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NEW ZEALAND

Water-filled zorb keeps the good times rolling



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DAN KITAY | M CCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

An employee moves a water-filled zorb back up the hill.

IF YOU GO

Zorbing in New Zealand

Ogo Rotorua is about 140 miles from New Zealand's north island airport of Auckland and is best reached by rental car.

For information on OGO Rotorua, visit www.ogo.co.nz or send email to info@ogo.co.nz. There are also two satellite locations in the United States that operate during summer months. For more information, visit www.skiroundtop.com/mt-adventures and www.hockingpeaks.com/#logoballs/cun

By **Andrea Kitay**

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ROTORUA, New Zealand — As I work down an ever-evolving bucket list of the world's most daft adventures, I'm in the north island town of Rotorua to try zorbing.

Say what? Visualize the round balls that give hamsters a chance to enjoy cage-free exercise without becoming the family cat's snack. Then 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 in the 1990s.

But the first zorbs were created by a couple of New Zealanders, Dwane van der Sluis and Andrew Akers. Akers has since joined forces with his

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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 or with a friend. Then there's the water-oriented orb, whose dual hull with a 6-foot inner sphere is what I'm most interested in.

As the ball rolls the length of almost three football fields down a straight incline, the rider moves like the Mad Hatter surveying the world from a hamster's-eye view. Dramamine, anyone?

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 water orb 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.

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.

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.

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. Interest in zorbing is growing as next-generation iterations are introduced, resetting the bar on the madcap world of adventure activities.

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.

As baby boomers occupy a larger piece of the travel pie, OGO Rotorua is seeing a corresponding growth among this demographic — retired folks whose travels with extended family often bring the whole group for a ride.

And, as the business continues to grow, Akers is already scheming about the next best idea.

"We're planning," he says, "a massive, straight, very fast OGO track from the top of our hill."



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