



TRAVEL NEW ZEALAND

Understated elegance

Across the Tasman, the premium tourism sector is on the rise, as discerning and time-poor travellers seek exceptional service and bespoke experiences, writes **Sam Bennett**.

The road was pitch dark and a heavy mist had settled as we slowly wound our way up a narrow private road through thick forest. Upon arrival the atmosphere was warm, homely and inviting. The dining room was intimate despite its size and the crackle of an open fire provided welcome respite to the persistent drizzle and cool coastal air after a long day in transit.

The maitre d' extended a warm welcome and offered an aperitif as he explained the evening's menu. Here, the level of hospitality, attention to detail and service is far from ordinary.

New Zealand has long been a popular destination for powder hounds, adrenaline junkies, campervanners and backpackers, with a reputation for extreme sports and breathtaking wilderness. But the premium tourism sector is steadily on the rise, with discerning and time-poor travellers seeking out secluded destinations with seamless service, exceptional food and wine, and bespoke experiences.

Arriving by air at Huka Lodge in Taupo on the North Island, one can't help but be struck by the stunning location. The lodge is nestled among tall trees and the sprawling, immaculate emerald lawn spills into the pristine Waikato River. As we slowly descend towards the property, the grounds and lodge are postcard-perfect.

Celebrating its 90th birthday in 2014, the original lodge was built by Irishman Alan Pye in 1924 as a private trout fishing retreat. The hideaway soon became the stuff of legend throughout the fly-fishing world. Nowadays the lodge is known as one of the world's finest. Featuring just 25 rooms, including two private cottages, across seven hectares, all are within stone-skimming distance of the pristine Waikato.

The lodge also boasts some of the finest cuisine in New Zealand with English-born

Michelin-starred executive chef Paul Froggatt at the helm. Garnering his repertoire from his time in the kitchens of Michelin starred restaurants in Europe and Asia, Froggatt takes his cue from the finest of local seasonal ingredients creating an ever-evolving seasonal menu. "I like to use everything that is local to New Zealand", says Froggatt. "I don't buy anything in. The fish, for example, is all sustainable and line caught which is very important for me."

The delicate tomato consommé had depth of flavour, as did his simple yet elegant treatment of the local Taupo beef, one of his favourite local ingredients, cooked rare and supported by a stunningly complex red wine reduction.

It's difficult to go anywhere off the beaten track without encountering striking scenery.

There is a long list of distinguished and high profile signatures in Huka's guest book. Monarchs, sultans, and film and music stars from around the globe have all kicked off their shoes here.

In 2013, Tourism New Zealand announced the establishment of its premium travel team, whose goal is to gain targeted exposure of the country's premium tourism assets to a defined market of well-heeled clientele. The group created the premium sector strategy to focus on high net worth individuals. Often, very and ultra HNWIs spend a majority of their lives travelling and unique, remote

destinations are highly sought after, either to decompress and unwind or, as is quite often the case, to indulge in personal passions and interests.

One pastime firmly on the group's radar goes hand-in-glove (pun intended) with the premium travel market. Between 2008 and 2012, around 280,000 tourists visited the country specifically to play golf. In a global market worth an estimated \$US20 billion, according to the International Association of Golfing Tour Operators, New Zealand contains some of the world's most challenging and naturally stunning courses – a handful of which are regarded some of the best on the planet.

Although not specifically tailored or marketed as a golf resort (under half of the annual visitors actually travel here particularly for golf), The Farm at Cape Kidnappers can definitely be a golfing destination in its own right.

Set on 2420 hectares of coastal farmland with 180 degree views of the Pacific Ocean, the lodge's par 71 golf course was designed by the legendary Tom Doak. In 2013 it was rated 33 on the list of top 100 golf courses in the world by *Golf Magazine*.

Sadly, due to the savage wind and driving rain, the opportunity for yours truly to squeeze in a sneaky round was next to impossible.

For the non-golfers, Cape Kidnappers and the surrounding area offers plenty of alternatives. The food and wine at the lodge are exceptional. The kitchen is once again focused on utilising the very best in local sustainable produce as well as growing their own vegetables on the property. Deer, beef and lamb are all locally raised and the fish are line caught in Hawkes Bay.

The lodge is a short distance from some of the finest wineries and vineyards in New



Zealand, including the family owned and operated Craggy Range. The cellar door tour provides an insight into the philosophy of the winemakers and the history of the property and business. A private wine tasting in the barrel room is intimate and informative and the on site restaurant Terroir is one of the finest in the region. The vineyard platter offers a small portion of all the entrées to share and the sous-vide duck breast with artichoke, liver parfait, cabbage and date packs serious punch in the flavour stakes.

Exposing the premium experiences on offer in this market is key to any tourism marketing strategy. The beauty of a country blessed with such natural splendour is that it's difficult to go anywhere off the beaten track without encountering striking scenery. With the majority of premium properties set in remote wilderness, customised helicopter tours, fly fishing, hunting and shooting,

Clockwise from main: the owners' cottage at Huka Lodge; executive chef Paul Froggatt; one of Froggatt's creations; fly fishing guide Dave Wood at Huka Lodge. Horse riding on the beach at Palliser Bay (above) home of Wharekauhau Lodge, top left.



The Loggia dining room (above) and the golf course, rated among the top 100 courses in the world, perched on the cliffs at Cape Kidnappers, Hawkes Bay.



trail riding, hiking and quad biking are de rigueur, as is the availability of tailored and personally guided action sports such as mountain biking, white water rafting, sailing and gliding, and cultural experiences broad enough to pique even the most pedantic of interests and tastes.

For many, time out means the opportunity to literally stop and drop. For those not interested in an active escape, a quiet, secluded getaway surrounded by nature is as good as it gets.

Wharekauhau Lodge at Palliser Bay has a "home is where the heart is"

philosophy. Set on a 2020 hectare working sheep station an hour and a half by car, or a breathtaking 25-minute helicopter ride around the rugged coastline from Wellington, the lodge is designed to be a relaxed country escape.

The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince George visited the property for a few days of family downtime during their tour of New Zealand.

"Guests can enjoy the lodge as if it was their house and unwind and experience true Kiwi hospitality in an unpretentious luxury setting", says lodge manager



Three of the best Cape Kidnappers
Hawkes Bay
capekidnappers.com
+64 6 875 1900

Huka Lodge
Taupo
hukalodge.co.nz
+ 64 7 378 5791

Wharekauhau Lodge
Palliser Bay
wharekauhau.co.nz
+64 6 307 7581

Richard Rooney. Naturally, this industry prides itself on a reputation for discretion and privacy. Rooney is reluctant to be drawn on the names of other high-profile dignitaries when they have some downtime. Many of the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* actors and actresses have stayed with us."

The remote location and country hospitality are certainly a drawcard for international guests wanting some serious time-out. The majority of guests at the lodge come from the United States and Australia, with Russia, India and Germany proving new growth opportunities.

Unwinding is the order of business here. Guests can take a long walk or a two-hour guided four-wheel-drive tour of the property and down onto the black sand beach at Palliser Bay. In the evening, settle in fireside in the main lodge with a glass of the region's finest pinot noir and a selection of canapes and feel the stresses and troubles of everyday life melt away.

The premium market is set to benefit from the New Zealand government's 2013-14 announcement of additional funding. Tourism New Zealand will receive \$NZ123 million (\$109 million) over four

years, with \$20 million allocated to growing the premium sector, targeting primary markets, the US, Japan, Australia, UK, Germany and France and the secondary markets, Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, Latin America, Canada and China. For Australian visitors, New Zealand has always been very accessible, with several carriers travelling to most capital cities.

As the fire warms us up and the maitre d' serves dessert, I consider what it is that defines the premium experience. It's the things you don't notice. It's the things you don't have to think about.

It's the exquisitely balanced six-course meal and matching wine, that subconsciously leads us on a journey through the paddocks, gardens, pastures and waters of Hawkes Bay.

It's retiring to the comfort of my cottage, where the bed has been turned down and a personalised card is sitting on the bedside table with tomorrow's weather forecast. Seamless, understated and quietly elegant. **LSL**

The writer was a guest of Tourism New Zealand and Qantas