

Taupo

The water's not all in the lake but neither are the attractions, finds **Miriyana Alexander**.



Grandstand: Acacia Cliffs Lodge, perched high above Lake Taupo.

Is there anything better than being in the hot pools while it rains? Yes, as it happens: getting a massage in the spa afterwards.

Friday, 6pm: We've probably picked the wettest weekend of the winter to visit Taupo, but right now we couldn't care less. We're perched high on a hill at gorgeous Acacia Cliffs Lodge, an upmarket B&B built by Linda and Rick Whitlock. The fire's on, the wine's poured and we're watching the clouds roll over the lake. Mesmerising.

10pm: We may never eat again. Rick is a chef and tonight's four-course feast was ace. The red pepper, chorizo and coconut soup was so perfect I hit him up for the recipe, and the pasta (walnut and leek with a blue-cheese sauce) and lamb so tasty my dessert plans were thwarted (I managed only a bite of hubby's lemon tart).

Saturday, 10am: The only time I'm keen on mud is when the words chocolate and cake are included in the sentence. But that's not the kind you'll find at John Sutton's Taupo Quad Bikes, about 20km north of the town, which offers everything from one-hour to day-long safaris in the surrounding hill country. We've had the safety briefing and, because it's still hosing down, have thrown on the wet-weather gear.

10.30am: What's the difference

between the brakes and the throttle? Turns out I'm not the one to ask. As hubby comes over the hill he sees me wiping mud from my helmet: John and I resolve that what goes on tour stays on tour. Hubby's having a ball, racing off ahead, but the hairy start has knocked my confidence, so I drive John's bike as he sits with me, talking me through the trails – lower gear, higher gear, brake, give it more power, no brakes (are you sure?), all the while telling stories about the beautiful native bush we're hooning through. Finally my nerves are calmed and some exhilaration sneaks in. Bless him.

11.30am: The rain and makeup run down my face but I'm kind of pleased as we return to base: I felt the fear and did it anyway. I'll be feeling the bruises for a bit longer.

1pm: I was so wrong about the eating. Not only did we pack away a fabulous brekkie at Acacia Cliffs Lodge, we now find ourselves at L'Arte, a cafe and gallery on the Acacia Bay side of the lake, acclaimed by *Lonely Planet* (which makes getting a table that much harder). It's tucked away in a garden scattered with the work of resident artist Judi Brennan, and my favourite is the mosaic living

room. We scoff fish pie, salad and coffee then visit the gallery where I buy a gorgeous red pottery dress. No, not to wear: to hang on the wall.

2pm: There's time for a quick lie down back at the lodge. Our heavenly super-king bed faces the floor-to-ceiling windows, and the weather provides another wild show. I make a cuppa and discover a tasty new tea from American blenders Harney & Sons. I swear their hot cinnamon spice is the best tea I've tasted. It's the little things that make a moment perfect.

3pm: Is there anything better than being in the hot pools while it rains? Yes, as it happens: getting a massage in the spa afterwards. Gill and Kylie work their magic and we leave Taupo Hot Springs with dazed looks on our dials. Relaxed? We're almost horizontal.

6.30pm: Another night, another fabulous dinner. This time at Huka Lodge, hideaway to the stars: previous guests include the Queen, actress Kate Winslet, songbird Barbra Streisand and tycoons Rupert Murdoch and Bill Gates. (It says so on the lodge website). Tonight seems celeb-free, but I do run into a former colleague having a birthday treat. We nab a spot in front of the fire and test-drive the

Fact file

Where to stay:

Acacia Cliffs Lodge, 133 Mapara Rd, Acacia Bay, ph (07) 378-1551, www.acaciACLIFFSLodge.co.nz

Where to eat:

Huka Lodge, 271 Huka Falls Rd, ph (07) 378-5791, www.hukalodge.co.nz
L'Arte, 255 Marapa Rd, Acacia Bay, ph (07) 378-2962, www.larte.co.nz

What to do:

Taupo Quad Bikes, 1475 SH1, ph (07) 377-6404, www.taupoquads.co.nz
Taupo Hot Springs, Napier-Taupo Highway, ph (07) 377-6502, www.taupohotsprings.com
www.laketapuonZ.com



canapes (cheesy croquettes and lobster blinis). Verdict? We're in for a treat.

7.30pm: Dinner is served at private tables around the lodge, and we're in the study. Again we eat to excess: potato and leek soup; oysters for him and crispy tofu for me; gurnard for him and out of this world pasta with a mushroom ragout for me. Tonight I force myself (yeah, right) to eat dessert, a decadent warm chocolate pudding. Back at Acacia Cliffs Lodge we sleep the sleep of the well fed.

10am: The weather hasn't been kind to us this weekend and we decide to take a rain-check on the Sunday brunch cruise as fog means low visibility on the lake. Besides, we couldn't eat another thing.

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