

Waitomo

A Place in New Zealand not to be missed

During our 6 week visit to New Zealand, we discovered a few gems. Waitomo, just about 3 hours south of Auckland is such a place! Wai (water) and tomo (hole or shaft) is aptly named as the area is riddled with underground cave systems. Amazingly Waitomo still remains undeveloped unlike most other popular tourist destinations in New Zealand. Perhaps it is because most people stop here for a few hours only. We decided to stay 3 days and to really explore the area. It was surprising to be here during nights when we hardly saw a soul and days with bus loads of tourists.

As far as accommodation goes, we found the new YHA - Kiwipaka (Youth Hostel Association) recently built, a nice hostel offering all the convenience of a top back packer hostel. We were surprised to have a private chalet, with double room with ensuite bathroom. It made for a great central location to participate in various activities.

Waitomo offers spectacular experiences like descending completely controlled 100m (400 ft) into the Lost World caverns.



Waitomo YHA: Accommodations from stately motor hotels to the sparkling Kiwi Paka YHA now adds a new motor lodge-type option to it's ultra-clean Backpackers formula.

The main attractions naturally are the numerous caves to be explored in different manners. We started with a visit of the Waitomo Museum of Caves to learn all about the famous glowworms and how the caves were formed. We then visited Waitomo Glow Worm Caves on a easy walking tour where you end with a boat ride underground on the river. Beautiful stalagmites and stalactites (do you still remember which ones go up or down?). The next day, we decided to explore some other caves in a more sportive way.

We took the Black Abyss tour by The Legendary Black Water Rafting Co. They fitted us with wetsuits, booties and all professional caving equipment. I was particularly impressed by the 'rack', a

device that let us effortlessly abseil (rapel) the breath-taking tomo and zip into the black water-filled abyss. We then glided in a glowworm tunnel on a 'flying dutchman' (they call it 'flying fox' in kiwi-land!). Our small group scrambled and we slid our way through squeezes and waterfalls. Did some tubing guided by our headlights and even in the complete dark, guided by the glowworms light! Feeling safely accompanied by friendly and professional guides, it is an experience we will remember for a long time!

Having enjoyed it so much, we decided the next day to do a different tour (dry this time) with Waitomo Adventures (the other oldest company there). We took the Spectacular Lost World 4-hour 100m Abseil tour. The trip was surprisingly gentle and the 330 feet abseiling was so easy, even for Jackie, my wife, with her arthritic fingers! The 'rack' and the safety line with our guide made it again reassuring and easy! More walking around spectacular rocks and amazing views in that other great cave. They provided boots and overalls, so when we exited our clothes were immaculate! So, after a light lunch, we decided to go for a 45 min walk in Ruakuri Park. Kevan Wilde, the

Waitomo Museum director led us around that beautiful path that takes you right through a natural tunnel. It was nice to see such a conservation area protected and to be freely enjoyed by all!

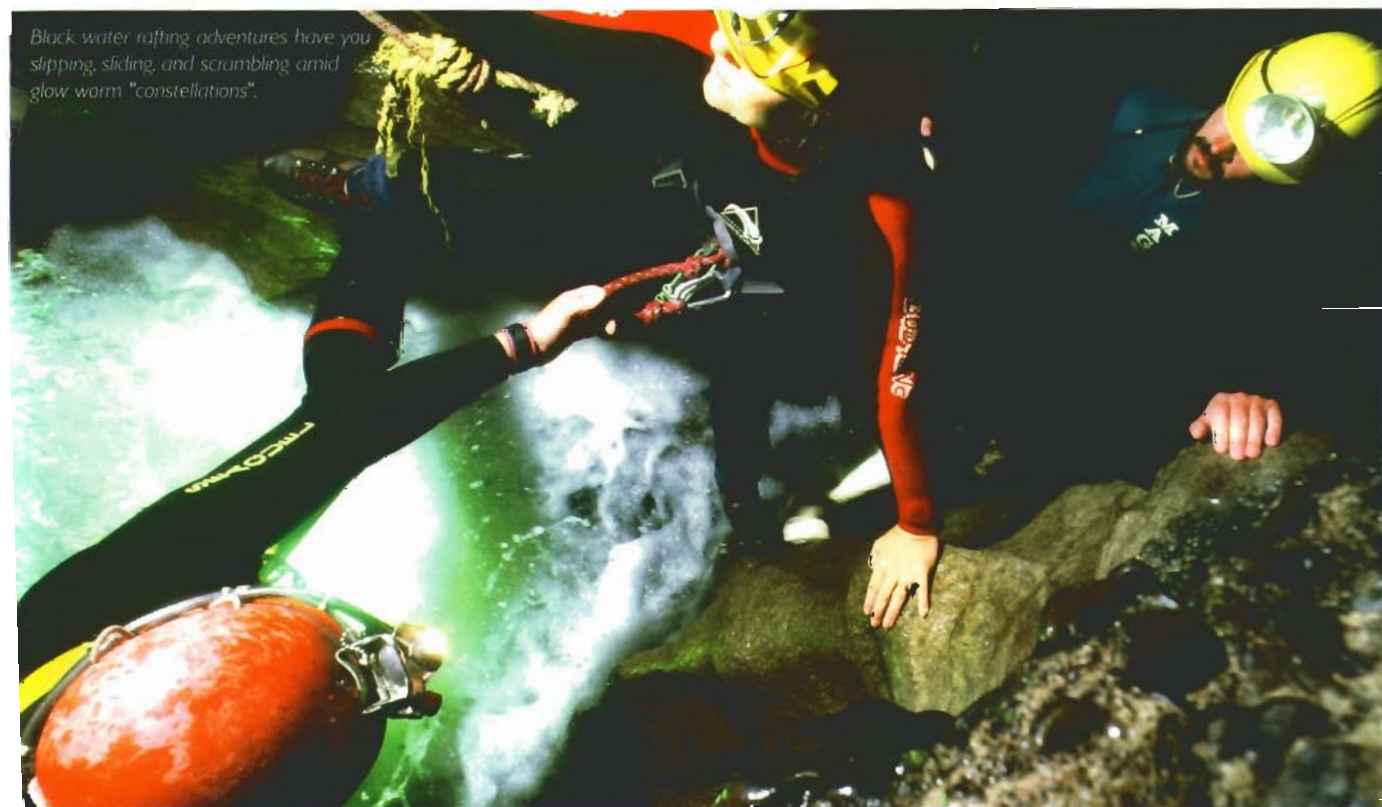
One place you can't miss is Woodlyn Park with the humorous and educative show of Billy Black. From the early days of the lumberjacks to farm animals, you will enjoy this great 1-hour one-man show! No, Billy Black is not a twin of Robin Williams, if you wonder!

If you look for very original accommodations, check his train and plane!

He has also the only place in NZ where you can drive your own jet boat. We had a blast racing in his special pond! And was Jackie not proud after beating me by 1/10 of a sec on the time race! Further, you can also visit the only Angora shearing shed we ever heard about! Lots of fun activities in a beautiful setting!

We were so glad that we had enough time to do and see what this area has to offer before continuing our journey to Rotorua and Taupo. But that's another story...

Luc Callebaut



Black water rafting adventures have you slipping, sliding, and scrambling amid glow worm "constellations".