

signature

LUXURY TRAVEL & LIFESTYLE

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Sport of Kings Polo in the Valley

REFINEMENT ON THE RIVER

From humble fishing lodge to New Zealand luxury institution, 90 years of Huka Lodge hospitality is an anniversary worth celebrating, as Cathy Wagstaff discovers.



This is the perfect setting for my final dinner at Huka Lodge, under the gilded candelabra of the Wine Cellar. Candlelight glints off bottles of the world's most prestigious vintages, lining the chamber in liquid splendour, adding a certain sparkle to the five-course menu by Executive Chef Paul Froggatt. He works his magic with the rich array of local produce, serving up heirloom tomatoes with Cabernet Sauvignon sorbet, a delicious Ōra king salmon with beetroot, Hawke's Bay pork with black pudding, and a dessert of Taihiki fig in mulled wine with blackcurrants.

An illustrious heritage

This is but one of over 20 dining areas at New Zealand's distinguished lodge, including cosy corners warmed by outdoor fires throughout the manicured gardens. It is a dining experience privileging intimacy, a factor that may be partly responsible for the roll call of famous names who have signed the Lodge's guest book, from royalty to designers and celebrity chefs. Queen Elizabeth II favours dining in the Library when she visits, while Jimmy Barnes enjoyed a stay just a week before mine. When Alan Pye first established his humble fishing lodge on a lush, green bend of the Waikato River in 1924, he couldn't have imagined the exclusive enclave Huka Lodge would become.

Greeted by a sweep of 90-year-old redwoods, you enter a sophisticated country home: warm open fires, book-lined shelves, tennis and croquet courts, spa pools, richly appointed suites and gourmet fine dining, all set in nearly seven hectares of sprawling grounds, encompassing eight 'nationally significant' gardens, flowing down to the river's edge.

Add to this a seamless, understated service and an absolute attention to detail, and you understand why Huka Lodge has garnered so many worldwide

accolades and the love of so many high-profile guests.

All in the details

My junior lodge suite, one of 25 rooms, including the two Cottages, is a light-filled retreat. The room is simple and refined, bathing guests in muted tones and thoughtful details, including freshly baked biscuits. My verandah looks across the lawn to the glassy river and beyond to the dense green forest that edges its banks. Here the world is at peace, enveloped in whisper-quiet serenity, with swans gliding on the water.

For our first evening we dine in the Trophy Room, warmed by the flickering glow of the fire. Paul crafts an exquisite five-course dinner that only adds to the splendour, drawing inspiration from his experience in Michelin-starred kitchens of the world and the secluded intimacy of Huka Lodge.

The fusion of flavours from England, France and Asia is reflected in his dishes, which includes highlights such as king crab with cucumber and lemon verbena; quail with pickled grapes and hazelnuts; abalone and venison with sour tomato; and a delicate passionfruit rice pudding with coconut and mandarin, topped off with the aromatic flavours of wines from South African sister property, Grande Provence Heritage Wine Estate.

A touch of adrenaline

Huka Lodge has not forgotten its origins and, even today, fishing is the primary pursuit. To honour this heritage, we go trout fishing on New Zealand's largest lake, Lake Taupo, following in the wake of Prince Philip and countless other guests. Trout fishing is heavily regulated in order to ensure numbers aren't depleted: caught fish must be more than 40cm long, no bait is allowed, and the catch is limited and cannot be sold. But luck is on our side, and, from the cold waters, we land a beauty to be

transformed into a delightful sashimi platter under Paul's guidance.

Fly fishing is another favourite activity, as is mountain hiking, guided helicopter wilderness hikes, golfing on Jack Nicklaus' signature Kinloch course, helicopter flights over Tongariro National Park, a thrilling jet boat ride to Huka Falls, vineyard tours to taste the fine wines of Hawke's Bay or indeed anything else you might desire.

The ultimate Huka Lodge experience takes in the North Island's inimitable landscape, combining scenic helicopter flights and a relaxing cruise on Lake Taupo, complete with lunch.

For my weekend-long stay, however,

the thrill of the catch is enough to sustain us, and we opt to luxuriate at the lodge, lingering in the warmth of the Library over a long afternoon tea and exploring the endless crooks and crevices of the gardens.

That evening, once my tastebuds have been tantalised in the glow of the Wine Cellar, we retire to the Lodge Room for petit fours. It is a delicious finale to three days of incredible food, wine and high-end tradition. As Huka Lodge celebrates its 90th anniversary, I can well understand its enduring appeal, a legacy that seems certain to continue long into the future. ♦

Travel file

Accommodation

www.hukalodge.co.nz

Getting there

www.airnewzealand.com.au
Huka Lodge can organise transfers by rental car, limo, plane or helicopter from New Zealand cities.

- 01 Exclusive Alan Pye Cottage
- 02 Riverside accommodation
- 03 Impeccable service
- 04 Owner's Cottage style
- 05 Elegant cuisine



*“FROM THE MOMENT YOU ARRIVE,
YOU ENTER A SOPHISTICATED
COUNTRY HOME”*