

DESTINATION
NEW ZEALAND

In splendid isolation

Max Anderson surveys the rise of Kiwi luxury lodges and defines the winning formula of style, wilderness and character.

I recently spent 18 days staying at nine luxury lodges, a tour of duty to find out how New Zealand's fabled wilderness retreats compare. Sounds idyllic, right? Actually, it was five-star overload – after consuming 158 courses of food variously described as “wild”, “organic” and “marbled”, I discovered bits of my lower intestine I didn't know I had.

Nevertheless, my lodge-athon proved valuable: what I'd previously regarded as a singular and definable five-star travel experience, I soon came to see as a bewilderingly varied beast.

Just like the safari camp and the ski chalet, the New Zealand lodge is a triumph of reinvention, the transformation of a utilitarian wilderness refuge into tourism gold. The original (and, some would argue, still the best) is **Huka Lodge**, once a 1920s canvas fishing camp on the Waikato River near Taupo, on the North Island, with fly-fishing so good it became famous among European royals. In 1984 a Dutch millionaire replaced the canvas with some contemporary homage to the Scottish Highlands hunting lodge and set new standards in antipodean luxury.

But it wasn't until the late 1990s that luxury lodges started springing up in spectacular corners of New Zealand. Bankrolled by foreigners, designed by Kiwis and serendipitously marketed by Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, they were tailored to meet the demands of American retirees on the Pacific-cruise circuit.

Among the first investors was the Australian Myer family, who built **Whare Kea**, a relatively modest, light- and view-filled escape on Lake Wanaka, on the South Island, in 1996. In 1999, Tom Tusher, the former head of Levi Strauss, built **Blanket Bay**, an edifice of schist and timber near Glenorchy.

Four years later, Julian “Wizard of Wall Street” Robertson used Huka designer Virginia Fisher to move on from the “tartan and antlers” theme in

his lofty and ambitious installations on the North Island: **Kauri Cliffs** (Bay of Islands) and **The Farm at Cape Kidnappers**.

Today, there are perhaps 30 establishments legitimately combining the word “luxury” and “lodge”, with at least four of these opening in the past year.

The best occupy valuable mind space among the world's wealthiest and most status-conscious markets, although the numbers of American guests, usually seen clutching *Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report*, still dictate whether it's a good or bad year (last year was bad). Brits and Australians are the next most-dependable patrons and there's growth among markets out of Russia, India and Brazil. If a lodge is closed then a private jet has probably delivered the likes of Bill Gates, Steven Spielberg or Brad Pitt.

As the range of lodges has expanded, so the price difference has widened: an entry-level suite with meals costs from \$NZ400 (\$306) a couple a night (**Pen-y-bryn**, low season); at Huka Lodge you'll pay \$NZ1375 a person a night (high season). With the recent growth of exclusive-use pricing (see box), you can secure a sole-occupancy retreat for \$NZ5000 to \$NZ17,773 a night. A 15 per cent GST usually goes on top.

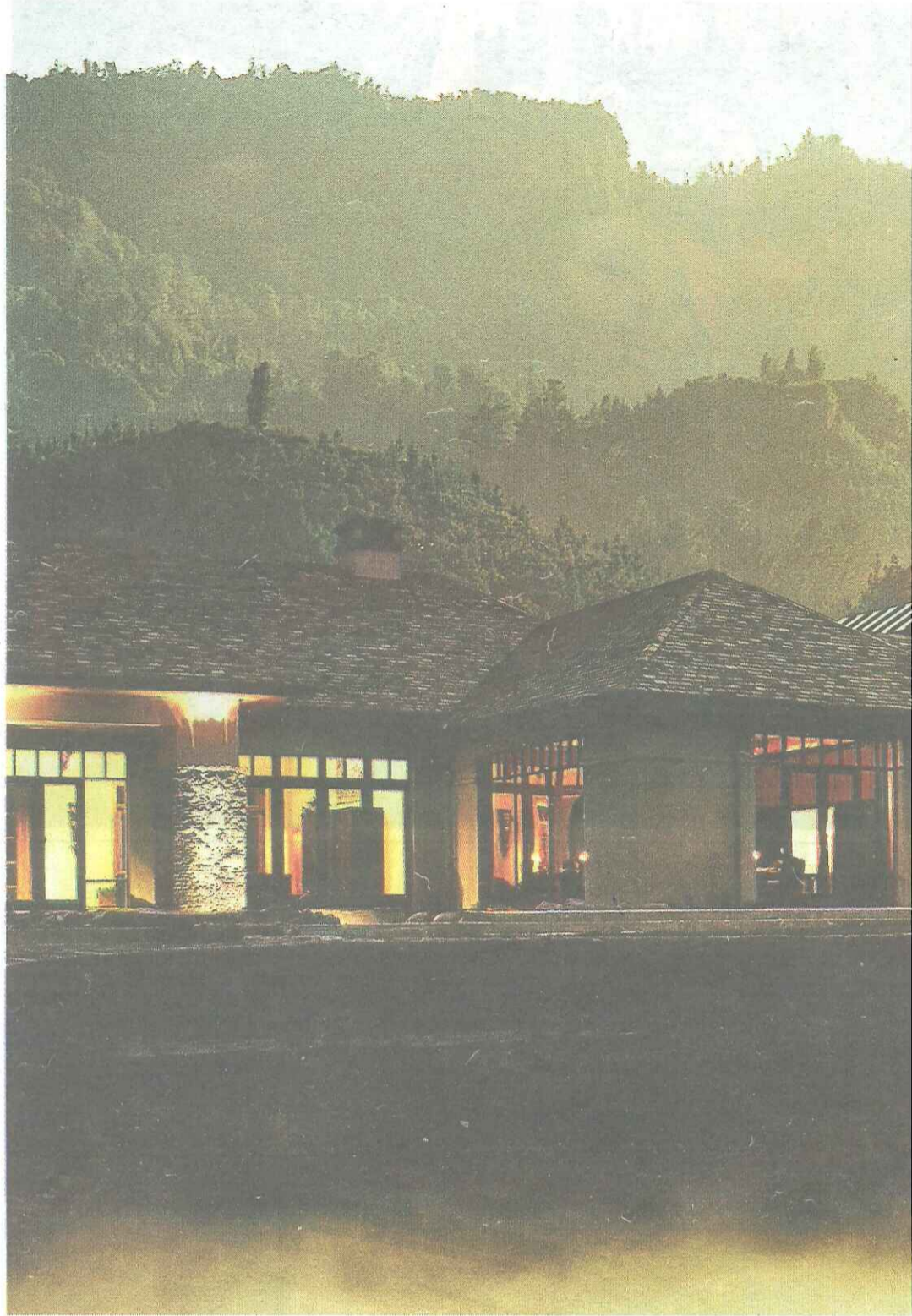
So what is a luxury lodge?

“Lodge” is used on every conceivable Kiwi accommodation, including the roadside motel. The five-star end has a similar elasticity of definition but a luxury lodge is defined by a few more distinct criteria.

Scenery

The embarrassment of scenic riches in New Zealand means everyone gets a view.

South Island lodges such as Blanket Bay, the recently opened **Matakauri** (Lake Wakatipu) and Whare Kea and **Tiritiri** (Lake Wanaka) have Ring-side seats on Middle Earth, their picture



windows gazing upon luminous glacial lakes fringed by snow-rimmed mountains. On the North Island, volcanic lakes offer prehistoric stillness, hot springs and world-class trout fishing. And the coastline is surprisingly glamorous with forest-clad uplands, beach snugs and clean blue waters where dolphins scatter shoals of fish – landscapes redolent of Big Sur and San Francisco but bought at a fraction of the price. Visit Kauri Cliffs in the Bay of Islands, **Split Apple Retreat** near Nelson or **Earthsong** on Great Barrier Island and you'll kick yourself for ever sneering at the idea of a Kiwi coast.

Isolation and game

Most lodges provide fishing options for guests (often aided by helicopter) but a few enjoy their own private wilderness and hunting grounds.

At **Poronui**, near Taupo, the sika deer roams free (at least until it gets shot) on 6000 hectares and the trout ply 40 kilometres of stream. There's

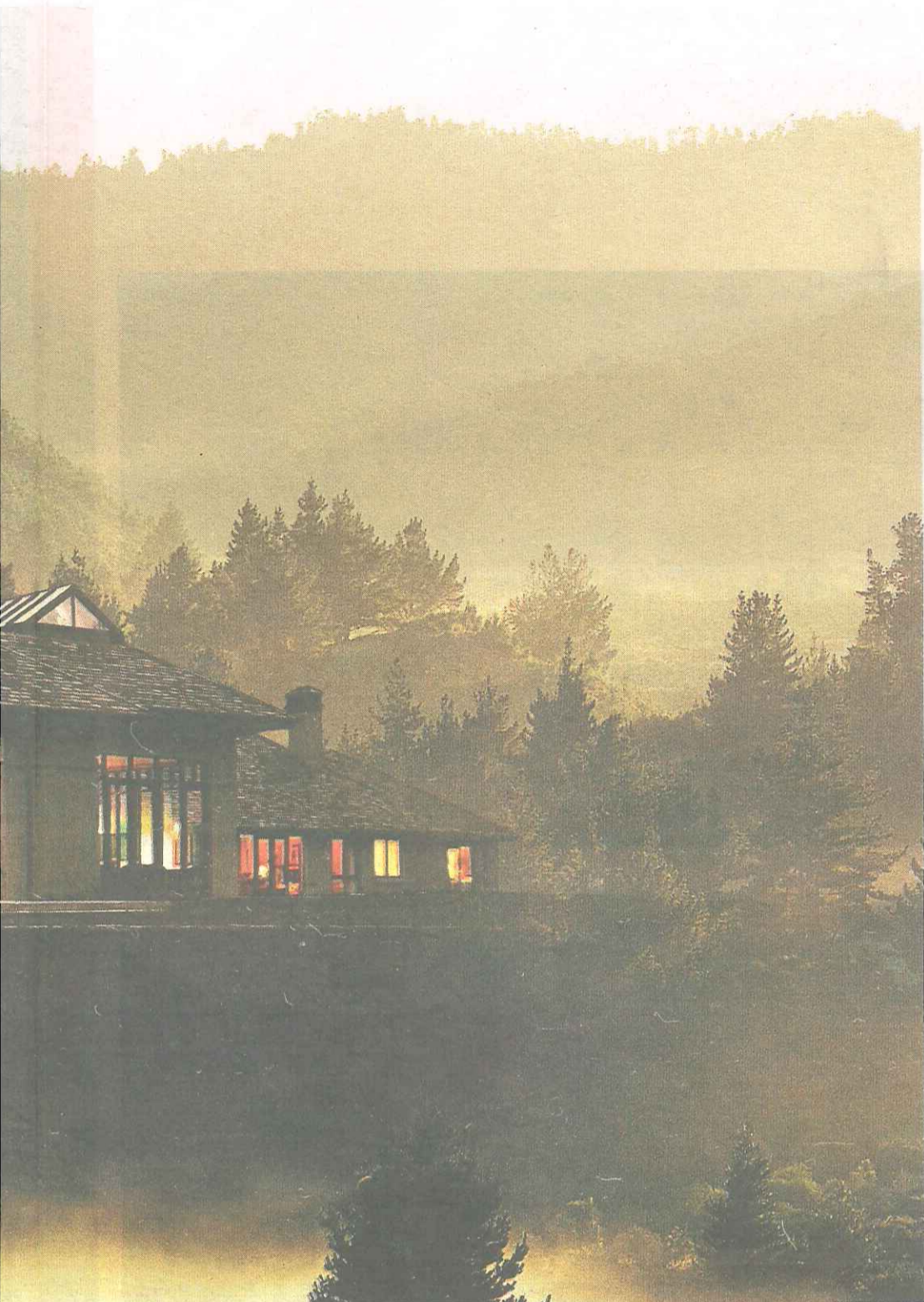
a separate luxury tented camp so you can “rough it” beside crystal waters, although hunter-fishers can also retire to a gussied-up stable with snooker table and echoing wine cellar. The highly regarded **Treetops**, near Rotorua (a rare Kiwi-owned luxury lodge), has game coming out of its acreage and will lend you a gun dog while you shoot pheasant.

Some lodges offer tamed wilderness. **Wharekauhau**, for instance, sits on 1350 hectares of moody landscape that raises prize lamb (served at night); Kauri Cliffs has 1500 hectares overlooking the Bay of Islands (space enough to build spa treatment rooms within a totara forest); and at Cape Kidnappers, the 1500-hectare farm has sheep, gannet colonies and a kiwi bird population that guests can help track, catch and weigh.

While isolation is often desirable, it's certainly not guaranteed. Lodges near popular lake and coastal towns such as Taupo, Rotorua, Wanaka, Queenstown and Nelson are no less beautiful but



Recent arrivals ... **Split Apple Hideaway**, which opened in July, gives guests a choice of BMWs; **Matakauri** has sensational views of Lake Wakatipu and snow-capped peaks.



it can be a surprise to find yourself winding through suburbs or new subdivisions to get to a retreat you'd associated with wilderness.

Heritage

A surprising number of lodges sell on the back of historical grandeur. For example, **Greenhill Lodge** (1889) is all grace and gables near Hawke's Bay; **Grasmere** (1858), near Arthur's Pass in the Southern Alps, is an old limestone sheep station; and **Otahuna** (1895), south of Christchurch, is a dazzling restoration that once hosted the future king of England.

Canapes and cocktails feel especially right among timber-panelled libraries and tapestries but these intimate properties also allow for special touches. At Otahuna, for instance, you can accompany the chef in the kitchen garden to pick your favourite ingredients before joining him with a glass of wine as he cooks. (The property suffered damage in the recent earthquake but will reopen on November 14.)

Fine dining

Some lodges boast of international chefs and award-winning sommeliers but all make tremendous play on the quality of Kiwi produce, from prized meats and fish to celebrated sav blancs and pinots. **Timara Lodge**, near Blenheim, has a Swiss chef with experience in Michelin-starred restaurants and its own vineyard; the Wharekauhau chef likes to "forage" for ingredients - feel free to join him in the fern-filled forest.

A point of difference

The Farm at Cape Kidnappers is rightly famous for its spectacular (slightly insane) golf course built on a series of cliffs. Whare Kea, on Lake Wanaka, will fly guests in from the main lodge to its exclusive chalet 1750 metres high in the Buchanan Mountains. And Split Apple Retreat near Nelson, which opened in December, has quickly earned a following on the strength of its health-promoting "functional food" - a menu shorn of evils and boosted with hard-working

treats, served in front of a view that makes you want to live forever.

So what constitutes a good lodge?

Clearly, the more of the aforementioned attributes a lodge can offer, the better. But for my money, the champion lodges are those whose owners also bring passion to the table.

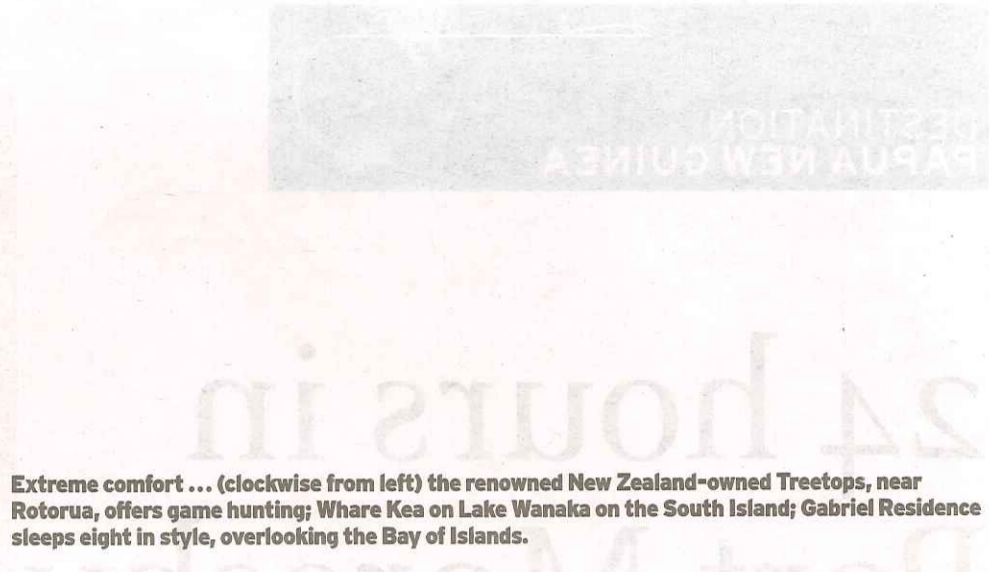
Otahuna's rise and rise is due in no small part to its young American hosts, who tell a great story of restoring a timber liability to a local treasure (at a cost of \$US10 million). If they're in residence at Blanket Bay, the Tushers are terrific hosts, people who have poured themselves as well as their money into New Zealand. And Dr Lee Nelson, of Split Apple Retreat, is a dietary guru, collector of ancient Asian art (much of it on display) and champion poker player; he and his talented chef wife, Pen, provide one of the most interesting lodge experiences on the circuit.

Finally, here's an example illustrating the fact that a great lodge is not dependent upon a profile, an architect or an especially steep tariff.

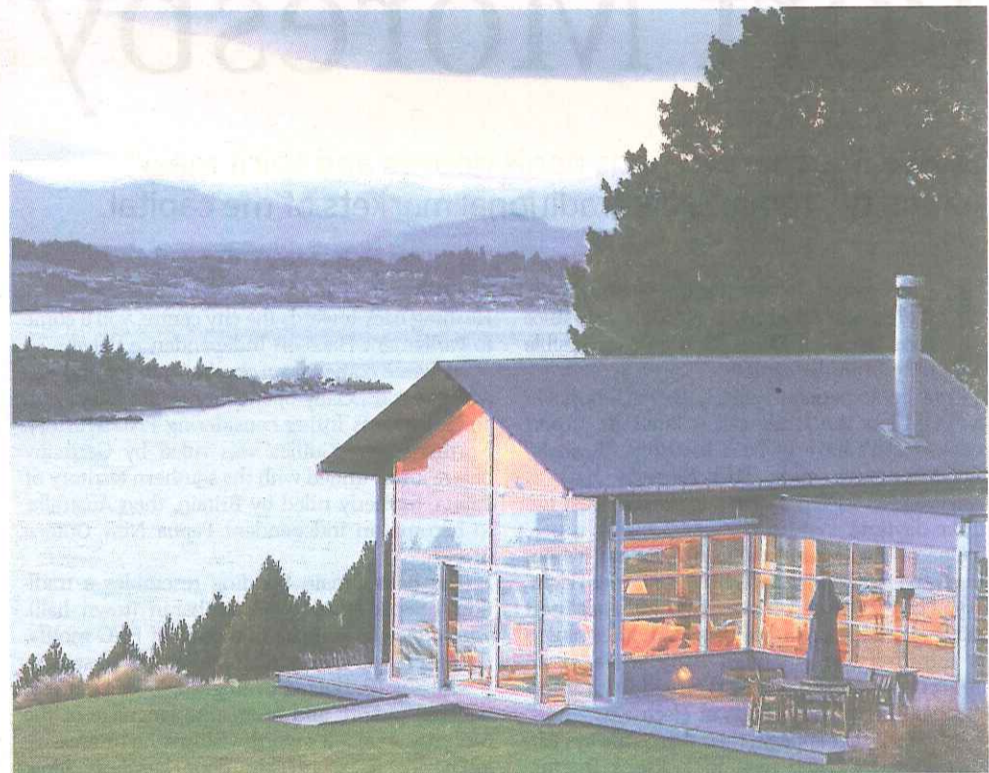
Manawa Ridge Lodge is perched on a sublime piece of Coromandel coast on the upper North Island. It's run by Willem and Carla van de Veen, who have invested time, love and craftsmanship in three highly unusual suites. Willem's polished tree boughs, rendered hay-bale walls and alfresco, pebble-lined spa baths conspire to leave guests feeling at peace.

The main lodge is similarly fashioned and features a quirky tower allowing you to drink in views with your champagne. The couple farm their land, pull their herbs and make their own sausages from wild pigs; you're welcome to join in and try anything you like, even culling a wild porker should you be so inclined (though most settle for art classes in the garden). At the bottom of a steep track is a magical beach of golden sand, fringed with gnarled trees and waterfalls.

Manawa Ridge is little known, doesn't translate well on the home-grown website and it's comparatively inexpensive at \$NZ650 a suite including gourmet breakfast. But it's definitely one of New Zealand's little luxuries.



Extreme comfort ... (clockwise from left) the renowned New Zealand-owned Treetops, near Rotorua, offers game hunting; Whare Kea on Lake Wanaka on the South Island; Gabriel Residence sleeps eight in style, overlooking the Bay of Islands.



A lodge of one's own

THE past three years have brought the rise of the exclusive retreat in New Zealand, a scaled-down, host-free lodge for single parties of guests. Most are beachside properties owned by foreign developers who've thrown (several) kitchen sinks at their projects. This is the territory of Hollywood and the big end of business, for guests who appreciate that they're surrounded by parrots and punga ferns, not people and paparazzi.

The most recent example is **Split Apple Hideaway**, which opened in July (not to be confused with the nearby Split Apple Retreat). Costing \$NZ7500 (\$5746) a night, it's 400 square metres of Californian excess with three suites. It comes with televisions that disappear into the carpets, sweeping stairways, a Versace-like taste in art and an awful lot of glass looking down on to a stunning beach near Abel Tasman National Park. Guests make their choice of BMW from a range of four models. The venue is

stocked with local food and wine but chefs will cost from about \$NZ1000 a day.

Other examples include **Lake Okareka Lodge** near Rotorua: for \$NZ5000 a night, you get the run of a lakeside lodge that has contemporary opulence and suite space to spare, with private chef and butler.

The **Gabriel Residence** describes itself as a "simple modern building" that sleeps eight. In fact it's a hilltop escape of 1100 square metres overlooking the Bay of Islands and starts at \$NZ4200 a night (four guests), with food and chef extra. The nearby four-suite **Rahimoana Villa** in Eagle's Nest - an eyrie of glass and infinity pool - peaks at \$NZ17,773 a night. Food and wine are included but the chef is extra.

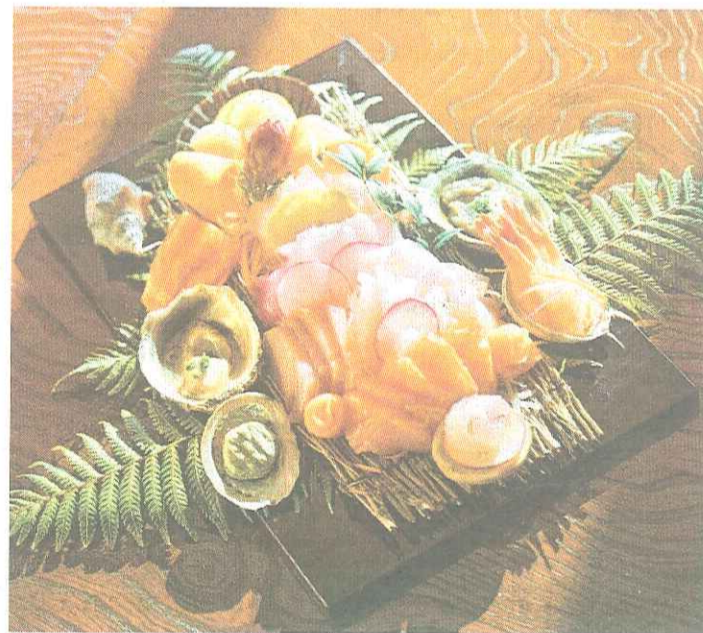
If you're in the market for an exclusive stay and you can book far enough ahead, inquire also of a mainstream lodge: with a big enough party, the cost of exclusive hire of, say, Otahuna or Blanket Bay can be competitive. **Max Anderson**

Luxury New Zealand



Zen and the art of chilling out

A luxury New Zealand retreat, full of Eastern promise, is a balm for weary souls in need of serenity, writes **Elizabeth Meryment**



JAPANESE TOUCH: Sashimi (above) is the order of the day at Split Apple Retreat (top), which overlooks Tasman Bay.

I AM having a “wow” moment. It is sunset at Motueka, near Nelson, on the west coast of New Zealand’s South Island, and a peach-coloured sunset is filling the huge sky over Tasman Bay. Even though there are snow-capped mountains to the east not far from here, the weather is balmy enough for me to consider a dip in the infinity pool that overlooks this magical waterway. But it’s the onsen that holds the stronger appeal. As I sink into the warm, calming waters of this outdoor, Japanese-style spa bath, the wow moment hits me. There are so many gobsmacking experiences to be had at Split Apple Retreat – one of the newest luxury resort properties to open in increasingly glammed-up New Zealand – it’s almost difficult to pick the best of them. But an onsen spa bath at sunset is up there.

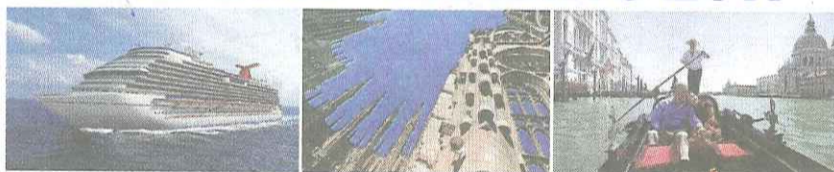
Just beside the onsen sits Split Apple Retreat’s steam and massage rooms. Also located here is a cunning machine described as a “detox box” – a very small wood-and-glass contraption in which a “detoxee” sits for 45 minutes at temperatures of about 50C. If it sounds like an oven, it is. But it makes the user sweat out impurities through their skin. It works best if you can stand an extra 20 minutes in the steam room afterwards. Which I do, emerging to feel as though my skin is as sleek and pure as a child’s. Split Apple Retreat is the creation of eccentric American millionaire Lee Forster and his charming wife, Pen, who have devised this little hub of luxury as the perfect antidote to frenetic modern Western living. Lee was a GP in the US before settling in New Zealand, making his fortune here through the disparate pursuits of writing popular medical self-help books and playing poker on the international poker circuit.

The couple live at the retreat (except when clients book it out in its entirety) and Pen does all the cooking for guests. Indeed, healthy, beautifully presented cuisine is one of the focal points at Split Apple. Lee has used his medical expertise to fashion a retreat fully designed for complete relaxation and “wellness”, and this extends to the food. The menu is entirely low-GI and mostly organic. Breakfast involves dishes such as manuka-smoked salmon with egg-white omelette, or buckwheat and blueberry pancakes with organic maple syrup, while lunch is often a hearty salad of vegetables fresh from the garden.

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LAP OF LUXURY: Split Apple Retreat's back yard (above); lounge (below); and a room with a view (bottom).

Pen's four-course dinners use such luxury items as steamed lobster, spring lamb with mint sauce and Japanese-inspired exotic mushroom soups, while Lee's abundantly stocked cellar boasts bottles from some of the best vineyards in France, California, New Zealand and Australia. And yes, you are allowed to drink (a little) as Lee believes a moderate alcohol intake is good for you. The food is delicious and it really does make you feel full without feeling bloated.

While good food is all very well, what you really need at a wellness retreat is peace and quiet to relax, and space to breathe. This being New Zealand, there is plenty of that. The retreat has only three plush rooms, plentiful communal areas and a movie theatre. It's been designed with a Japanese sensibility, so the decor is all zen lines, soft wooden floors and Japanese baths.

For all this Asian appeal, I love the luxury European bedlinen and the views out the sliding glass doors past the two private decks, per room, which hover over the hillside that tumbles down towards the cute private beach below. Walk down here and you might just find seals frolicking and sunning themselves, even during the summer months.

Also worth knowing about in these parts is Split Apple Hideaway, a huge, California-style beachhouse/ lodge around the point from Split Apple Retreat, closer to Nelson.

Owned by another American couple, Alan and Shelly Trent, the Hideaway has links with the Retreat while remaining a separate property.

The "Split Apple", incidentally, is a rock formation just off the beach between the two properties.

The four-level, four-bedroom house, which can be let with or without a private chef, is a study in opulence.

I stayed in the upstairs bedroom, complete with window-side bath, enormous widescreen television and underfloor heating, and woke up in the morning to see a seal swimming near the beach down below. But the views from almost every room are stunning.

Perhaps the best thing about the Hideaway is its private beach access.



Leave the house and wander 50m to the secluded sands for some solo sunbaking or swimming. Alan will also arrange to pick you up from Nelson airport and leave you with the keys to one of his several BMWs, in case you feel inclined to leave this rock star house to see the awe-inspiring surrounds. Elizabeth Meryment was a guest of Split Apple Retreat, Split Apple Hideaway and Tourism New Zealand.

Wish you were here

Staying there

Split Apple Retreat, 195 Tokongawa Drive, Motueka, NZ. Ph +64 3 527 8377. Rates start at \$NZ920 (\$A700) a person a night, twin share. www.splitappleretreat.com

Split Apple Hideaway, Via Motueka, NZ. Ph +64 3 526 6733. Packages start at \$NZ6000 a night. www.splitapplehideaway.com

Getting there

Air New Zealand flies to Auckland

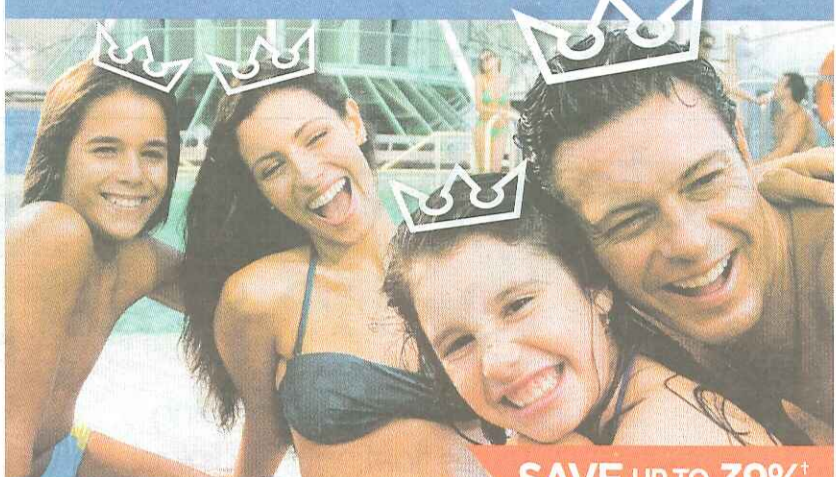
with connections to Nelson. Both the Retreat and the Hideaway can organise transfers. It's about 45 to 60 minutes' drive from Nelson.

Doing there

Simply Wild is an adventure company that offers day trips to Abel Tasman National Park by boat, yacht, kayak or helicopter. www.simplywild.co.nz

Wine, Art and Wilderness takes tours of nearby wineries, cafes and art shops. wineartandwilderness.co.nz

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