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EXTREME SPORTS

Zip up for New Zealand's zaniest adventure: zorbing

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The green pastures of Rotorua, New Zealand, are home to inventor Andrew Akers' next-generation zorbs. Dan Kitay / MCT

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ZORBING

OGO Rotorua: www.ogo.co.nz or info@ogo.co.nz. There are also two satellite locations in the United States that operate during summer months, in Lewisberry, Penn., (www.skiroundtop.com/mt-adventures) and Hocking Peaks, Ohio (www.hockingpeakspark.com/#!ogoballs/cuuo).

BY ANDREA KITAY
MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

The weather here in the north island town of Rotorua, ground zero for New Zealand's mind-blowing extreme sports, is as confused as a June bug in July. As this little mecca sheds its heavy gray mantle of winter, 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 halfway 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 island nation 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. But after researching zorbing accidents, it became clear that only the best — and safest — experience would do.

"We make it look edgy, sexy and dangerous," Melissa Craig, sales and marketing manager, 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."

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 are more of a commitment to physics. Think of 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?


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 zipped up and deployed.

I can see why riders say it feels like being in a gently moving waterfall, but 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.



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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.

Zorbing has mimicked the trajectory of bungee jumping, another high-octane sport developed by enterprising Kiwis, and there doesn't seem to be

operate during summer months, in Lewisberry, Penn., (www.skiroundtop.com/mt-adventures) and Hocking Peaks, Ohio (www.hockingpeakspark.com/#!/ogoballs/cuuo).

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.

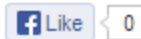
At OGO Rotorua, between 15,000 and 20,000 annual guests figure a run in a makeshift hamster ball might be good fun. The majority are international travelers — New Zealand is farming country and most Kiwis I've talked with shrug off their countrymen's tryst with the less-than-practical much the way they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