

Hooked on Huka

Nick Scott finds a haven of luxury and back-to-basics adventure in the one (extravagant) package at New Zealand's Huka Lodge.

The crash of a nearby waterfall, the crackle of a log fire, the clink of crystal: it's the aural equivalent of the heady aromatic blend of a fine pinot noir. I'm basking in the early evening glow of Huka Lodge, a retreat which redefines the outer limits of exclusivity and nestles on the lush banks of the Waikato River in the dead centre of New Zealand's North Island. The perfect gentleman's adventure destination posing as a romantic getaway, it's a place that makes Eden, as seen illustrated in children's Bibles, look like a Bunnings car park.

On a terrace outside, overlooking the deep cobalt river and lush weeping willows and firs on its banks, a band of newly acquainted guests enjoy a tough bout of Name-Drop. "Have you visited Tim's hunting lodge in Namibia?" parps one high society shape-thrower as I wander past. Even a Jaffa-orange Texan – lavishly enriched by decades of loveless tactical nuptials, she'll boast to me later on – complaining to management about not having a TV in her room with which to check "Mr Obama ain't screwing my portfolio into the ground" can't quite crush the spirit of posh camaraderie.

With a drink in hand, I step back inside and take a slow walk through winding corridors lined with nautical regalia – sepia maps, antiquated fishing



reels, rods and nets. Tripping over a basket full of ancient tennis racquets – the type Henry VIII might have rocketed aces at a quivering Anne Bolyen with – I stumble into a small dining room-cum-library, fussily appointed with candles, crystal and an eclectic assortment of slightly battered furniture.

"Her Majesty and His Royal Highness like to dine in there," calls a female clerk from the nearby reception desk, smiling playfully.

A stone archway carved with the word "Abundance" acts as an invitation for visitors to enter through it and descend to a cosy cellar with candlelight flickering on its vaulted ceilings and sample the region's finest wines.

The Huka grounds are only three hectares



The hide-out: Huka's layout includes a wide selection of indoor and outdoor spaces in which to make yourself scarce.

NEED TO DO

Tempting as it might be to revel in the sybaritic possibilities of Huka Lodge, that would be a shocking waste. The lodge's staff can happily organise jet-boating, kayaking, parasailing, whitewater rafting and quad-biking on request.

The area is also rife with hunting opportunities, including deer, boar and goats year-round, and pheasant, duck and quail if it's shooting season. The Lodge will provide transport (four-wheel drive or helicopter) and lessons if needed, and local taxidermists and trophy fees are available on request.

For a lazier taste of the terrain, you can get a chopper tour of the surrounding area. The snow-topped mountains of Tongariro National Park and White Island are popular spots. Also worthy of a low hover are the mud lakes, where steam and sulfuric gas is farted upwards from the bowels of the Earth.

NEED TO KNOW

Design: New Zealand-born designer Virginia Fisher breathed life into what was a humble fishing shack back in 1984, with a style characterised by natural tones that blend with the majesty outside and

plenty of simple exposed woodwork and an assortment of artefacts. Food: Huka's executive chef David Griffiths strikes a decent compromise between fussy and hearty. His five-course dinner menus typically run from spicy soup entrees



to melt-in-the-mouth desserts, via lamb or trout. Excellent local dairy produce makes long, lazy breakfasts a treat. Price: From NZ\$2844 (about \$690) per person per night during mid-season (May to September). Price includes pre-dinner drinks, a five-course dinner, full breakfast, use of all facilities and airport transfers. Inquiries, hukalodge.co.nz

GETTING THERE

Emirates (emirates.com/au) flies from Sydney and Melbourne to Auckland daily. Air New Zealand (airnewzealand.com.au) operates three flights between Auckland and Taupo daily. Helicopter transfers between Auckland and Huka Lodge are available on request.

"hooker", it has 18 lodge rooms (think neoclassical ewok) lining the river. High-profile visitors (Messers Gates, Murdoch and Cheney have all been) are more likely to stay in the hidden-away Owner's Cottage, a four-suite boathouse with bleached oak floors and soft cream furnishings. What you're really here for, though, is adventure and it seems apt when I wake up on Day Two to opt for the ancient pastime that brought Huka Lodge into existence.

Huka was founded in the 1920s when an intrepid-spirited Irishman, Alan Pye, heard about a fisherman's nirvana near Taupo. Having purchased a block of land on a bend in the river, he put up some canvas-clad huts and began establishing a reputation for fine dining and even finer hospitality for well-heeled anglers. Dutch



Roger: A chopper transfer from Auckland will possibly cost more than the whole holiday but at least you'll get to wear your aviators.

in size but a tour that takes in every impeccably manicured nook and cranny of the lodge takes a good hour. Pronounced, to the only slightly embarrassed amusement of the management,

entrepreneur Alex van Heeren bought the Lodge in 1984 and developed the site into the award-winning den of opulence it is today, but it has stayed in touch with its fishing roots.

Raft fishing in the Waikato River delivers adrenaline; fly-fishing in the wilderness surrounding it offers tranquillity. But being a landlubberly novice looking for a straight-out-of-the-pocket Hemingwayesque experience, I opt for boat fishing in nearby Lake Taupo.

Lake Taupo's 190km circumference is the familiar hole in any vaguely detailed map of the North Island. The lake's waters, packed with rainbow and brown trout introduced from California and Germany respectively, are so clear you can see the flickering glint of silver as you reel in your catch, even when the creature is still five metres or so below the surface. You can't buy trout from this region anywhere – non-commercial licenses are granted on a one-day basis – but you can take your haul back to the lodge, where staff will show you how to smoke it.

The following morning there's only time for a two-hour horseback trek through local bush trails on nearby Harakeke Farm. Battling itchy drizzle and a crushing reluctance to begin the journey home at lunchtime, I reach a brow of a hill and look out over verdant contours masked here and there by fog. Just a few kilometres away is the familiar outside world of tarmac and sub-prime catastrophe.

A word to the wise: should you make the trip to Huka, banish all qualms about the latter and be as lavish with your time and money as you are adventurous in spirit. ✦

Star chambers

The first phase of Sydney casino Star City's \$475 million refurbishment, the Star Suites, is complete. Thirty-one premium suites, designed by Cate Young, are the new additions, with exclusive room service menu from chef Sean Connolly, a cocktail minibar from Mark Ward, L'Occitane skincare products and three LCD TVs, including a waterproof one above the spa. From \$549 a night. Inquiries, starcity.com.au



Check in: Catch *Lateline* on the waterproof set above the spa before you hit the hay then wake up to look at *Sunrise* or the sunrise.



OPERA IN AUCKLAND

New Zealand is only a few hours from Australia but why zoom straight off to Taupo on your trip to Huka Lodge when you can rest up in Auckland, where your plane will land? Mollies boutique hotel looks over Auckland's Waitemata Harbour and is the master project of a pair of opera buffs, which explains the baby grand in the lounge. It's also part of the Paris-based Relais & Chateaux boutique hotel collection. Inquiries, mollies.co.nz

