever the season, but especially in late October when tulips are brilliantly blooming. There are many aspects to the gardens but central to it is the splendid mock-Tudor building, originally constructed as a spa and health retreat in 1908, but now home to the museum and art gallery. There are bowling greens and croquet courts in front of it and, another impressive period

building, the 1930's Mediterranean-style Blue Baths, faces the museum and art gallery from across the green. The baths, which have been fully restored but have modern workings, allow one to relax in heated waters in an architecturally stunning setting. But there is no swim or museum visit for us because of our austerity programme (Museum \$20 and Baths \$11) and, besides, it is too nice a day to be inside.

The gardens are an interesting combination of colonial English formality and weird geothermal activity. The area around Sulphur Lake, which is an opaque creamy green and smells like rotten eggs, has been recently revamped to become a serene walk that weaves between trees and includes a sculpture trail with 17 artworks.

This area was next to a sanatorium, where sick and wounded soldiers from the WWI recuperated, 100 years ago, so the sculpture has an ANZAC theme and because this is Rotorua, the heart of Te Arawa territory, most artworks have Maori associations. My favourites: a giant wooden angel with Maori features; and a symbolic waka on a plinth, presumably taking the soldiers who gave their lives to King and Country, to heaven. The thermal activity and steamy lake give this walk a curious visual beauty and the sculpture is emotionally moving.

The next stop, on our free self-guided tour, is Sulphur Point Wildlife Sanctuary, in the south-eastern corner of this vast park. Had we been busy white-water rafting or



The sculpture trail



Food glorious food in Eat Street



Fabulous feathery ponga at Okere Scenic Reserve



St Faith's angel

Zorbing, we would not have taken the time to investigate this area and it is very special.

My childhood recollections of Sulphur Point are of a desolate-looking, steaming, bubbling area edging Lake Rotorua, that was once used as a lazy-person's rubbish dump. In the bad old days the geothermal area was littered with broken chairs, old shoes, rapidly rusting cars and other discarded detritus.

The thermal activity is still here but the rubbish has gone. The path winds along steaming ditches, hot springs and silica flats, the lake water is warm and has a milky sulphurous patina, and the area is busy with birds. Sixty bird species have been recorded here and

they seem unperturbed by the thermal activity.

Pukeko hot-foot around steaming ponds looking for bugs; little black shags nest high in scraggy trees; seagulls nest in thatches of grass on lake-edge islands; scaup, a small native black duck with bright yellow eyes, hundreds of them, populate what appears to be a man-made floating island lush with grass. Black and white swans cruise around with signets in tow, geese families mow the lawns, and paradise ducks shriek and honk hysterically while guiding their striped golf-ball sized babies to the lake's edge.

A Department of Conservation notice tells us that birds live here for warmth,

refuge and because it is in close proximity to food in other parts of the lake. Birds have fast metabolic rates and geothermal warmth helps them conserve energy usually used to keep their bodies warm.

We drive Apollo to the northern end of the Government Gardens and park near the yacht club. The Maori village at Ohinemutu squeezes between the lake, Lake Road and Hutuhina Stream, and the marae is hidden down a quiet lane. This is not a tourist village but the real thing. The homes, old and new, belong to the Ngāti Whakaue, a sub-tribe of Te Arawa, and cluster around Te Papaouru Marae.

The meeting house is ornately carved and immaculately maintained and it faces St Faith's Church across a large paved

courtyard. A tall white angel stands outside the church and equally impressive, but totally different, Maori carvings stand near the meeting house. Geothermal boiling water and steam, casually cordoned off, bubbles between the paving stones in one corner of the courtyard.

The 1915 mock-Tudor church has a sweetly English exterior but the inside is magnificently Maori. The walls are made of intricately woven tukutuku panels; the pews have beautifully carved ends, as does the pulpit and altar. The beams supporting the church are painted in traditional designs and a hymn, The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, sung in Maori, discretely resonates in the background.

It is an exquisite little church and I love its reverent Maori ambiance even before I discover the Galilee Chapel that was added to its right side in 1960. In this chapel there is a famous glass window etched with a Maori Christ, wearing a traditional feathered cloak, 'walking' on water.

When viewed from a pew, this handsome, larger than life-sized, ghostly version of Christ, really does seem to be really walking on water, sometimes with real, live, ducks scurrying around his feet. It is ethereal and sublime. St Faith' is not Notre Dame but, in its unique way, it is one of the most beautiful churches I have ever visited.

A wonderful thing about a campervan is that it has a kitchen and a 'fridge so we

stroll back to it and, mindful of the austerity programme, build sandwiches which we munch in comfort while having a cup of tea looking over Lake Rotorua, where waves are blustered by the breeze and fluffy clouds race over blue sky. This beats a restaurant, any day.

Though a lie-down is tempting we devote the next part of the afternoon to a forest walk. Okere Scenic Reserve, 15 minutes out of town on the road to Te Puke, follows the Kaituna River. The walk takes up to an hour but is linear so we happily do it both ways.

The reserve is world famous as a white-water rafting river and the Okere Falls, with a drop of three meters, is reputed to be the highest rafted waterfall ▶▶



Okere Falls



A military angel in the sculpture trail

on the planet. Then there are two lesser waterfalls for rafters to navigate over. White-water rafting is way too thrilling for me and even if I had the \$85 that it costs to raft this river, I would not do so.

The views of this bush-surrounded river and its waterfalls and the trout pools between them make the walk exceptional and, if one is lucky, views include hapless rafters zooming down, shrieking with fear and delight, and often tipping out on the big one.

It's a splendid bush with shaded paths featuring magnificent stands of emerald green ponga. I look, really look, at these

glorious tree ferns; they have elegant umbrella silhouettes, a magical curl of a half unfurled fronds and bright featheriness when the wind ruffles them.

It is, according to Sam, beer o'clock and, given his Irish ancestry, austerity never applies to beer. He has walked up a thirst and had a big day so the cheap beer in the Apollo' fridge apparently isn't celebratory enough. He drives us back to central Rotorua, to Eat Street, a trendy city-block sized pedestrian mall closed to vehicles.

There are 14 restaurants, cafes and bars to choose from, all with al fresco

tables. Eat Street tastefully crosses the divide of being covered and airy and the overall use of wood in the design, including very clever wooden bicycles stands, gives it a rustic but edgy ambience.

BREW, a craft beer bar, is a great place to chill-out, and over a pint we marvel at what a lovely city Rotorua is. And we toast the fact that we have had a full and varied day and, except for drinks for us and diesel for Apollo, it hasn't cost a thing. ■

## Stay over

There are two Kiwi Holiday Parks in Rotorua: Rotorua Thermal Holiday Park, \$25 per person for a powered site. 463 Old Taupo Road, Rotorua. Phone (07) 346 3140, email [info@rotoruthermal.co.nz](mailto:info@rotoruthermal.co.nz); or Cosy Cottage Holiday Park 67 Whittaker Road, Rotorua. Phone (07) 348 3793, email: [stay@cosycottage.co.nz](mailto:stay@cosycottage.co.nz), website: [cosycottage.co.nz](http://cosycottage.co.nz)

## Local knowledge

To book your self-drive holiday with Apollo Motorhome Holidays phone 0800 113 131 or go to [apollocamper.co.nz/holiday](http://apollocamper.co.nz/holiday). Check-in was efficient and seamless as was checking-out. The motorhome was immaculately maintained. Rotorua is paradise for people keen on lakes, walks, native birds and bush. Besides walks alongside Lakes Tarawera, Okataina, Okareka there are excellent walks in Whakarewarewa Forest Park and the Redwoods Forest. There are numerous bike riding paths, as well.

1930's Mediterranean-style Blue Baths