



The Road to Rural Bliss

Nick Walton encounters four very different takes on the New Zealand lodge during a luxury road trip of the North Island.

New Zealand

Getting to **Treetops Lodge & Estate**, one of New Zealand’s original luxury lodges, takes some serious faith in one’s GPS. After a three-hour drive from Auckland, I follow the purple line on the screen intently as the route descends deeper and deeper into rural bliss, leaving the highway for a gravel track that bobs and weaves between undulating hills. Eventually, just when I think I’ve come the wrong way, I’m greeted by a sign and a tree-lined laneway that beckons me just a little further.

This is the experience many visitors to New Zealand are looking for; to be removed from the rat race, to a place that’s as serene as it is bucolic; remote, but without sacrificing the creature comforts. Located on its own expansive working farm outside Rotorua, in the centre of New Zealand’s North Island, Treetops Lodge & Estate ticks all those boxes and more. It’s also the first stop on my New Zealand road trip as I sample four leading New Zealand lodges, each distinct from the next.

Treetops is the story of the traditional New Zealand lodge; created by passionate naturalist John Sax, and built initially as a big stag hunting lodge, today many Treetops guests would rather pick up a knife and fork than a rifle. While the property still seduces hunters from across the globe with its diverse game and stunning setting, it’s also become a culinary destination in its own right, with an innovative Chilean chef; access to world-class produce, including estate venison, quail, rabbit, wild pig and trout; and a series of unique foodie adventures that range from Estate-to-Plate safaris to Maori Food Trails. I’m no hunter I confess, but that doesn’t stop me on my first night at the lodge, from enjoying the sika (one of six deer species on the estate) loins with raspberries and indigenous kawakawa, a basil-like herb foraged from the forest, served by Chef Philippe and matched with Hawkes Bay wines by Dutch manager Pieter on my first night.



Accommodation at Treetops is rustic yet inviting. A pioneer of environmentally-managed design, the lodge offers a variety of accommodation styles, including the recently-added Lodge Wing, a four-room enclave housed in the main lodge building that’s ideally suited for families and friends travelling together; and a clutch of secluded cottage-style villas that each boast two suites. My suite boasts custom furniture; fireplaces that keep the evening chill at bay; a king-sized bed dressed in high thread count linens; a voluminous bathroom with jacuzzi bath; and dramatic native forest views. If you listen carefully, you’ll hear the roar of resident red stags as dawn breaks.

(Clockwise from top left); Serenity found at Treetops; the elegant lounge at the Kinloch Club; the golf course beyond is one of New Zealand’s newest; seasonal fare is par for the course at the country’s top lodges; deer at Treetops; the lodge pioneered the estate-to-plate movement in New Zealand.



I’m able to drive my hire car right to the door of my one-bedroom villa, which, dressed in polished oak floors, handmade rugs, Egyptian linens and floor-to-ceiling French doors, has a distinctly residential feel about it. The refined, modern space features a full kitchen, lavish furnishings, and a patio overlooking an inviting par three.

I emerge from these comfy confines, first to tackle the golf course, which follows the sometimes-challenging terrain of a former sheep farm, before joining other guests for cocktail hour in the main lodge’s Great Room, where manager Ken McTague offers aperitifs beside a roaring fireplace. The luxurious, eclectic and tactile interiors of lodge guru Virginia Fisher are unmistakable here, and include plush banquettes, cowhide, goat skins and burnt wood floorings. Beyond, the dining room is an airy, elegant space dedicated, where possible, to organic estate-to-plate cuisine prepared by executive chef Jean-Michel that ranges from grilled Karitani crayfish with Beluga lentils and star anise jus; to wild venison dusted in endemic harore and horopito.

From the mirror-like waters of Taupo I fly north to Whangarei, gateway to one of New Zealand’s most spectacular regions, Northland, to continue my road trip. Again, I’m forced to rely on my GPS as I leave the highway in my wake and descend the narrow, winding Russell Road east, towards the Pacific. So elusive is New Zealand’s newest ‘super lodge’ that I drive straight past its gates before backtracking and announcing myself to the ranks of security cameras which guard the entrance.

From Treetops it’s an easy hour’s drive south through mist-wreathed farmland to the banks of Lake Taupo, New Zealand’s largest. I trace my way around the lake, world-renowned for its trout fishing, until I reach the sleepy settlement of Kinloch and one of the country’s newest lodge sensations, **The Lodge at the Kinloch Club**. Another creation of John Sax, The Lodge at the Kinloch Club marries luxury accommodation and sublime dining with a coveted new golf course by Jack Nicklaus.

Modern, imposing and ambitious, The Kinloch Club straddles a low range of mountains and offers a contemporary take on the New Zealand lodge experience for golfers and non-golfers like. New arrivals weave their way through manicured fairways as they ascend to the main lodge building; built from local schist stone and inspired by Kinloch Castle in Scotland (albeit with a very contemporary take on that timeless icon) the lodge was designed by New Zealand architect Andrew Patterson and boasts sun-kissed internal courtyards, elegantly-appointed lounges and dining rooms, and panoramic lake and links views.





Understated and yet determinably luxurious, **Helena Bay**, which opened in late 2016 after eight years of development and with a price tag of US\$35 million, is the creation of a media-shy Russian steel billionaire, who selected the lodge's namesake bay as his own little slice of kiwi heaven. Located on three kilometers of pristine coastline, complete with private beaches, forested walking paths, and its own 215-hectare working farm, Helena Bay accommodates a maximum of ten guests at a time, making it the latest in a series of new properties that cater to travellers looking to book out entire estates.

Each of the lodge's ocean-facing suites feature double-height ceilings, cavernous, mosaic-lined bathrooms, Christian Fischbacher robes, Hefel of Austria linens, and private patios. The main lodge building wreaths a 25-metre infinity pool, and boasts a gym and intimate spa, lounges and libraries, and an extensive modern art collection.

As the only guest in residence I get the star treatment. Happy hour starts when a young kiwi waitress, who has returned home from working aboard superyachts to take up a role at the lodge, arrives, resplendent in a tuxedo, and presents a perfectly made martini before inviting me to dine in an intimate book-lined snug, complete with roaring fire. Service is refined but also intuitive – I can't see staff until I need them, which gives Helena Bay the residential feel its owner envisioned.

Of course, there's plenty to keep you occupied between lavish meals, from farm tours with estate manager John and his trusty blue heeler, to helicopter flights, kayaking, beach picnics at the newly-opened

private pavilion, and diving on the acclaimed Poor Knights Islands. There's also a tennis court, secluded beaches on which to wander, and orchards and gardens to tour with executive chef Michele Martino, who has brought the Michelin-starred cuisine of chef Ernesto Iaccarino's acclaimed southern Italy restaurant Don Alfonso 1890 to New Zealand.

(Clockwise from left); Dusk overlooking Helena Bay, New Zealand's newest super lodge; local artisans play an important role in Helena Bay's culinary offering; views of the lodge's namesake bay from the sunken fire pit.





From Helena Bay I place my faith in Lady GPS once again and forge north, for one of my personal favourite lodges in the country, **Kauri Cliffs**. One of three lodges created by Tiger Fund founder Julian Robertson (the other two being Hawke’s Bay’s Cape Kidnappers and Queenstown’s Matakauri), Kauri Cliffs, his first, redefined New Zealand’s lodge scene; wreathing a golf course by David Harman that’s listed #39 in the world and which hugs dramatic sea cliffs, the lodge crowns a 6,500-acre working sheep station in the Bay of Islands, certainly one of New Zealand’s most breathtakingly beautiful locales.

Despite being almost two decades old, the lodge at Kauri Cliffs seems timeless and infinitely graceful. Arriving guests are greeted by captivating sea views as they wind their way across the estate to reach The Lodge which features just 22 guest suites, each of which boasts sublime interiors my Virginia Fisher, spacious bathrooms, and east-facing balconies, and which is in turn sequestered in native forest.

I managed to hit the links as the sun begins to descend towards the Pacific, pausing on the 15th hole to soak in the panorama of rural bliss, infinite ocean, crashing waves and manicured greens. The colours of this spectacular landscape burst to life as day comes to an end, and I greet the inky night over pre-dinner drinks on the lodge’s deep-set terrace. Unlike some of the lodges, Kauri Cliffs maintains a sense of formality (so don’t forget a sports coat) which pairs perfectly with crisp, intelligent service from a United Nations staff, and the delectable cuisine of executive chef Barry Frith, which champions food miles and local producers.

For those post-round aches, Kauri Cliffs is also home to an intimate spa nestled on the cusp of an ancient Totara forest that features four

treatment rooms and a range of bespoke rituals. Alternatively, take to the skies for an exhilarating coastal helicopter flight (many guests also combine a tour with helicopter transfers from Whangarei or Auckland) or a picnic at the estate’s best kept secret, Pink Beach, a heavenly strip of white sand under a canopy of red flowering pohutukawa trees.

For the last stop on my luxury road trip of New Zealand’s North Island I scoot south to Whangarei Heads, another corner of the region that’s rarely visited by tourist throngs. My route left cosmopolitan Whangarei behind and traces its way around the city’s harbour before climbing over the towering headlands that shelter the port from the Pacific Ocean.



The Glasshouse is the newest addition to the Ara Roa Accommodation family and offers one lucky couple about as much privacy as they could hope for. Located at the tip of a privately-owned peninsula, **The Glasshouse** features staggering ocean views, a glass-encased living area and master bedroom, an expansive sun deck with wood burning fireplace, a covered al fresco dining area, and one of the most breathtaking bathrooms, I’ve seen (if you don’t mind the occasional walk in the dark when nature calls), secluded at the end of a garden trail, complete with a shower that opens to the elements.

The Glasshouse is more than just a respite – there’s everything you need to enjoy your stay, from a fully-equipped kitchen and chef on call, to an internet-connected sound system, lavish furnishings, and high speed wifi. Fly in by helicopter or park your hire car at the front door, and disappear from the face of the earth, if only for a day or two.

Of course, there is also plenty for the active to do, from fishing, hiking and swimming from the estate’s own pier, to exploring some of Northland’s most spectacular beaches. The Glasshouse can be booked as a stand alone or matched with the peninsula’s modern three-bedroom Te Whara house when travelling as a group.

(Clockwise from top left); Many guests arrive at lodges like Kauri Cliffs by helicopter; dramatic coastal views from The Glasshouse; the country’s newest luxury accommodation offers ultimate privacy; Kauri Cliff’s guest rooms have a sublime residential feel.