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On a roll in New Zealand

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By Andrea Kitay
McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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ROTORUA, New Zealand The weather here in the North Island town of Rotorua, ground zero for New Zealand's mind-blowing extreme sports, is confused. As this little mecca sheds its heavy gray mantle of winter – the summer months in North America – both passing spring showers and bursts of sunshine mark the days until the start of the busy summer season. And as the nation's high-octane sports operators ramp up, I trek half way around the world for a taste of New Zealand's finest.

Nope, I'm not here for a succulent rack of lamb or even a cut of the heavenly grass-fed Angus beef for which this New Zealand is renowned. It's action I'm after as I work down an ever-evolving bucket list of the world's most daft adventures. I'm here for the zorbing.

Say what? Visualize those round, hamster-sized balls that give critters a chance to enjoy cage-free exercise without becoming the family feline's snack. Now supersize that. Add a little warm water, a couple of human beings and a shallow slope, and you have zorbing. And, as I discover on a freakishly green slope overlooking Lake Rotorua, it's one of the most riotous rides in the Southern Hemisphere.

I suppose I could have found any old zorbing location. After all, the "sport" went viral after its inauguration back in the 1990s when Forrest Gump was waxing on about boxes of chocolate. But after confirming the scuttlebutt surrounding bizarre zorbing accidents in a quick YouTube search, it became clear that only the best – and safest – experience would do.

"We make it look edgy, sexy and dangerous," International Sales & Marketing Manager Melissa Craig explains as we stand in OGO's lively lobby, surrounded by jazzed-up, colorful images of the spheres in play. "Behind the scenes, though, it's pretty boring and very safe. New Zealand has strict health and safety laws, and we take them seriously."

Slideshow

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DAN KITAY - MCT

For these two visitors from the United Kingdom, a ride in an H2OGO feels like being in a washing machine on agitate.

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MORE INFORMATION

BOUNDING ALONG

Info on OGO Rotorua: www.ogo.co.nz. There are also two satellite locations in the United States that operate during summer months. One is in Lewisberry, Pa. (<http://bit.ly/1cwMgDk>); the other is in Logan, Ohio (<http://bit.ly/1bXk9Uy>).

GETTING THERE: Ogo Rotorua is about 140 miles from New Zealand's North Island airport of Auckland and is best reached by rental car.

INFO: Details on visiting New Zealand: www.newzealand.com.

CLOSER TO HOME: Zorb Smoky Mountain, in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. (<http://bit.ly/18x12L3>)

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The first zorbs were created by a couple of wacky New Zealanders, Dwane van der Sluis and Andrew Akers. Akers has since joined forces with his brother David and their business partner, Chris Roberts, to retool – and rename – that simple inflatable ball.

Now called Outdoor Gravity Orbs, or OGOs, the human spheres come equipped with harnesses and can be ridden alone (IGO) or with a friend (WEGO). Then there's the water-oriented H2OGO, whose dual hull with 6-foot inner sphere is what I'm most interested in. Admittedly, if I were a bona fide thrill seeker I'd opt for the real deal, the high-tech IGO.

The original-style rides, IGO and WEGO, are more of a commitment to physics. Think the whirling teacups at Disneyland. As the ball rolls the length of nearly three football fields down a straight incline, you move like the Mad Hatter surveying the world from a hamster's-eye view. Dramamine, anyone?

Let's try it out

I'm standing on the top of the 17-acre property's track in shorts and T-shirt as our athletic "ball engineer" prepares our H2OGO for launch.

"Time to go, ladies!" she jokes as I dive through a small hole into the ball's shallow pool of warm water. There's no stopping the sloshing, and as my partner follows, we slip and slide in unpredictable directions before we've even deployed.

A few snapshots of us peering through the hole as she zips it up, and we're off. I can see why riders say it feels like being in a gently moving waterfall. I would add it is closer to being in a washing machine stuck on agitate. At any time our legs are shooting up in the air, facing downhill, then suddenly back uphill while we constantly and unintentionally switch positions. I wonder if practice makes this more ... sane.

As we roll, twist and splash our way around the ball and into each other for what feels like the longest ride in Middle Earth, I shriek with laughter. While the complete loss of control might normally freak me out, knowing the site's commitment to safety makes it easier to give in and let 'er rip. What's not to love?

Soaking wet after a second go on the Sidewinder, a slower ride that follows a winding course as it veers from left to right and back again, we head to the hot tub. From our warm perch we watch as balls spin down the hill, the faint sound of roaring laughter barely audible over the spa's bubbles.

Akers wanders by to see how the rides went. "We now concentrate on creating the greatest ball-rolling experiences for our customers," he tells me – PR-speak for "I have the best ride around." A quick-witted devotee of physics, athletics and that nebulous art – or is it a science? – of experiences, he recommends "The Experience Economy" by Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, a must-read for the consummate venture, he informs me.

The effects of adding weight in the sphere aren't lost on Akers. "The OGO has all the real-world stuff – friction on the ground, friction with the air. With extra weight, there's less friction from the air slowing it down, so the net is it'll go a little bit faster," he explains rapid-fire.

Zorbing has mimicked the trajectory of bungee jumping, another high-octane sport developed by enterprising Kiwis, and there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. In fact, interest in zorbing is growing as next-generation iterations are introduced, resetting the bar on the madcap world of adventure activities.

A draw for boomers?

At OGO Rotorua, between 15,000 and 20,000 annual guests figure a run in a makeshift hamster ball might be good fun. The majority are international travelers – New Zealand is farming country and most Kiwis I've talked with shrug off their countrymen's tryst with the less-than-practical much the way they do an afternoon rain: "Whatever."

But before you reckon this sport is just for the hale and hearty, think again. As boomers occupy a larger piece of the travel pie, OGO Rotorua is seeing a corresponding growth among this

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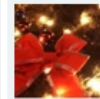
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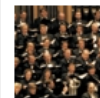
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demographic – retired folks whose travels with extended family often bring the whole group for a sloppy ride down a long hill in the land of Hobbits and Orks. With an annual growth rate of around 20 percent a year, Akers is already scheming about the next best.

"We're planning a massive, straight, very fast OGO track from the top of our hill," he says. "At the moment we have maybe three or four people chicken out at the launch point for the OGO each year. With our 'Big Momma' track we think 25 percent of the people will freak out at the top!"

Ah, the sweet sound of success.

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