



Room with a view: The villas, left, overlook an untroubled Lake Taupo.

Match point

What: The Point Villas
Where: Whakamoenga Point, Lake Taupo, 07 377 8002 or 027 477 4323
Basics: Two luxury villas available to individuals or groups for exclusive use. Private lakeside position. Prices from \$1100 a night per villa with special rates in winter. Each villa has two large bedrooms with bathrooms, large living and dining areas, fire and kitchen.

Reviewed by: Carolyn Enting

FIRST LIGHT glimmers on Lake Taupo as we slip into the silent, bracing water. We are alone, but for a fantail performing a merry dance.

A swim around a rocky outcrop, not far into the lake, we're confronted by a giant Maori carving which towers 10 metres above us and plunges straight into the lake. I feel like an explorer in an Indiana Jones movie.

The Mine Bay carvings, made in the late 1970s, are accessible only by boat, kayak or helicopter, but if you stay at The Point, within the private, gated estate of Whakamoenga Point (known as The Point), you're just a short swim away.

A hot tub for two draws us back, though it's a tough choice between that and the shower: separated from a waterfall by only a glass wall. Nestled in the bush, the bathroom puts you at one with nature... apart from the heated tiles.

Our villa is one of two that are ideal for a luxury escape. Each boasts sensuous linen, giant fluffy towels and robes, a wine cellar filled with Mt Difficulty Roaring Meg pinot noir, and tennis racquets for a court just a few metres from the front door.

The villas have kitchens that would impress Gordon Ramsay: a dinner table for eight, and a giant granite bench overlooking the lake. Perfect for a romantic getaway,

the villas are also fun for a group of friends, summer or winter. Bi-fold windows open to a spacious deck, outdoor dining area and a barbecue. A swimming pool sits between the two villas, and it's a five-minute stroll for a swim in the lake.

In winter, double-glazed windows, underfloor heating, a roaring log fire, and a glass of red keep you cosy.

The property was developed with a long-term view to preserve and protect the environment. House sites have been carefully chosen so that no building obscures another's view. The area has been planted with trees which have a thriving bird population including bellbirds, tui and fantail. Sewage is piped back to Taupo to keep the lake pristine.

Fishing for trout is as easy as stepping out of the front door. Local fishing guide Brent Pirie lives at The Point and will collect you in his 4WD or arrange for a helicopter to drop you into a more remote spot. We opted for the thrilling scenic flight (a great way to view The Point, and the carvings) and fished locally. Brent kitted us out in waders and took us to the Waitahanui Stream.

A former radio announcer, Brent keeps up a steady commentary punctuated with the word "crikey", although he's quiet when it comes to "the hunt".

Fly fishing, we learn, is quite meditative though not without excitement. Waitahanui Stream has some good-sized trout, once Brent shows you where to look. We hook a big one, but it leaps dramatically out of the water and off the line. What a beautiful sight. Brent's hands are shaking from the adrenaline rush.

Alas, no trout for dinner, but wood-fired pizza with a bottle of red does the business.

■ The writer was hosted by The Point.

ROAD TRIPPING

The wheel deal

Ange Hartshorne hits the road for Taupo, despite the cold season.

CAMERA and laptop into the car, bottles of water, lots of warm clothes and we're off. Enough of sitting at home in the dreariness of winter while the mates are off on their holidays.

The Met Office has promised a few days of sun and a huge storm has just been through, so there's lots of snow; beautiful scenery on the doorstep.

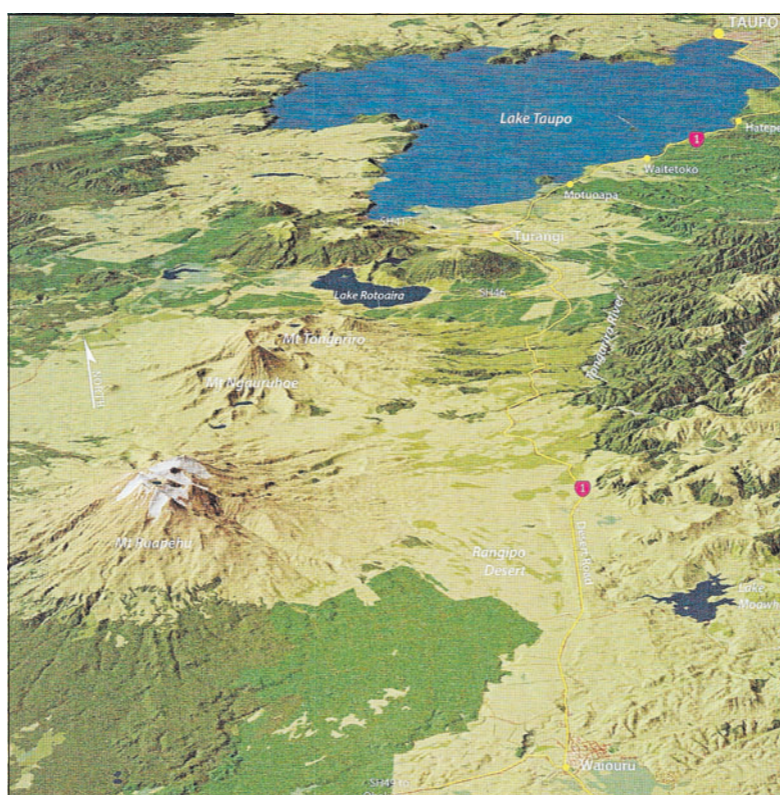
Being a student, there's not a lot of money to splurge on luxuries, but a roadtrip can provide lots of scenery and a well-needed break.

We take Route 54, out the back of Feilding, as opposed to State Highway 1. You turn on to Kimbolton Rd at historic Cheltenham, and after exhilarating roller-coaster parts of the road, you drive through the quaintness of Rewa, with its bright-red art shop, the beauty of Waituna West and the famous Vinegar Hill.

About three-quarters of the way along Route 54 is Stormy Point, where you must stop at the lookout and spot the ranges above the Rangitikei marching towards Taihape. The sign tells us we're looking at "one of the best preserved sequences of river terraces in the world". Back on the road we reconnect with State Highway 1, just south of Ohingaiti, where we stop to take a photo of an abandoned shop covered in graffiti.

We had been told there was thick snow, even south of Taihape. Lo and behold, two days after it dropped, it's still there in all its glory. Hills we have driven past many times before look like an alien landscape under a blanket of snow.

A few days earlier, the roads were closed and motorists stuck for the night. A road-trip tip: take warm clothes, a sleeping bag and maybe a bottle of whisky when motoring through here mid-winter.



Hills we have driven past many times before look like an alien landscape under a blanket of snow.

Next stop, the craggy hills of Taihape. We stop at Wild Roses Furniture and Gifts for a nose around the lovely merchandise and the entrancing atmosphere that transports you to other worlds.

There are more snow-covered hills as we climb to Waiouru, army training mecca of New Zealand. On the way we drive past the turnoff to Paengaroa Scenic Reserve, a mainland "island" of podocarp forest containing rare plant species and the "largest number of divaricating plants in New Zealand, for

an area its size". This is well worth a visit, preferably with a DOC guide. Waiouru is under snow and a bit colder. Good for the soul.

This is what we've come to see: the mountains in all their glory. Cold stops, hopping in and out of the car, and we've snapped enough photos to fill an album.

We had been going to turn around at Turangi, but are drawn to the Great Lake.

It sparkles in the lowering sun and we want to see the mountains reflecting in the water at twilight so blow our budget on a waterfront motel - with a spa.

The motelier tells us there is a heater in our room should the night get too cold, which it does.

A lamb curry in the microwave, the camera comes out again. Twilight, mountains and lake, our prize for the trip. The morning brings just as many picture possibilities. I



Winning way: This view of the road to Taupo is one of the fascinating Geographx maps in the *Driving Guide to Scenic New Zealand* published by Craig Pottin. To win one of five copies, email travel@dompost.co.nz, subject line "Roadtrip", with your name and address, or send same on an envelope to Roadtrip, Travel Desk, Dominion Post, Box 3740, Wellington, by Friday.

never realised Taupo does mist, but the large body of water must drag it in.

We spend the early morning taking photos from the lake edge, it's cool and still, and then find some elevation for mountain shots.

A moment of pure pleasure and wonder awaits on a corner of the Huka Falls road. Rounding the corner we come across a stand of trees shrouded in mist and biblically lit; it's a "Road to Damascus" moment, mystical and pretty.

All in all it had been a gorgeous road trip, although we nearly run out of petrol on the way home and there's another dicey moment when I stop on a windy bit of the Desert Road to photograph ice-encrusted volcanic rock strata.

But life should have some adventure about it, shouldn't it? Especially in the middle of winter.

Trusty go-pilot

CAMERON WILLIAMSON

FINALLY, we found it: a road that TomTom didn't know was there. It was on the frayed edge of the road atlas, up a sparsely populated valley, well out of cellphone range and bereft of buildings. But it was a rare lapse.

As a travel companion on a road trip, TomTom is really hard to fault. Just moments before you reach for the map, a schoolmastery Englishman or a pouty blonde Australian (you choose) tells you what you need to hear: "At the roundabout, turn left." Turn right, and TomTom will take a deep breath (you're only imagining the roll of eyes) before instructing: "Make a U-turn at the next opportunity."

Most of the roads I drove with TomTom, I knew backwards. But between the Coromandel Peninsula and Cambridge in the Waikato, there's a maze of dairy-drain roads across the Hauraki Plains known only to milk-tanker drivers. TomTom came up trumps, left-and-righting me through the flats with timely instructions so I could keep two hands on the wheel and two eyes on the road, and spat me out at Cambridge in the shortest possible time to destination. Full marks.

The top-of-the-range TomTom GO 930 has much more ambitious travel plans than we were able to test on our family jaunt around the North Island. With the latest maps of 45 countries from Andorra to Ukraine, it's touted as a stress-extracting travelling navigator for the international traveller.

As an all-in-one navigation device, the first-sized dash or screen-mounted TomTom does more than simple navigation. Every calculation from "time to destination" (a definitive response to "are we nearly there yet?" from the back seat) to average speed, next petrol station, rest area or scenic spot is shown, and a jukebox (preloaded and MP3 feedable) plays through your car stereo on an FM station. There's hands-free calling via Bluetooth and your mobile phone, the ability to speak a street name and receive directions, and a remote control.



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