

TRAVEL

Huka Lodge has me hooked

For tranquillity 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 campervan – the 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.

TRIP NOTES

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.

MORE INFORMATION

hukalodge.co.nz



Exquisite . . .
the
incomparable
Alan Pye
Cottage.