

A Manawatu for all seasons

By MARIKA HILL - The Dominion Post Last updated 09:59 27/01/2010

It's like a choice between a reasonably good three-course meal at a city restaurant or firing up the steak on the barbie in your ultimate Kiwi backyard. And when you've got a weekend break from Wellington, it's a tough choice.

The Travelodge Palmerston North has your hotel sparkles and business necessities covered. Boulder Lodge, out of town and under the mountains, offers the ultimate rural retreat.

Snuggled into the base of the Ruahine ranges, two hours' drive from Wellington, Boulder Lodge whispers escapism. But there's a catch - there's no electricity. Will this mean freezing river baths and bed by sundown?

The lack of power actually has its benefits. There's no temptation to flick on the telly or switch on the laptop, marking a return to the pre-electronics times of conversation. There's also no need to go smelly. Gas heats the shower and powers the stove and there's even a fridge. Best of all is the fire-heated bath under the stars.

The 12-year-old self-catering lodge offers plenty of choice: gas or fire barbecue; bunk or king-size bed; mountain biking or reading on the porch.

It sleeps up to 14 travellers, and includes a bunk room and double room in the lodge, plus double and twin cabins. It's all or nothing when hiring, meaning no bumping into strangers.

I'm not used to stepping over dead animals, but the deer skin rugs and possum fur fit with the lodge's ethos of capturing the pioneer essence. The owners are happy to organise a hunting trip, and judging by the noises on my roof, there's plenty of pesky possums.

There's nowhere for the kids to plug in the PlayStation but bikes, mountain golf, volleyball, walks and hunting are catered for in your backyard. And if the conversation gets dull, you can fall back on the board games and books.

Did I mention there's no cellphone coverage? This is the sort of break where you leave work and responsibilities at home.

One the other hand, Travelodge not only has electricity, but also internet, phone, restaurant, bars and room service.

General manager Gill Ishwinder says the focus is on good food, good service and good, clean rooms. "There's no fluffy, fancy stuff, we just want to get the basic things right," he says. And that's what you'll get.

Although the mid-range hotel is marketed to corporate clients, an eclectic mix of people sift through the doors on the Friday night I'm staying.

In the hotel restaurant, called Nosh, an elderly party, donned with Christmas paper hats, wander out with festive smiles. A pilot and his flight crew swoop in to check in, while workmates drink away their working week in the bar.

But the best is yet to come. Peppermint massage oil wafts down the hall, as the room next to mine reveals half-naked blokes getting massages. This spectacle isn't guaranteed for all guests though - I've timed my stay right with the Phoenix and Sydney FC footballers in town for a game.

The 85 rooms vary in size, from your basic room with bed, television and bathroom, up to the sophisticated heritage rooms.

An old-style gated lift carries guests to the heritage tower. The 20 heritage rooms have been recently decorated with new duvets, carpet, flat screen television, wooden stand-alone wardrobes, and flowers. They manage to hit the mark of hotel elegance.

A good shower is vital when I stay at hotels, and Travelodge doesn't disappoint. The pressure and heat are easily adjustable and I love how there's a reminder of the breakfast hours hanging in the shower.

If you fancy a night in, there's the standard television channels plus sky sport, movies, trackside and news. Travelodge also has two bars, a restaurant and pokie machines, all open seven nights week.

I'm a bit disappointed with the buffet breakfast. Although the selection is good and service friendly, the hash browns are soggy and the hot chocolate machine spits out hot water.

You really do get what you pay for at the Travelodge. There's no concierge: you'll have to carry your own bags and park your own car. However, if you're looking for a little bit of class in the city centre without the five-star price tag, Travelodge is the place to stay.

But for those suffering the January work-blues and desperate to disconnect from modern life, Boulder Lodge would be the best bet for a shot of relaxation.

TOWN vs COUNTRY

What: Travelodge, Palmerston North

Where: 175 Cuba St, Palmerston North

How much: \$135-\$185 per room

travelodge.com.au

What: Boulder Lodge

Where: 70 Piripiri Rd, Ashhurst

How much: \$55-\$75 per person (cheaper rates for children and bunk room). Minimum tariff \$150.

boulder-lodge.co.nz

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