

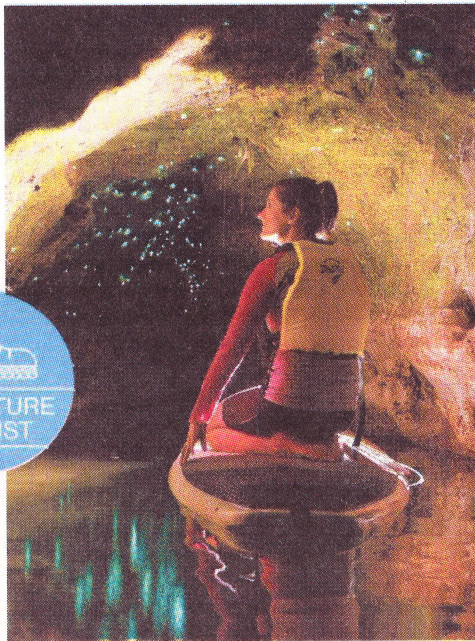
Glow in the dark

BRIAR JENSEN

The Milky Way spreads overhead and an icing sugar-like dusting of stars extends all the way into the still waters of the inky-black lake. It's a surreal feeling of floating through space, as though I'm paddle-boarding through the galaxy.

Dusk fades swiftly on this early winter evening as I squeeze and squirm into a full-length wetsuit and booties to venture on to Lake Okareka, a 15-minute drive from Rotorua, New Zealand. With three fellow visitors, I'm joining Nev Wilson from Paddle Board Rotorua for a nocturnal adventure to glow worm caves that can be accessed only by water. As we set off, our headlamps create dancing pools of light on the marble-smooth water. I concentrate on maintaining my balance; although the 16C water is considerably warmer than the 8C air, the thought of it seeping into my now-cosy wetsuit fills me with dread.

As we glide over the water, the only sounds



Glow worm cave in Lake Okareka, Rotorua

are the dip of paddles and startled ducks taking flight at our approach. With no visible landmarks except a few lights from homes across the lake, Wilson describes the coves and beaches that slip by unseen as we head towards a silhouetted smudge that slowly materialises into a distinguishable headland.

IN THE KNOW

Paddle Board Rotorua's sunset tours are available year-round and limited to seven guests. Kayaking glow worm tours are also available.

■ paddleboardrotorua.com
■ rotoruanz.com

Arriving at the entrance to a cave, we sit on our boards. Turning off my headlamp I enter the cavern, which is so narrow I can touch the sides, necessitating paddling with my hands. Slowly the glow worms reveal themselves on the curved ceiling centimetres above my head, like stars progressively brightening in a darkening sky. Some glow faintly, most shine luminously, and a few shimmer like faint fairy lights. We are so close to these tiny worms, actually the bioluminescent larval stage of fungus gnats, we can see their delicate, sticky mucus threads dangling to ensnare insects.

Paddling to a second cave, I learn this tour evolved from a potential tourism disaster. Wilson, a structural engineer, always wanted to start an outdoor tourism business. Bored one day while waiting for new tyres for his car, he started watching extreme sports on YouTube. "I saw these guys hovering over the water on foil boards cruising at 40km/h," he says. He called his surfing mate and outdoor

guide Matt Barnard and convinced him they should be partners. Deciding against the extreme motorised boards, they ordered paddleboards and electric jet motors that cruise at between 5 and 10km/h. The paddleboards turned up, but the motors never did.

"We found out no one really wanted to go paddle-boarding on the lakes, so we looked for something that added to the experience," says Wilson. Having heard there were glow worms on Lake Okareka he set about finding them. It took about five trips scouring the lake's circumference, only to realise the caves were underwhelming during daylight. So they obtained permits to operate at night. "You could say our glow worm tour created itself," says Wilson. I'd say it was Kiwi ingenuity.

At the next cave, we again shelf paddles and sit on our boards. Wading in the water, Wilson pushes us in two at a time, side-by-side. The cave narrows in the distance and the mass of glow worms recedes into infinity like a mirrored tunnel at an amusement park. We lie back on the boards transfixed by the luminous butts above us as Wilson describes the lifecycle of the fungus gnat.

On the return paddle, we leave our headlamps off and surrender to the darkness. The sky takes centre stage and we lose ourselves amid the constellations, searching for satellites, which proves harder than finding fungus gnats.

Briar Jensen was a guest of Tourism Rotorua.

