

AT LEISURE

OUT OF THIS WORLD

NEW ZEALAND

Kia ora, and welcome to paradise: Luxury travel in New Zealand means unique lodges, private chefs, spectacular helicopter flights, slimmer lobsters caught off a remote beach, impressive infinity pools, world-class wines and wonderful people encountered along the way

BY SONJA PIONTEK

Ladies and gentlemen, we hope you enjoyed the flight with Air New Zealand. On behalf of the entire crew, we wish you a wonderful stay in what many believe to be the most beautiful country in the world.”

I smile because I couldn't agree more. After all there is a reason why I've been to New Zealand so many times over the past 20 years, this time on a multi-stop journey curated by bespoke travel operator Sonnenkind. We have just landed in the Bay of Islands, a mere 45 minutes north of Auckland by plane, and we are headed to the esteemed The Lodge at Kauri Cliffs, one of New Zealand's oldest luxury lodges.

Kauri Cliffs sits on a 6,000-acre piece of Māori land and is a true golfer's heaven, featuring a stunning 18-hole course that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. To stretch our legs, we start our stay with an exciting guided walk. Not only do we get to see an impressive 1,000-year-old endemic Kauri tree and a herd of cuddly baby lambs that we totally fall for, we also get to sample the famous Manuka honey and even catch a glimpse of one of the rare kiwi birds that live in the native forests of Kauri Cliffs. After this beautiful walk we reward ourselves with a visit to the lodge's spa for a revitalizing Vichy water massage treatment. I'm quite surprised to see an

original Picasso painting as I walk into the spa — but this is one of the many touches that make The Lodge at Kauri Cliffs such a memorable place. While the sun sets over the vast ocean mist, we enjoy a glass of champagne in the lounge, and dinner is then served in the lodge's elegant private dining room, where the lodge's general manager, Martin Hamilton, joins us.

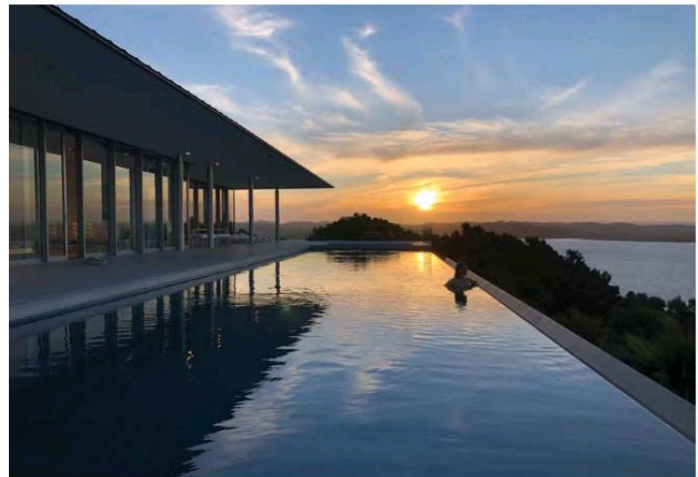






The next morning, our Scottish friend John heads out to play a round of golf with the resident pro, while Tina and William from Hong Kong, Chisato from Japan and I opt for a fishing session on Kauri Cliffs' private beach. None of us has ever done any fishing before, and I have to admit that it requires a lot more skill and patience than I expected. We try hard but in the end I would not call our catch a tremendous success; the experience of being on a totally secluded, stunningly beautiful beach and trying something new, however, was a tremendous delight. To round off the morning, we get to enjoy a private barbecue on the beach. John is back from his game of golf and while we have fresh seafood, crisp salads and a traditional rack of lamb, we share stories of the experiences we have just had. And obviously we make our only catch – a bit of soggy seaweed – sound a lot more attractive than it actually was. Well, isn't that what all hobby fishermen do?

The afternoon holds another highlight as we get picked up by helicopter. Our lovely pilot will not only take us on an amazing flight across the Bay of Islands, but eventually bring us to our next lodge for the night, the acclaimed Eagle's Nest. Soaring over the countless islands, the remote beaches, the bright turquoise waters, stunning villas and little picturesque settlements is quite a treat. To our total surprise we even land on top of the area's famous Hole in the Rock,



a formation that you normally only get to go through by boat. We truly appreciate this unique opportunity, the stunning views and the details our pilot shares about the Māori rituals that are still regularly performed at this location.



Eagle's Nest is a luxury property that features a handful of private villas near the little town of Russel. Our host James gives us a warm welcome and we are immediately taken by his genuine British charm, the villa's inviting modern design, the vast living area and the stunning bedrooms with 300-degree sea views — but the highlight of Eagle's Nest clearly is the 25-m infinity pool overlooking the amazing bay. While our private chef Francois prepares a delicious French meal made out of the freshest local produce, and my friends enjoy their chilled aperitif, I cannot help but go for a dip in the stunning pool and swim towards the setting sun.

Sights to behold

The next morning, we wake up to the smell of fresh crêpes — a lovely surprise. After a delectable breakfast on the terrace and another swim in our infinity pool, we head out for a sailing trip on a private catamaran. Flying across the Bay of Islands by chopper was definitely great, but sailing around the many islands and bays in a catamaran isn't any less enjoyable. With the wind in our hair, champagne in our hands and cameras ready for the hundredth selfie, we soon get into the groove and can't get enough of the beautiful sail on this cat. For lunch we stop at The Landing, an exquisite vineyard with a handful of remarkable private villas suitable for multi-generational families or groups traveling together.

No wonder the likes of Warren Buffet and Bill Gates have stayed here in the past.

From the beautiful Bay of Islands, we head south. This time we get picked up in a seaplane that first takes us to Auckland's Waiheke Island for a special vineyard tour and another impeccable lunch. We all enjoy the flight as much as the unique water landing and have a great time on Waiheke — even if it is only a short stay.

From Waiheke the little seaplane takes us to Rotorua, famous for its thermal activity and the deep Māori heritage. Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland might be a tad touristy, but it is arguably one of the world's most impressive places to see thermal activity, admire the bright red pools, watch impressive geysers shoot jets of water high into the air, witness the intriguing bubbling mud pools, and simply get a glimpse of what Mother Earth is made of deep inside. Another worthwhile sight in the area is the famous Huka Falls, with an impressive 220,000 liters of crystal clear water pouring down every second. A few hundred meters upstream, away from the hustle and bustle of this tourist attraction, lies another of New Zealand's old established luxury lodges, the Huka Lodge, a beautifully tranquil and homey luxury retreat that the Queen of England has stayed at several times.

After a healthy breakfast in the legendary Queen's Room (possibly sitting on the chair that the Queen used during her last visit) we say goodbye to Huka Lodge and make our way to Poronui Lodge, a premier sporting lodge nestled in the vast Taharua Valley, an hour



outside of Taupo. Poronui is famous for its prime hunting and fly-fishing, and welcomes sport fishers and hunters from all over the world. Our little group has booked into Blake House, a rustic yet luxurious private villa hidden in the vast mountains surrounded by nothing but native bush. We opt to shoot only with our cameras and we are happy about the time we spend unwinding in this remote location. For breakfast the local Māori guide Tom Loughlin drops by to share some captivating insights into the centuries-old Māori culture and his local iwi (Māori for “tribe”). We are intrigued as he tells us about the relevance of the spiritual space in relation to the physical world, Tane the forest, Mana the spiritual power, and Manaaki, the old tradition of hosting and welcoming guests. At Poronui it’s not about the haka or the touristy Māori performance; it is a deep insight into the spiritual world of an exceptional culture, and an experience we will certainly never forget – tānā rawa atu koe (Māori for “thank you”).

Heading south

After a few unforgettable days on the North Island, it is time to explore the beautiful South Island. Our private luxury tour first takes us to the lovely town of Christchurch, with its historical city center and the many lovely little boutique shops. To enjoy an exclusive lunch degustation in a Victorian villa surrounded by the most pristine English gardens, we drive to Otahuna Lodge, a little out of town. If only I had managed to bribe its chef for the recipe for his strawberry tart – it was simply divine! For the night we head to The Homestead at Pigeon Bay’s Annandale luxury villa collection. The five-course meal our private chef creates is marvelous, the drinks we



sip by the cracking fireplace a treat, the stargazing in the hot spa pool unforgettable, the rooms elegant with its distinct colonial charm, and the dolphins we see the next day on a boat tour organized by Annandale nothing short of amazing.

Next, our luxury-lodge-hopping takes us to the alpine Queenstown in the center of the South Island. Back in the mid-19th century, the area featured some of the world’s most productive gold fields and was known for its enormous gold rush. Today, the picturesque Queenstown is known as the adventure capital of the world (commercial bungee jumping was invented here, after all); a retreat for the international moneyed elite, as seen from the ever climbing real estate prices; the southern hemisphere’s leading ski resort, a nature lover’s paradise; or a popular destination to feature on many a bucket list.

We have decided to stay in the iconic Eichardt’s Private Hotel, built in 1859 and situated in the heart of Queenstown on the lakefront with stunning views of Lake Wakatipu and right where all the shopping is. After a glass of local dessert wine in the hotel’s private lounge upstairs, we head to yet another highlight of this trip to take part in a prestigious pastime in the nation – the opening tournament of the newly established Queenstown Polo. Players from New Zealand, Australia, Argentina, Singapore and England compete for the first trophy to be won in this promising new polo club. Some of my friends have never watched a game of polo before, but with all the action on the field, the horses, the good commentary, the excellent wine and food served, the elegant marquee we sit under, the great chat we have with Queenstown Polo owner Jonathan Gabler, the fantastic company and the relaxed atmosphere, they enjoy it just as much as I do.

From Lake Wakatipu our private chauffeur takes us across the Crown Range to Lake Wanaka, another South Island gem. The next stunning lodge we stay at is the high country luxury homestead Manu Whenua, originally developed by none other than singer Shania Twain and ex-husband Mutt Lange. Located in the mountains on a vast 135,000-acre piece of private land, Manu Whenua is an eco-sanctuary as much as a home away from home. Luxurious, homey, welcoming, charming and paired with the most heart-warming hospitality, Manu Whenua is simply a place where your soul can breathe. I would have loved to spend a few more days in this remote mountain paradise and do some horse-riding across this beautiful land, but this will have to wait till my next visit, as our amazing lodge-hopping journey continues to the next unique location.

Have you ever had the opportunity to be amongst the first in any lodge? In our case, we are the second set of guests to spend the night at the newly opened The Lindis, an iconic and architecturally distinct luxury lodge located in the pristine Ahuriri Valley. It is hard to describe what makes The Lindis so special, as it is appealing in so many ways. Is it the unique setting away from civilization in the most stunning scenery, the five designer suites that invite you to forget every worry you've ever had, the unparalleled wine cellar, the wonderful team led by General Manager William Hudson, or the impressive stargazing you can do while relaxing in a hot bubble bath once the sun has set over the surrounding mountain peaks? Whatever it is, there sure is something quite compelling about The Lindis, and I can see how travelers from all over the world will soon fall in love with this new luxury lodge.

Out to sea

After a few magnificent days, it is time to leave The Lindis, its lovely team and the spectacular location with its million-dollar views. Our helicopter is ready to take us across the Southern Alps. Our pilot Dan is a true South Island native and has been with Alpine Helicopters for half of his life. I like him instantly and feel totally at ease as we soar above the snow-capped peaks, dive deep down into remote valleys, fly low over the vast native forest, rise high above the clouds and eventually land on a totally secluded West Coast beach. Well, actually it is not totally secluded – Dan has landed our chopper in the middle of a huge seal colony.

With our cameras ready, we carefully step out and watch in awe as these beautiful creatures assess us with the same amount of curiosity. They might not smell great, but the opportunity of being so close to them, hearing their deep roars, watching the little ones play and taking some great shots up close is pretty amazing. We're sad we have to leave, but our guide Doug says he's got yet another surprise in store, so on we fly along the coast. New Zealand's west coast is wild, loud, misty, rough, barren, secluded, but equally captivating, thrilling and unique. A few kilometers down we land on a black sand beach and Doug asks us to get out. He then takes off the helicopter's door and attaches a rescue hook and a long metal wire. With expert precision they fly the helicopter out to the open sea, aim the rescue hook over a little red buoy that bounces wildly in the roaring waves, and pull out a huge metal crate. A chopper, a hook and a crate in the sea? That's what I call helicopter crayfish catching at its very best. Our Hong Kong friends Tina and William cannot believe their luck as we are invited to pick one whole crayfish per person.



The rest of the crayfish are released, the crate put back into place, and with content smiles on our faces we take off again. But wait, there's another highlight awaiting us – landing on top of a spectacular glacier for some stunning photographs and a snowball fight. Can this day get any better? It actually can, as our crayfish have yet to be cooked. An unparalleled helicopter excursion of this level of attention to detail means we aren't heading to a fine-dining restaurant to have our catch prepared there; an alpine kitchen and luxury picnic is the way to go. Soon we sit down at the glamping table on a tussock-covered plateau high up in the mountains, enjoy a glass of chilled champagne while Dan and Doug cook our crayfish to perfection on a little gas stove. This is quite the way to enjoy a luxurious meal, and Tina swears she had never had better crayfish.

For afternoon tea we visit Minaret Station, a rather unusual lodge and one that I really wish we had booked to stay for a few days. Set in a remote valley and only accessible by air, this alpine luxury lodge is heaven for nature lovers, couples and those who seek unusual experiences.

To enjoy the more remote side of Queenstown, we decide to spend our last evening at the prestigious Blanket Bay lodge, a bit further down the lake. Blanket Bay is marketed as New Zealand's ultimate alpine escape. I can say Blanket Bay is a remarkable luxury lodge and a lovely way to bring our outstanding luxury-lodge-hopping tour to an end in a lot of style.

The next morning, it is time to say goodbye to New Zealand. A string of highlights seems to have been the goal of this trip. Unforgettable experiences, extraordinary memories, million-dollar shots and strengthened friendships are what we will take home. And one thing is for sure: We will be back, because New Zealand is the perfect place for a luxury retreat. 