

Waitomo has the

WOW FACTOR

Laurel Watson has a jam-packed weekend in Waitomo.



Whether you are looking for adrenaline-pumping adventure or serene yet spectacular scenery, Waitomo is a 'must visit' destination.

With a population of just over 40 permanent residents, you'd think this would be a sleepy little speck on the map – not so! Waitomo is packed with surprises.

Here is a rundown of things to see and do in wonderful Waitomo:

Glow-worms! These tiny little beasts are what have made Waitomo famous and rightly so. There is something so magical about gliding silently down a river in the pitch black, gazing up at a constellation of tiny lights.

We took the Spellbound tour to escape the bus groups which dominate the main caves, and enjoyed a small (maximum of 12 people), boutique and personalised tour with our incredibly knowledgeable (and funny) guide Norm, who also handled the young kids on our trip really well.

Our tour took about three hours and was a very easy adventure that would be suitable for everyone, including families with small children.

On Spellbound tours you spend 30-40 minutes under the glow-worms and this allows time for your eyes to adjust to the darkness. During the raft ride your night vision begins working and you will be amazed at how much you can actually see throughout this part of the tour – the effect of thousands of softly shining glow-worms is actually spellbinding.

The glow-worms are interesting as well as beautiful, and Norm showed us their life-cycle stages as we watched them move about and saw them use their silken fishing lines to catch prey.

After a warming cuppa and biscuits in Norm's rugged 'café' (ask him for a cappuccino for a real treat!), we took a gentle walk along a gorge path which took us to the Cave of the Spirit, Te Ana o te Atua. Soft lighting and gentle paths have provided a wonderful way to experience this quiet and contemplative cave. The natural formations, including stalagmites and stalactites, are always impressive but the "coolest" thing, according to the children, was seeing the skeleton of a long-lost moa.

I would wholeheartedly recommend this tour to everybody – just gorgeous.

And then, luckily, it was time for an early dinner, and directly opposite the Spellbound drop-off point is HUHU Café. What a find! This place is that rare and wonderful mixture of welcoming casualness paired with a fantastic menu packed full of the freshest local produce.

When we arrived we were slightly damp and the children were hungry. The service was immediate and when the hot chocolates arrived adorned with a chocolate dipped parfait spoon with a very large marshmallow attached, the oohs and aahs were audible, but the kids soon succumbed to a satisfied silence!

The menu, created by chef Andy Rawles, is deceptive in its simplicity – the flavours are delicious and robust but there is nothing unsophisticated here.

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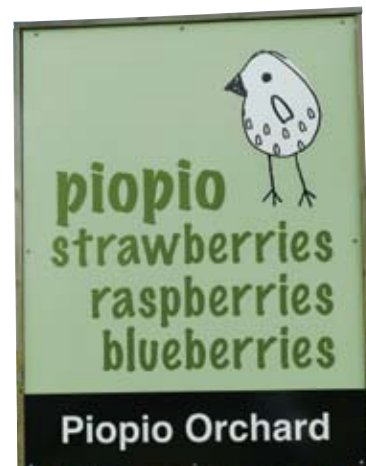


A great menu, a comprehensive wine list, warm, friendly and extremely efficient service make this a must if you are visiting anywhere close. I think it will be on our list of detours off Highway One from here on in.

I ended up having a great chat to the owner of HUHUCafé, Bruce Maunsell, who offered to take me to see a couple of the suppliers used by the cafe.

The first place we visited was the organic veggie patch of Karen Jones. Karen comes from a family of market gardeners and decided to give it a go herself, but this time using organic growing principles. The result is a delightful garden full of flowers and vegetables which Andy uses on his menu. The vegetables are literally picked the morning he orders them and the menu changes to take advantage of what's best in her garden on the day. Karen also makes a range of yummy pickles from surplus vegetables under the label 'Naked Spreads'. These are organic, homemade and very tasty.

Next, we visited the Piopio Orchard and I went into berry heaven – huge punnets of fresh, delicious, late-growing raspberries for just \$15 and the best



blueberries I have ever tasted, plump and unbelievably tasty, but I have been assured that its strawberries are even better! Unfortunately they were out of season, so I will have to come back to the King Country for them, as the berry farm is so popular that it can only grow enough beautiful berries to sell directly from the farm gate.

Pilgrim's Organics beef farm in Te Angra is another example of the superb product that HUUH Café is able to source within a small area. This is truly a fantastic spot for foodies. And still yet another find in Waitomo was the Top 10 Holiday Park. This is great accommodation at a great price. The hotel room we stayed in was clean and bright and came with everything you could need for self-catering (although, why would you with HUUH Café right next door?).

The park has a big swimming pool and heated spa, and a huge play area for kids with a jungle gym, two trampolines and swings galore. There were even baby bunnies hopping over the grass to enchant my city-slicker children. The park has many different types of accommodation from hotel rooms to cabins to camp and camper van sites, so however you get to Waitomo, you can pull up here and enjoy a beautifully maintained park-like setting with all the 'mod cons'.

Since Waitomo is also famous for its adventure tourism, I very generously allowed my husband Mark, instead of me, to try out black-water rafting while I took the children on a gentler outing.

Waitomo Adventures whisked him away for four hours of Waitomo's most concentrated action adventure. Apparently it's a bit like *Indiana Jones* in a washing machine.

Mark did a series of abseils and rock climbs, crawled through tight spaces in the dark and cruised along an underground river in a tube exploring the cave and watching glow-worms. This trip is called the Haggas Honking Holes and is extremely popular, so it pays to book ahead.

The experience was apparently very exciting, fast moving and challenging, in a good way. This is an adventure that

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crams lots of action into only four hours! The website advises: “Participants should be fit and brave but no prior experience is required.” And remember to take your sense of humour into the cave as the guides have lots of fun with you.

I, on the other hand, took the kids to see angora bunnies being shorn. These creatures are amazing and as they are shorn every six weeks, they are the most laid-back bunnies I’ve ever encountered. There are lots of angora goodies on sale and you can also see the wool being spun into yarn. You will find the shop in a red barn on the way into Waitomo – stop, it’s worth a look.

Then we were off to do the Ruakuri bush walk which starts in a scenic reserve close to the main Aranui Cave. This is one of the many stunning bush walks in the area, and in just half an hour we descended into an ancient sink hole, walked through limestone caves, watched the black-water rafters appear out of one of the caves along the river and enjoyed the beauty of the native bush. This is a really achievable walk to do with primary-aged children (who have the energy to bound up the many stairs involved), and the interesting and informative notes scattered along the walk made for great reading.

After picking up my rather pale-faced husband from his adventure, we had one last trip to HUHU Café for those wonderful hot chocolates. Then we said goodbye to Waitomo, having had one of the most enjoyable, adventurous, fun-filled and, most of all, delicious family trips ever.

In my opinion this is a holiday every Kiwi should experience.

Chef Andy Rawles kindly shared a couple of his dishes with us so that you can whip up some Waitomo Wow in your kitchen.



USEFUL WEBSITES TO VISIT BEFORE YOU GO:

www.waitomo.org.nz
www.huhucafe.co.nz
www.glowworm.co.nz
www.waitomopark.co.nz
www.waitomo.co.nz (for black-water rafting)



HUHU CAFÉ ROAST SUMMER VEGETABLES WITH BABA GANOUSH & LAVASH

2 aubergines, 1 sliced, 1 whole
 2 courgettes, sliced
 3 capsicums, various colours, cut into quarters
 1 red onion, cut into wedges
 1 Tbsp tahini
 juice of ½ lemon
 2 cloves garlic
 olive oil
 salt and pepper
 100g haloumi cheese

TO MAKE THE BABA GANOUSH:

Preheat the oven to 200°C.
 Charrill the whole aubergine in a very hot pan until black and very charred. Bake until mushy and very soft. Cool, peel and purée in a blender.
 Add the garlic and tahini, and mix well.
 Add lemon juice, and salt and pepper to taste.
 Slowly add the olive oil while blending until thick and creamy.

TO COOK THE VEGETABLES:

Charrill the remaining sliced aubergine, onion, courgettes and capsicum in a very hot pan with a little olive oil until cooked, about five minutes, and then set aside.

TO COOK THE HALOUMI CHEESE:

Cut the cheese into wedges.
 Grill in a very hot pan until golden brown on each side.
 Serve while warm.

LAVASH (MIDDLE-EASTERN CRISP BREAD)

500g flour
 250ml water
 50ml clarified butter
 olive oil
 sea salt

Preheat the oven to 160°C.
 Place the flour on a clean bench and make a well in centre of the flour.
 Pour the water into the well and add the softened butter.
 Slowly mix the water into the flour until the dough comes together in rough ball.
 Roll the dough through a pasta machine until about the thickness of a \$2 coin. Alternatively, roll the dough out with a rolling pin, but this will take a bit more effort.
 Cut the dough into wedge shapes.
 Brush the dough with oil and add a sprinkling of sea salt.
 Bake for 10–15 minutes until a light golden colour.
 Remove from the oven, allow to cool and store in an airtight container.

TO SERVE THE DISH:

Put a large spoonful of baba ganoush on the centre of a dinner plate.
 Arrange the vegetables around and over the baba ganoush.
 Sprinkle the haloumi over the vegetables.
 Add two pieces of lavash on top and serve.

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BLUEBERRY TART WITH ALMOND TOPPING

This tart can be made the same way using seasonal fruits such as plums and apricots.

TART PASTRY:

900g plain flour
560g salted butter, chilled
4 tpsps caster sugar
4 eggs
10 Tbsps water

Sift the flour, add the sugar and mix thoroughly.

Dice the cold butter.

Cut the butter into the flour and blend until the mix looks like breadcrumbs.

Mix the egg yolks and water together, then add to the flour, stir until just combined, don't over mix.

Knead lightly to a smooth dough.

Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for an hour.

When chilled, roll out the pastry and line either a large loose-bottomed tart tin or individual loose-bottomed tart tins with pastry. Prick the bottoms with a fork and then place in the freezer for 15 minutes.

Preheat the oven to 180°C and then blind bake the tart shells until just starting to colour, about 10-15 minutes. Remove from the oven and set aside.

ALMOND MIXTURE:

150g butter
150g sugar
2 eggs
100g ground almonds
150g sliced almonds

Soften butter to room temperature, add the sugar and beat until pale and creamy, about 5 minutes.

Add the eggs, one at a time and continue beating.

Add the almonds and stir through the mixture.

Cover and set aside.

BLUEBERRY MIXTURE:

1 cup blueberries
3 Tbsps sugar
2 tpsps cornflour
2 cups blueberries extra

Place the first cup of blueberries in a small saucepan and sweeten to taste (approximately 3 Tbsps sugar). Bring the fruit to the boil and then turn the temperature down a little and simmer until reduced by about a quarter. Mix together 2 tpsps of cornflour and 2 tpsps of water to a smooth paste. Add to the blueberry mixture and cook until thickened.

Add the remaining 2 cups of blueberries to the pan and remove from the heat. Set aside.

TO FINISH THE TARTS:

Preheat the oven to 200°C.

Fill the tart shell with berry mix. Spread the top with the almond mix. Bake in the oven until the almond mix is cooked and the berries are heated through, approximately 15 minutes.

Serve with a scoop of good quality ice cream. ■



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