

New Zealand | Once known for backpacking and bungee jumping, the country is now attracting wealthier visitors with its network of luxury lodges. By Mark Jones

# Lodge-hopping



The four accountants who'd come down from Nelson by helicopter to have fish and chips on the quay had flown back home. The Australian-Chinese family next door had finished cooking the fish they'd caught in the bay and the guys in the public campsite at the end of the cove had run out of beer and finally fallen silent. I stood on the balcony of my cabin at the Bay of Many Coves. The only sound was the Sound — the waters of Queen Charlotte Sound, lapping against the pontoon, which, with its white uprights and the white yacht moored nearby, seemed to float in space against the flat, black bay.

So ended a blissful day in New Zealand and a rather remarkable journey. In a week I had crossed between North and South Islands visiting some of the 31 properties that make up the Luxury Lodges of New Zealand. This is a loose association of places, owned by a variety of owners from Wall Street billionaires to third-generation families of rural landowners — and they are booming.

Once seen by many as a destination for backpackers to hike, bike and bungee jump, New Zealand's profile is changing. In 2014 the national tourist board developed a "premium sector strategy" that would appeal to the world's wealthiest 40-60 year olds. It hoped to capitalise on a perceived rejection of ostentatious luxury in favour of privacy, authenticity and natural environments.

Already it has paid dividends: the members of Luxury Lodges of New Zealand saw revenues rise 22 per cent for the six months to September 2015 compared to the previous year. And rather than simply visiting one upmarket lodge, they are increasingly indulging in what is — genuinely — becoming known as "lodge-hopping". You can hop, as I did, on internal flights and into rental cars. You can hop on ferries. Or — if you're really not scrimping — you can hop from lodge to lodge on a helicopter; they all have helipads.

Rates include breakfast, early evening drinks and dinner, and range from NZ\$805 (£360) for a room at Hapuku Lodge or NZ\$12,075 for the owner's cot-

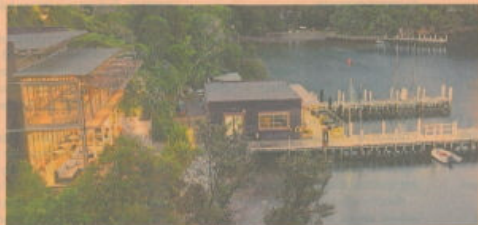
The marketing slogan is as simple as it is compelling: 'Stay where the world can't find you'

tage at Matakauri Lodge near Queenstown, where the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge stayed in 2014.

I started in the North Island, flying from Auckland to Napier, the east-coast town that was devastated by a huge earthquake in 1931. It was rebuilt entirely in the Art Deco style and, Miami Beach aside, there's no finer concentration of that vernacular. Some 20 minutes out of town, the US billionaire and hedge fund pioneer Julian Robertson acquired 6,000 acres of farmland and forest gazing over Hawke's Bay in 1995 (for what he has described as "the cost of a modest New York apartment"). In 2007 he opened an isolated lodge there called The Farm at Cape Kidnappers, run by his son Jay.

There are walking trails along barren clifftops and through wild meadows with the promise of spotting kiwis and tuas (the former hard; the latter easy). There's also what Golf Digest says is the best course in New Zealand. The rooms are what you'd expect a billionaire with taste and a care for heritage to make of a 19th-century sheepshearer's farmhouse.

From there I flew to Queenstown, the more or less undisputed global capital of adventure and adrenaline. On the outskirts overlooking Lake Wakatipu is Azur Lodge, nine cabins (or villas, as they prefer to be known) sprinkled down a steep slope. Inside: the trappings of a contemporary chic hotel — white sofas, fireplaces, throws, rugs and sculp-



tures. Azur is not part of the lodges association for the simple reason that it doesn't serve dinner, but instead staff will order food in from one of the many international restaurants nearby. I was as happy here with my fishburger from Fergbaker and Amisfield Sauvignon Blanc as with any meal on the trip.

After venturing further afield in Otago, including Arrowtown, a village so sweet, tree-lined and clapboarded it's crying out to be the setting of a horror movie, I took the Milford Sound road south past the Remarkables ski fields, through the paddocks and trout streams to Te Anau and Fiordland Lodge. I hesitate to say Fiordland is the humblest of the lodges, although it is the cheapest and most traditional of those I saw — albeit housed in a fine contemporary timber building with an asymmetrical pitched roof set against a backdrop of

distant snowcapped peaks. It wasn't the best room but it was my favourite cooking of the trip. The classic, unfussy dishes such as grilled salmon and risotto don't sound exciting, but they're just what guests — whether the helicopter-riding classes or not — want on a rural New Zealand adventure.

The lodges are not just about fine food, soft mattresses and great views but about the range of activities and experiences offered. In the morning, a helicopter landed on Fiordland's front lawn and whisked us over the lake and up the mountain to the Luxmore Hut, a mountain refuge 1,085m above sea level and one of the stopovers on the celebrated Kepler Track walking route.

I was guided by Steve Norris, who runs local tour operator Trips and Tramps, and is also an unpaid checker of stoat traps. Many of New Zealand's native creatures have struggled against predators who arrived with human visitors — dogs, cats, rats, rabbits, stoats and their like — and the traps are an attempt to control their numbers. We descended through blustery rain and buffeting winds into sparkling sunny lakeland,

checking the traps as we went. We found one dead stoat and two decomposing rats in the traps. This is a hopeful sign for the kiwis and even rarer tahakes, their eggs and their chicks — when they first laid the traps, the haul would have been five or six times that. "Unless," as one laconic American tramp we met on the trail put it, "the stoats have gotten smarter."

From Queenstown, a flight took me to poor, battered and broken Christchurch. Before the 2011 earthquake this was known as the most genteelly English of New Zealand cities. Now, with its cranes, wasteland parking lots and hoardings it has the air of an English town that's still recovering from the Luftwaffe. But the insurance money is beginning to flow at last. It will recover; look at Napier.

An hour's drive to the south is Annandale, a coastal farm that is home to some of the association's most dramatic accommodation. Four separate, private, houses are scattered across a 4,000-acre farm, each offering a distinct architectural style and what the owners

Clockwise from main: Scrubby Bay beach house; tree houses of Hapuku Lodge; Azur Lodge; the Bay of Many Coves; Fiordland Lodge; dolphin watching trip near Hapuku Lodge; a helicopter trip from Fiordland Lodge — (top left) iStockphoto; (top right) iStockphoto; (middle left) iStockphoto; (middle right) iStockphoto; (bottom left) iStockphoto; (bottom right) iStockphoto

call "gumboot luxury". They range from the five-bedroom Homestead, a handsome colonial-style farmhouse built in the 1880s to Seascape, a dramatic glass-walled retreat just for two. Surrounded by hills and facing the sea, Scrubby Bay is a relaxed and secluded beach house, ideal for gatherings of up to 14, complete with swimming pool and outdoor hot tub. Annadale's marketing slogan is as simple as it is compelling: "Stay where the world can't find you".

Head north from Christchurch and three hours on the road brings you to Kalkoura, a small town on a bay, whose cold, rich waters support sperm whales, seals, occasional orcas, dolphins, albatrosses; and hence shoals of tourists.

Just up the coast, the tree houses of Hapuku Lodge appeared between the mountains and sea. I wish I had the space to tell the story of the Wilson family, five generations of architects who made their way in San Francisco and came back to create this delightful place. It's also one of those New Zealand environments that throws the unwary European: your eyes settle on a pattern of tussocky fields and hills, so familiar to travellers in Scotland or North Wales; and then — what? — totara trees, whelk-punga tree ferns, pohutukawa flowers.

For all the epic Middle Earth wonders of the mountainous west, the drive along the coast road to Blenheim and the far north of the South Island is the most magical: the turquoise and aquamarine expanse of the Pacific to your right, the golden hills of the wine lands rippling in the wind and sun ahead.

At Picton you leave your car and take a boat through Queen Charlotte Sound to the Bay of Many Coves, where this story began and ends. The lodge has been transformed by Murray McCaw, chair of Luxury Lodges of New Zealand, and his wife Elaine. After a career in the motor industry, IT and doing corporate turnarounds, Murray has settled for a life where he can indulge his passion for photographing birds, wine tasting, playing Scottish folk songs, organising opera festivals and chatting to people like me about what this particular aspect of New Zealand tourism has to offer.

Over dinner and an increasingly voluble debate about wine matching we wrestled with a phrase coined by my tour operator to sell the lodges: "luxury with a conscience". To me it sounded like "puritanical decadence" or "responsible hedonism", and on my trip I sensed some awkwardness around it. Luxury, the word and the idea, doesn't thrive well in these far southern islands.

True, there are Pradas and Louis Vuitton on Auckland's Queen Street, but even their most loyal customers from Hong Kong and Beijing aren't here for the shopping. They're here to eat abalone, see kids graduate, eye up a waterfront apartment, try some wines and fill their bodies with clean air and water.

Within the lodges' association there's a select group of "super lodges" (of which Cape Kidnappers is one), with more privacy, a bigger room, more daring architecture and higher thread count on your sheets. But I'd still recommend trying the full range; and don't forget the real luxuries the lodges offer — the traps, the wildlife, the heart-breaking views — are open to everyone.

## DETAILS

Mark Jones was a guest of New Zealand In Depth ([newzealand-indepth.co.uk](http://newzealand-indepth.co.uk)), which offers a 10-night tour staying at five of the association's properties, from £4,120 per person, including half-board basis, a round of golf at Cape Kidnappers, a scenic helicopter flight, car hire, domestic flights and transfers. The writer flew from Hong Kong to Auckland on Cathay Pacific ([cathaypacific.com](http://cathaypacific.com)).

## Short cuts

**Kitzbühel** The Alpine ski racing season fits its stride next weekend with the Hahnenkamm in Kitzbühel, Austria, arguably the biggest event on the World Cup tour. But this year has also seen the launch of a very different kind of tour, with events in which competitors must race up, rather than down, the mountain. Many of the courses used in the new Vertical Up tour are the same as those

Hahnenkamm itself. Competitors can choose any equipment they wish — touring skis, cross-country skis, spiked running shoes or snowshoes. Entry is open to all but be warned: courses are up to 4.5km long, with an altitude gain of more than 1,000m. [vertical-up.com](http://vertical-up.com)

**London** Air ports serving the British capital are among the world's worst for

Uphill ski racing on the Vertical Up tour — [vertical-up.com](http://vertical-up.com)



league ranks the 196 airports worldwide that have at least 3m seats on departing planes each year. London City performs well, achieving 51st position with 86 per cent of flights departing or arriving within 15 minutes of schedule, but the capital's other airports fare poorly. Heathrow comes in at 174 out of 196, Luton at 189, Stansted at 190 and Gatwick at 192. The report suggests

flights within 15 minutes of schedule. Top slot goes to Osaka in Japan, with 94 per cent. [oag.com](http://oag.com)

**Paris** Air France retired its final Boeing 747 this week, after more than 45 years of flying the aircraft. The last flight touched down in Paris from Mexico City on Monday, and members of the public are being offered tours of the plane this

from fleets worldwide. Japan Airlines, Air New Zealand and Singapore Airlines have already retired their final 747s; Delta is due to follow suit in 2017. But despite Air France's move, other European flag carriers show no sign of ending their long relationships with the plane. Lufthansa still has 32 in its fleet; British Airways has 42 and is investing in modernising their interiors.