

Introduction

Even though I am aware of the tectonic processes that create hot springs, it nevertheless seems like magic every time I encounter warm water gushing from the earth. It also amazes me that bathing is possible at so many of these springs and that they are often located in such unique and stunning settings. This is particularly true in New Zealand, where the springs surface in all manner of places and in an astonishing variety of forms. There are springs on the edge of crashing surf beaches, on offshore islands, in lush rainforests, beside pristine alpine streams, at the base of volcanoes, at the foot of glaciers, in the middle of farmers' fields, on the edge of world-class fishing lakes – need I go on?

These springs come in all shapes and sizes; about half of those listed in this book have been developed into commercial ventures, which include luxury spas, historic bathhouses, giant concrete pools, waterslides, natural lakeside pools, private mineral spas at a variety of camping grounds and motels, and even bubbling mud pools. Non-commercialised thermal bathing opportunities include rock-lined pools, steaming waterfalls, hot streams and lakes, do-it-yourself pools dug out of sandy beaches, recycled bathtubs and remnants of turn-of-the-century bathhouses. Just getting to a spring can be an adventure in itself; while the vast majority of the springs can be driven to, there are a few that can only be reached by boat or an overnight hike into the hills.

THE HISTORY OF HOT SPRINGS AND THEIR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The bliss of being enveloped in thermal water, along with its therapeutic benefits, has long been recognised. Two thousand years ago the Romans built magnificent spas at hot springs all over Europe and the Middle East, stretching from England to Palestine. New Zealand's thermal waters have been used by the Māori people for heating, cooking, bathing, therapy and rituals for at least 700 years. For Māori, geothermal features hold a spiritual significance, and their many uses are recognised as an integral part of Māori tradition. Rūaumoko is known as the god of earthquakes, volcanoes and hot springs. He's the unborn child of Papatūānuku

(mother earth) and Ranginui (father sky) who were torn apart by their son Tane, god of the forest. He creates rumblings from under the earth where he still resides inside his mother's womb.

A well-known legend tells how geothermal activity came to New Zealand. The navigator-priest Ngātoro-i-rangi was on the snow-clad summit of Mount Tongariro when he was overtaken by a storm. Unable to light a fire and almost freezing to death, he called on his sisters in Hawaiki for help. Carrying ahi tipua (sacred volcanic fire), the sisters travelled under the ocean, first to Whakaari (White Island), then inland past Awakeri, Rotorua, Tarawera, Orakei Korako, Taupō and Tokaanu, scattering ngawha (overflowing pools), puia (volcanoes, hot springs), waiariki (hot springs) and other thermal activity in their path. Then, as they reached Tongariro, they rose up through the mountain, creating a great fire to warm their brother.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of private entrepreneurs were offering commercialised thermal bathing. These often consisted of little more than a natural pool, sometimes lined with timber, with a small changing shed nearby. From the end of the century, the government began building thermal resorts all over the country as a means of generating revenue, after witnessing the success of health spas in Europe. From the 1920s onwards, the government's finance and commitment waned, and the dream of turning New Zealand into a South Seas spa never eventuated. This was due to a combination of factors, which included maintenance costs, the Depression, the Second World War, a change in spa philosophy and the country's geographical isolation. For a detailed historical account of the commercial development of New Zealand's thermal areas, see Ian Rockel's *Taking the Waters: Early Spas in New Zealand*.

A BRIEF SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION

Our planet's interior contains vast quantities of heat stored in its rock and magma. In a geothermal system, a fluid (usually originating as rainwater) collects that heat and transfers it from underground to the surface. New Zealand has an abundance of hot springs and other geothermal activity because it is located on the boundary of two of the earth's tectonic plates. In the northern part of New Zealand, the Pacific Plate is driven under the Indo-Australian Plate, giving rise to the geothermal activity known as 'high temperature systems', which are associated with active volcanism. This type of geothermal system is found in the central and northern parts of the North Island. The earth's crust is relatively thin in these locations and water percolates down from the surface and becomes heated by hot volcanic rock, such as a magma body. The heated waters interact chemically with the volcanic

rock, often becoming highly mineralised. The hot water is less dense than cold water and so rises to the surface through fractures in the overlying rocks. All of the springs in the South Island and many of the isolated North Island springs are classified as 'low temperature systems' and are associated with active faults or areas of extinct volcanism. Cold rainwater trickles down through the rocks to depths of up to five kilometres, is heated by warm rocks, then rises along channels such as faults, emerging at the surface as hot springs. In the South Island the springs are found mainly near the Alpine and Hope Faults. In the North Island the hot springs of the East Cape are the result of active faults, while those in the Waikato and the Coromandel are connected with areas of extinct volcanic activity.

HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

All the places listed in this book have thermal waters for bathing, with the exception of three in the North Island where water from other sources is geothermally heated and five non-geothermal bathing places in the South Island that I decided to include because there are no geothermal bathing options nearby. There are descriptions of 94 individual thermal springs, plus five separate 'accommodation' entries for Parakai, Tauranga, Rotorua, Taupō, and Tokaanu which include hotels, motels and campgrounds in each of these towns that have thermal pools available for the use of guests only. The non-commercial springs are those where 'Pool Hours' are not given. I have clearly specified the springs that require permission from landowners to visit.

ICONS

A variety of symbols indicating the price-range and clarifying access have been introduced to this edition.



Free



Up to \$15 per adult



Between \$15 and \$25 per adult



Over \$25 per adult

Note: Prices are always subject to change. Some springs offer discounts to 'locals' as well as season passes.

**Wheelchair accessible**

(this usually means a ramped and railed entry or a chair hoist/lift)

**Hiking required****Can only be reached by boat.****Requires advance permission from landowners to visit****PRECAUTIONS**

Always test the water before getting in, as hot springs have been known to change suddenly and a pool that was a perfect temperature one day may be way too hot the next. Be aware that prolonged immersion in hot water can result in hyperthermia, an elevated core body temperature. Early warning signs include a slow pulse and faintness. To avoid most heat-related problems limit your continuous exposure to hot water, avoid all drugs and drink plenty of fluids. People with a history of heart disease, high or low blood pressure, or who are pregnant should consult their doctor prior to bathing in hot springs. Sunglasses, a hat and sunscreen are essential items – New Zealand’s sun might not be as hot as elsewhere but it burns quickly, especially when you are in and around water. Biting sandflies can be a problem during daylight hours at some of the South Island hot springs. Some people opt for insect repellent but I recommend hiking in long sleeves and leggings. Out of consideration for others and the environment, please don’t douse yourself in insect repellent before getting into a hot pool.

Although I tend to bathe barefoot and have had no problems, wearing sandals in non-commercial pools can be a good idea to protect feet from potential hot spots (and sadly the occasional piece of broken glass). I have mentioned within the text those few springs where I’d strongly advise footwear.

Amoebic meningitis is a very serious illness that is sometimes associated with hot springs. The good news is that it is extremely rare (there has only been one confirmed case of amoebic meningitis since the 1970s and it’s suspected that many New Zealanders have a natural immunity to this organism). The amoeba organism can only enter the body when water is forced up the nasal passage – you can protect yourself against contracting the illness simply by not putting your head under water. The pools most likely to contain amoeba are those that are unlined and surrounded by exposed earth, as the organism usually lives in warm soil. These amoeba cannot survive in chlorinated pools. All told, you’re safer in a thermal pool than on the road.

THE DRESS CODE

In many cultures, including Māori, communal bathing traditionally takes place in a state of total undress. These days, swimming costumes must be worn in all the public pools at commercial springs. Many commercial springs have strict policies about what constitutes swimwear and don't allow t-shirts or other street clothes to be worn in the pools. At the non-commercial springs it's a matter of personal preference, and if you're discreet and sensible then what you're wearing (or not wearing) in a hot pool should not be an issue. Those first at the springs usually have the prerogative, and if you arrive at a hot pool and don't want to join the skinnydippers (or chunkydunkers!) then wait until they're finished or go to another spring. Alternatively, if you're a dyed-in-the-wool skinnydipper and you arrive to find a group wearing swimsuits you can, a) ask if anyone minds that you don't have a swimsuit, b) make a concession and let your underwear double as togs, c) wait until they're finished, or d) find another spring. Generally the rule is that the more remote and unknown a spring the more common it is for people to skinnydip there. From my observations, hot springers in New Zealand tend to be very courteous towards each other and don't seem to clash over bathing attire.

It is perfectly legal to bathe nude in a non-commercial hot spring. A person would have to be making a nuisance of themselves or acting obscenely before the police would become involved in a dispute over someone choosing to bathe au naturel at a non-commercial hot spring.

GUIDELINES FOR VISITING NON-COMMERCIAL HOT SPRINGS ON PRIVATE PROPERTY

I owe a debt of gratitude to the farmers who consented to having their hot springs included in this guide. As with any spring, some commonsense rules apply to ensure everyone has a safe and enjoyable soak, while respecting the rights of those who are lucky enough to own these springs and who have generously agreed to share them with us.

- First and foremost, permission to visit any of these hot springs must be obtained in advance. Be aware that access may be denied for a wide variety of farm management reasons (i.e. lambing, mustering, high fire risk, etc.).
- Visits to these hot springs are restricted to daylight hours.
- No large groups (e.g. tour buses).
- No pets.
- No camping or fires.
- No glass or alcohol, all rubbish to be carried out.
- Gates must be left as found, and stock disturbance must be minimal.
- You enter these properties and their hot springs entirely at your own risk.

HIKING INTO HOT SPRINGS

Hiking (tramping/trekking) is a popular outdoor pursuit in New Zealand, and what could be more perfect after a long walk into the wilderness than the reward of immersing your weary bones in a hot pool nestled in a sublime alpine setting. New Zealand's remote springs, which are confined mainly to the South Island, can usually be accessed all year round, but during the winter months extra precautions, equipment and levels of experience are required. I have graded the walking tracks as easy/moderate/difficult, but it is important to note that individual levels of experience and fitness should also be taken into account (what might be easy for one person can be difficult for another). The walking times are averages only, and do not include time taken for stops along the way. When giving directions, 'true left' and 'true right' refers to the side of the watercourse when facing downstream.

Essential hiking items include waterproof clothing, warm clothes, sleeping bag, tramping boots, cooker, spare food and a medical kit. Also bring along a GPS unit and/or a topographical map, taking note of the springs' coordinates if they're not already marked on the map. Leaving clear intentions is important, so before setting off let someone reliable know where you're going and when you'll be returning (intention form template can be found at www.mountainsafety.org.nz). New Zealand weather changes quickly and is highly unpredictable – you can expect the best but also be prepared for the worst, as it is not uncommon for people to be stranded by rising creeks and washed out bridges.

I have specified which huts are private, but any others mentioned in this guide are Department of Conservation (DOC) huts. To stay in a DOC hut you need to purchase hut tickets (or an annual hut pass) in advance from any DOC office. Some outdoor stores and many i-SITE information centres also sell tickets (full list given on www.doc.govt.nz).

MAPS

The main topographical hiking maps referred to are the NZ Topo50 series by Land Information New Zealand (LINZ). Online versions of these maps can be accessed (and printed) for free at www.linz.govt.nz using the 'mapchooser' feature on the topographical maps page.

NEW ZEALAND ENVIRONMENTAL CARE CODE

Protect plants and animals

Treat New Zealand's forest plants and birds with care and respect. They are unique and often rare.

Remove rubbish

Litter is unattractive, harmful to wildlife and can increase vermin and disease. Plan your visits to reduce rubbish and carry out what you carry in.

Bury toilet waste

In areas without toilet facilities, bury your toilet waste in a shallow hole well away from waterways, tracks, campsites and huts. This helps to prevent the spread of giardia.

Keep streams and lakes clean

When cleaning and washing, take the water and wash well away from the water source. Because soaps and detergents are harmful to water-life, drain used water into the soil to allow it to be filtered. If you suspect water may be contaminated, either boil it for at least three minutes, filter it, or chemically treat it before drinking.

Take care with fires

Portable fuel stoves are less harmful to the environment and more efficient than wood fires. If you do use a fire, keep it small, use only dead wood and make sure it is out by dousing it with water and checking the ashes before leaving.

Camp carefully

When camping, leave no trace of your visit.

Keep to the track

By keeping to the track, where one exists, you lessen the chance of damaging fragile plants.

Consider others

People visit the backcountry and rural areas for many reasons. Be considerate of other visitors who also have the right to enjoy the natural environment.

Respect our cultural heritage

Many places in New Zealand have spiritual and historical significance. Treat these places with consideration and respect.

Enjoy your visit

Enjoy your outdoor experience. Take a last look before leaving an area; will the next visitor know that you have been there?

Toitū te whenua

Leave the land undisturbed.



Kerosene Creek [Courtesy of Heather Crawford]

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have attempted to include the vast majority of New Zealand's hot springs where bathing is possible and public access is permitted. If you know of a spring that you think ought to have been included, drop me a line at hotspringsofnz@hotmail.com and I will let you know the reason for its omission – I may not have been given consent by the landowners, may have deemed it too arduous to reach, or perhaps I simply failed to find it! I'd also appreciate any corrections, as hot springs do alter over time, and their ownership and access may also change (plus there's always the odd dash of author fallibility). At the end of the day I hope this guidebook ends up helping you get into a whole lot more hot water as opposed to barking up the wrong tree!

Happy soaking...