

No bones about it

For tranquility seeped in elegance, Huka Lodge is peerless, writes **Caroline Gladstone**.

Chef Paul Froggatt makes short work of the rainbow trout we caught a few hours earlier, slicing and dicing it into an amazing plate of sashimi in all shapes and sizes.

We eat it with dipping sauces as the sun sets on Huka Lodge.

Froggatt is relishing the bounty of Lake Taupo and applauds our efforts in reeling in several large fish. There is no trout on the menu at the lodge or any restaurant in New Zealand as the law prohibits anyone selling it; the idea being if you can't sell it then you won't poach it.

But there are no laws preventing you from catching it and giving it to a chef to cook – as long as you had a fishing licence when you hooked it.

Trout by the tonne – in the lake and the Waikato River and its many tributaries – was the reason Huka Lodge was put on the map.

Froggatt, who hails from rural Sussex and landed in New Zealand nine months ago after stints in France's top restaurants and acclaimed eateries in Singapore and Hong Kong, is the first new chef at the renowned lodge in five years. His mission is to introduce more locally grown produce and adopt a "back to basics" and not-

too-experimental approach to cooking. He's definitely in the right place.

Pundits call Huka the "super lodge", the place that introduced the L-word into the New Zealand vernacular and then sat back

peacefully by the river as other lodges clambered to follow suit.

A stone's throw from the North Island town of Taupo, Huka Lodge wallows in its accolades. People rave about it. Miranda Kerr and Orlando Bloom hunkered down here in happier times and apparently it's the only place the Queen will stay when visiting this neck of the Colonies.

Lodges differ from hotels and resorts because they stress (a bad choice of words) they are places to unwind. They also corner the best and most tranquil locations and appeal to a fishin', huntin' and shootin' clientele.

Huka turns 90 this year and while it welcomed the likes of Zane Grey and Douglas Fairbanks jnr in the early days, its appeal today is as egalitarian as it is elitist.

Huka general manager Kerry Molloy says he greets all manner of guests – those who arrive by private jet and those who turn up in a camper van – the

TRIP NOTES

MORE INFORMATION
hukalodge.co.nz

GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand flies to Auckland from Sydney about five times daily. From Auckland it's a 45 minute flight to Taupo. There are non-stop flights between Sydney and Rotorua (for a one-hour car transfer to the lodge) on Tuesday

and Saturday only. Return fares start from \$629 on the Sydney-

Rotorua leg. See airnewzealand.com.au.

STAYING THERE

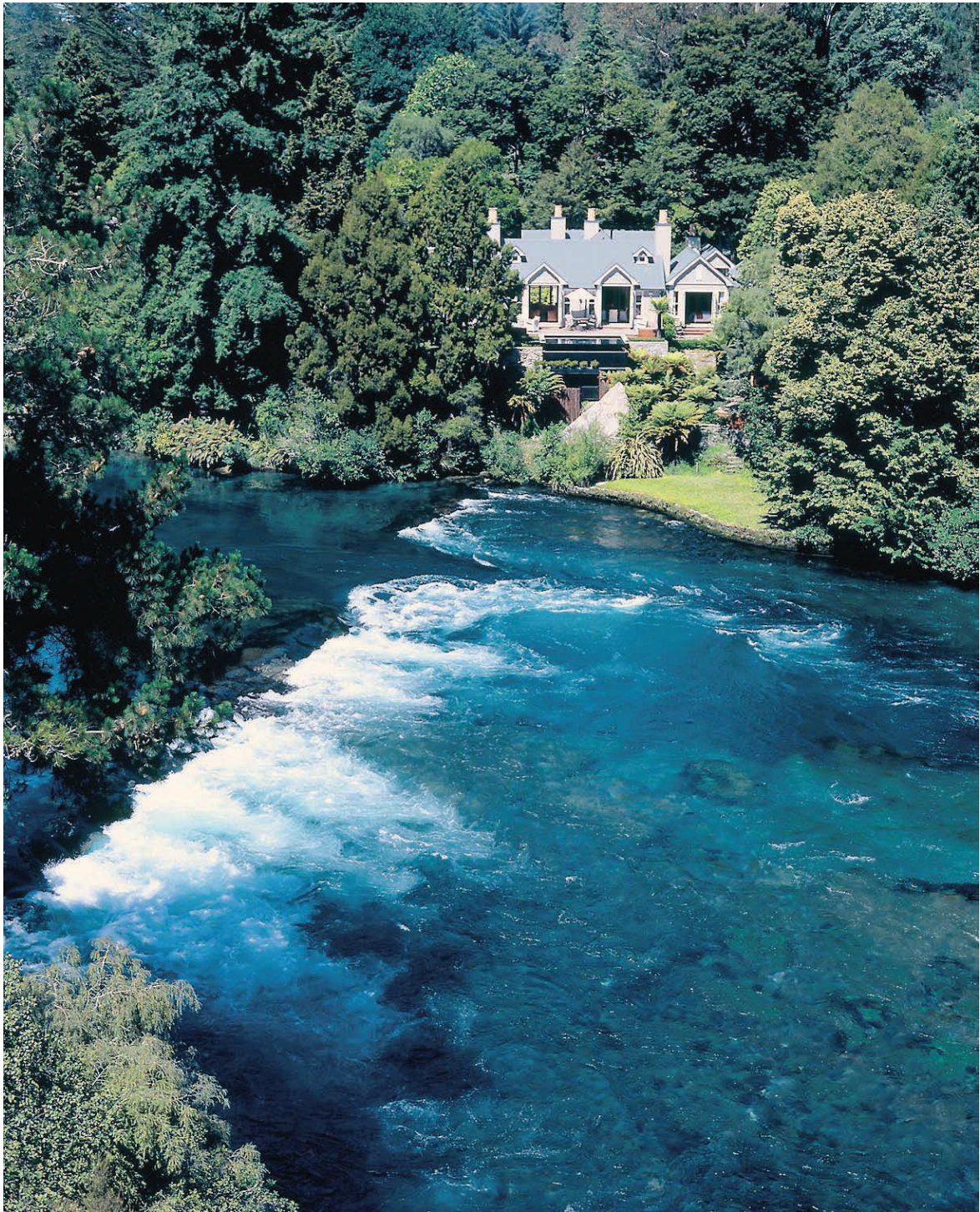
Huka Lodge has 18 riverside junior lodge suites from \$795 a person a night, one two-bedroom lodge suite from \$1395 a person a night, the two-suite Alan Pye Cottage and the four-suite Owner's Cottage. The

cottages cost from \$1390 a person a night. This includes a five-course dinner, breakfast, tennis, petanque, croquet, swimming pool and spa pools and in-room Wi-Fi.

Fishing and other activities are extra. A half-day fly-fishing trip with equipment and fishing licences costs from \$530 for one guest and \$545 for two guests.

FISHING THERE

Chris Jolly Outdoors has been operating fishing tours (fly fishing in rivers and boat fishing on Lake Taupo) for 30 years and has a long association with Huka Lodge. The company also operates jet-boating, helicopter and hunting trips, among other activities. See chrisjolly.co.nz.



common denominator is their deep pockets.

There are many beautiful places to stay in the world but as soon as I enter Huka Lodge, smell the open

fire burning, walk out on the terrace and see the river rushing by, I'm seduced. The lush greenery, that gurgling river and "the serenity" (quoting Darryl

Kerrigan), have me in their spell.

Ninety years ago it wasn't anywhere near as grand of course, although the location would have been just as superb. When the

reputedly charming Irishman Alan Pye bought the land and established a few tents on the Waikato River, he went after the fishing-mad crowd.

They came in droves to reel them in on the banks of New Zealand's longest river. The early guests spread the word of this angler's Eden; Zane Grey declared it a "fly-fishing El Dorado" and a decade or so later James A. Michener penned his collection of short stories, *Return to Paradise*, while staying there.

In the 1990s, a new clientele was lured by the romance of the whimsically wise movie, *A River Runs Through It*, our fishing guide tells me later.

Nature has truly blessed this volcanic region. The Waikato rises on the slopes of Mount Ruapehu and wends its way to Lake Taupo. As it squeezes out of the northern end of the expansive lake, it gains force and races towards Huka Falls, 600 metres from the lodge entrance.

I'm surprised at the pace of the river as I admire it from my suite's terrace and even more surprised that on closer inspection I can see to the bottom of its clear, jade waters. It's no wonder the trout love it.

While Huka's beginnings were humble, today it's a beacon of style and elegance with hints of country club. I love the tartan chairs in the library, which I imagine also appeal to the Queen, and note that while there's an element of the fishin' and huntin' ornamentation with statues of hounds by the fire and mounted deer heads in the trophy room, it doesn't dominate. Pressed to find words to describe the look, I'll settle for "simply perfect".

The guest rooms have the lush theme of the ever-so-green outdoors, but a degree softer. Cream-painted timber walls exude a chalet feel and on entering, I just want to grab the tartan angora rug, wrap myself in it, prop myself up

against the soft pillows and watch the river from my sumptuous bed. The bathroom, with a deep tub that looks out on a private, fern-filled oasis is a destination in itself.

This sophisticated reincarnation of the legendary property is the work of Dutch

entrepreneur and honorary consul to New Zealand, Alex van Heeren, who bought the lodge in 1984. Along with New Zealand interior designer Virginia Fisher he turned what had been an ailing establishment into one that collects awards year after year.

Set on almost seven hectares, there is plenty of space. The main lodge house with its lounge, library, trophy room and terraces is the focal point. A short wander away via tree-lined paths are 18 junior lodge suites. Flanking either ends of the property are the two cottages (read mini-mansions), the owner's cottage, built in 1937, and the five-year-old Alan Pye Cottage.

With 20 different dining areas both indoors and out, Froggatt has plenty of exquisite places to show off his modern European style of cooking. He tells me he yearned for the country life of his childhood in Sussex after years working in bustling Asian capitals. As we sample our sashimi on the terrace of the owner's cottage, I think he's nailed it.

Afterwards we settle into the subterranean wine cellar among hundreds of dusty bottles for a five-course degustation, while other lodge guests savour the same meal in whichever venue they have chosen for the night.

Another night we dine in the trophy room, although my favourite nook is the orchard, an outdoor private garden shrouded by hedges and warmed by an open fireplace and pot belly stoves.

As the winter dew in, Huka Lodge hosted authors, wine-makers and former rugby great and Wallaby captain Nick Farr Jones during a series of special event dinners.

In August, guests enjoyed the best vintages at the Champagne Bollinger dinner, while in October Man Booker prize-winning author Eleanor Catton will talk about her novel *The Luminaries* as guests sample canapes before tucking into a five-course feast. **T**

The writer travelled courtesy of Huka Lodge.

It's the only place the Queen will stay in this neck of the Colonies.



Simply perfect: (From left) the main lodge building on the banks of the Waikato River; the dining room; Alan Pye cottage.