

Moi in sensible shoes?

Peta Mathias finds herself in flats – and in love – with Rotorua, the holiday heartland of her youth.

PHOTOGRAPHY SALLY TAGG



Lake Rotomahana.

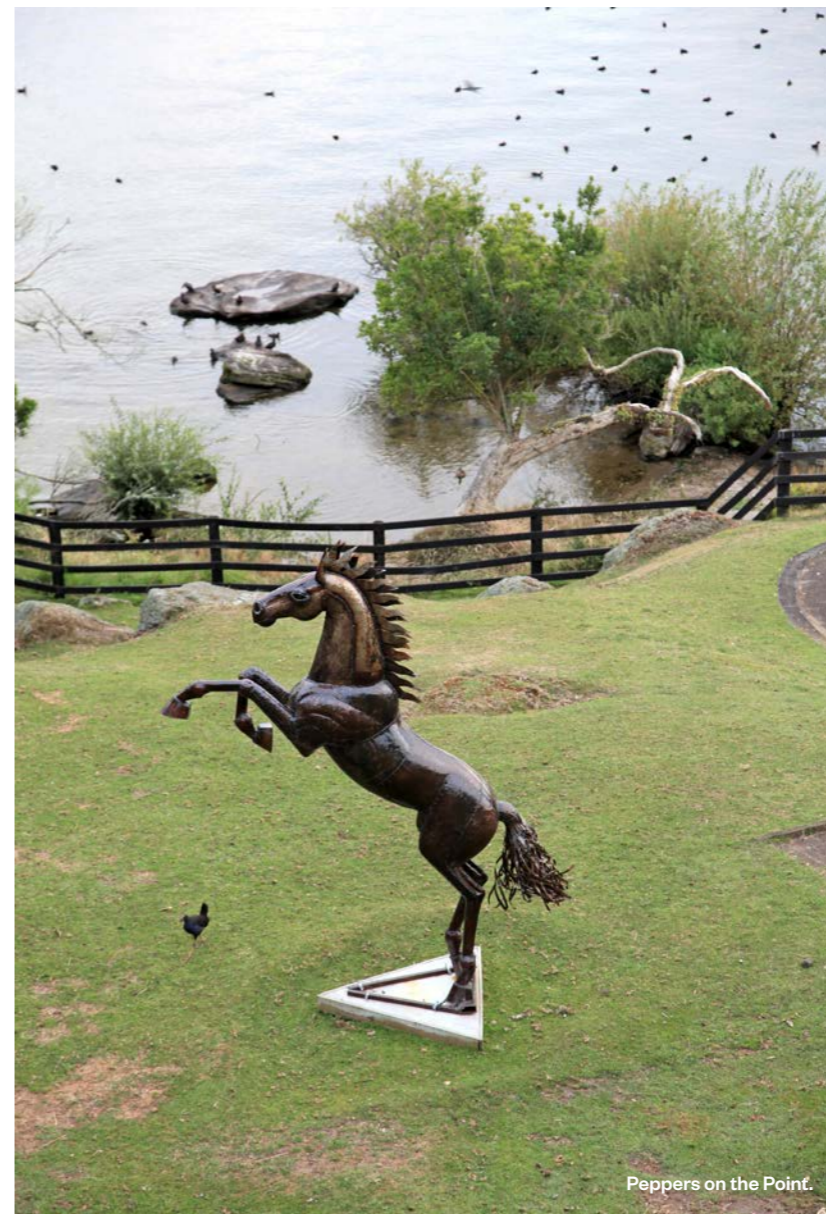
My family are from Rotorua – the grandparents started up a department store there, Mathias Drapery, and I spent my Auckland childhood visiting the cousins every year, mostly at Christmas. I remember the mellifluous waiata, I remember the sulphur smell, I remember the rēwena (potato bread).

Later, I filmed an episode on Rotorua for *Taste NZ* and discovered Māori cooking with master weaver Emily Schuster. I learned how to make fry bread, oven hāngī, boil-up with kūmara dumplings and hot pool-steamed kamokamo (squash) and freshwater kōura (crayfish). It was Emily who explained the importance of whakapapa – if you don't know where you come from, you can't know who you are.

But I digress, and that is a tendency of mine. Photographer Sally Tagg and I hopped into the rental car and the first thing that hit

us as we neared Rotorua was the sulphurous perfume, a sure sign that we were entering the beating heart of a geothermal zone. We were about to find out how the world began, by visiting Waimangu Volcanic Valley to stroll around the designated trail resplendent with gorgeous, colourful, seething lakes, bubbling hot springs, bowl-like craters, lush native bush and birdies like kawaupaka (little shag), bellbirds and fantails. We finished the tour with a boat ride around Lake Rotomahana so we could get a sense of the 1886 Mt Tarawera explosion from the inside, imagining where the pink and white terraces used to be. It's like a meditation – when you emerge from the valley you feel calm.

“Hello, how wonderful to see you again.” This was the warm welcome from the sterling manager at Peppers on the Point, our luxury digs for the next couple of nights. Ann Gregor-Greene wears appropriately volcanic-red



Peppers on the Point.



Skipper Martin Pearce of Waimangu.

Like nowhere else in the world.


lipstick, chic clothes and a charismatic smile. New Zealand luxury lodges have a staff tone like nowhere else in the world – polite, friendly, relaxed and competent, without being obsequious. It is their greatest secret weapon. Luxury lodges are another tendency of mine, but don't get me wrong – it's a tendency rather than an expectation. This wonderful lodge, owned by Jamie Main, with its unusual, eclectic decor, really is right on Kawaha Point, overlooking and practically in Lake Rotorua.

“Gin and tonic anyone?” Ann said.

Sally and I looked at each other. I ask you. This is the only reason we do these stories together – people give us gin.

The next best thing that happened to us at the lodge was the food. Chef William Foote knows his way around a kitchen and he knows the way to a woman's heart: tomato consommé. Do you know how long it takes to make real consommé? Months of waiting for end-of-summer tomatoes, hours of dripping, application of egg whites, acres of muslin... Anyway, the smoked venison with onion jam and wild berries and dessert of vanilla bean brulée with white-chocolate vermouth sorbet were also very refined and clean-tasting – no busyness, he knows when to stop.

I always wonder what people see in trees. Sure, there are leaves, trunks, branches and stuff, I get it – but that was before I walked through them from the top, not the bottom. At night. If trees bore you and you stopped hugging them in 1976, I recommend the Redwoods Treewalk Nightlights. Completely magical. As the night descends, very stylish David Trubridge lamps light up, and as you ▶

A photograph of a suspended walkway in a forest. The walkway is made of wooden planks and is supported by ropes. It is surrounded by tall, thin trees and lush green ferns. Several tree trunks have glowing orange lights attached to them, resembling fire or small lights. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn.

*As you trip along the
suspended walkway, tiny
crawling lights and owls
appear in the trees.*

trip along the suspended walkway, tiny crawling lights and owls appear in the trees.

Same goes for experiencing the geysers by night. I thought, “Oh no, not sensible shoes again,” but that’s just me. Turns out most people wear sensible shoes all the time and I’m the odd one out. The Te Puia interactive night tour is enchanting, not only because of the bubbling mud and lit-up geysers but also because of the storytelling. You get kai in the form of steamed pudding too.

All this walking through mud and balancing in treetops needed to be set off with a traditional Māori romiromi healing bodywork treatment from my lovely friend Wikitoria Oman. A romiromi massage can reverse dysfunction in the body by releasing blocked energy, allowing the body to regain its natural flow of mauri (life force). It was really good. There’s a spiritual element to it and she does it on top of your clothes, manipulating and stimulating pressure points. I walked out of her treatment room on a cloud.

There are lots of fun food stands at the Rotorua Night Market every Thursday on Tūtānekai Street, all mixed in with live music, crafts, every friend you ever met, and just an opportunity to socialise and share food and love. At the other end of Tūtānekai Street is “Eat Street”, a precinct lined on both sides with restaurants, all pumping with happy diners. We tried Atticus Finch, owned by two lovely sisters, Kay Thompson and Cherry Te Kiri. They specialise in sharing plates, local craft beer, and cocktails made with their own syrups.

If you jump into the Skyline gondola you will find yourself in a winery in the sky – Volcanic Hills Winery, where you can have tastings and gasp over the fabulous view ▶



The Redwoods Treewalk: it's lit.



Putting the “treat” into treatment, with Wikitoria Oman.



Jamus of the beautiful voice sang us in.



of Rotorua and the lake.

Good, intelligent, refined cooking is to be enjoyed at Terrace Kitchen, located between Eat Street and the lakefront – all modern, chic decor, marble counters and native timbers. Very cool and probably the best café/restaurant food I tasted in Rotorua.

I have another tendency: a catholic taste in gastronomy, which is why I try everything and why I have saved the most interesting till last.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not talking about church – although the experience with Jamus Webster and Lady Saifiti at Tamaki Māori Village did have singing, unleavened bread, flowers and spirituality. Jamus of the beautiful voice sang us in with his powerful powhiri and, from then on in, Sally and I were in the capable and charming care of him and Lady.

I've been to this traditional village many times and am always struck by how professional the experience is. The forest mushrooms, pikopiko (fern shoots)



and smoked eel were exceptional, and prepared (I found out) by Charles Royal of the Kinaki wild herbs brand – one of the best Māori cooks around. We did a brilliant cooking class in which we made our own bread dough from self-raising flour, flattened with our fingers and then wrapped around a pre-cooked hamburger patty and trimmings such as grilled eggplant, grilled pepper and lettuce.

This delectable stuffed bread ball was then deep-fried and devoured by us – unbelievably clever and delicious when opened, with all the fragrant steam pouring out.

And who knew red wine was a traditional Māori drink? Didn't see any gin though. ^S

A karakia for all who travel: Kia hora te marino, kia whakapapa pounamu te moana, kia tere te kārohirohi i mua i tō huarahi. (May the calm be widespread, may the sea glisten like greenstone, and may the shimmer of sunlight ever cross your pathway in life, now and always.)



THE LOWDOWN



What to do

- Waimangu Volcanic Valley
- Redwoods Treewalk
- Wikitoria Māori Healing
- Rotorua Night Market
- Tamaki Māori Village



Where to eat & drink

- The Mains at Peppers on the Point
- Eat Street
- Atticus Finch
- Volcanic Hills Winery
- Terrace Kitchen

Where to stay

- Peppers on the Point

