

**W**hilst the majority of snow bunnies hop south for the winter to Queenstown, the North Island locals like to frequent the slopes of Mt Ruapehu, home to two of the North Islands best Skifields – Turoa and Whakapapa.



Mt Ruapehu is an active stratovolcano that hasn't rumbled since 2007 with the last major eruption in 1995. But don't let that scare you, the region has one of the most sophisticated hazard warning systems in the world - *Geonet*. Not letting a little volcano get in the way of a good snowboarding session, I flew direct from Brisbane to Wellington, hired a car and headed straight for the Ohakune.

### ***Carrots and mardigras***

Ohakune is known as the carrot capital of New Zealand, containing rich volcanic soil for farming. It is also the ski capital of the North Island, well known for its premier ski party 'Ruapehu Mountain Mardi Gras'. The celebration welcomes winter with music, rides, stalls and fireworks in a fantastic festival style. Ohakune is the gateway to Turoa, but there are no direct trains up the mountain to the skifields so locals either take a tour coach or drive up. Accommodation in Ohakune ranges from cheap backpackers to lavish cabins on the snow and there are plenty of pubs, cafes and restaurants to keep everyone entertained. The village even has a spa and massage clinic, but if you are lucky enough, your cabin might contain a spa. There is nothing better than a warm soak in the hot tub

after a big day on the slopes.



### ***Powdery Bliss***

Located on the south-western side of Mt Ruapehu, Turoa is Australasia's longest vertical descent and home to the highest lift, the 'Highnoon Express'. The

beginner's area is quite small and I'm pretty sure the pub takes up half of the space at the bottom of the mountain. There is a variety of terrain and natural half-pipes, so it is a good thing the Ruapehu snow season is the longest in the country, just in case you need to come back.

Whakapapa is located on the north-western side of Mt Ruapehu and is New Zealand's largest ski area. It contains the best beginners section known as 'happy valley', where there is plenty of room to fall at your leisure, without worrying about experienced skiers/boarders throwing you off your game. There is a massive variety of trails and expert runs to suit all levels. Whakapapa contains a variety of accommodation ranging from backpackers to a remote chalet with built-in fireplace, providing a wonderful winter-wonderland experience.

### ***Staring down into a volcanic crater***

The highlight of my trip and a must for adventure seekers is the crater climb, where you can climb up Mt Ruapehu to the crater and gaze down into the geothermal waters of Crater Lake. This climb isn't always easy with a snowboard or skis, so be sure to take a carry bag for them. To begin the journey, ski lifts take you up the mountain as far as they can go and then it is a meandering uphill climb from



there. When you have finally reached the peak, the spectacular views are well worth it. When sightseeing is over the real fun begins – snowboarding or skiing all the way back down the mountain with a stop at Knoll Ridge Chalet. This is the highest café at 2020 metres above sea level and offers breathtaking views – the perfect place to stop for lunch before resuming your adventurous decent.

### ***Keeping your feet firmly on the ground***

If skiing isn't your thing, there are plenty of other attractions the Mt Ruapehu region has to offer. The film crew for 'Lord of the Rings' and 'Hobbit' were based in Ohakune, so the LOTR tour is a must for JRR Tolkien fans. The Tongariro National Park contains world heritage guided hiking trails that boast fantastic views of all three mountains; Mt Tongariro, Mt Ngauruhoe (Mt Doom in the LOTR) and Mt Ruapehu. The best hiking is done outside of the winter season, when all of the snow has melted and the mountain reveals its true beauty. The famous Tongariro Crossing trek contains stunning volcanic features along the way including a crater landscape, scattered pumice, mountain springs, lava flows, emerald lakes and volcanic desert.



### ***Relax and rejuvenate***

On the drive back to Wellington I couldn't resist a quick trip to Taupo, known as the adventure lover's playground. Lake Taupo is the crater of an ancient volcanic eruption, being the largest fresh water lake in the southern hemisphere, it is a haven for water-based activities such as Jetboating the Huka Falls, cruises, fishing, kayaking and white water rafting.

If relaxation is the only thing left on the agenda, then your trip cannot be complete without a rejuvenating soak in the Geothermal hot springs. The springs are best known for their healing properties, so it is the perfect remedy to ease the aching snow bunny muscles. There really is so much to see which couldn't possibly be experienced in just one trip to the beautiful Mt Ruapehu.

Natalie Galvin | 29<sup>th</sup> March 2014