



Head chef Bruce Thompson and waiter Oliver Thurston serve lunch at Treetops Lodge & Wilderness Experience.
Photo John Selkirk

Model Monique Rana. Nova Models wears Gold Sabatini dress \$620. Gun bracelet with Swarovski stone \$599.

Places for famous faces

IF YOU WERE SO RICH THAT YOU COULD AFFORD TO STAY ANYWHERE YOU PLEASED, AND SO FAMOUS YOU NEEDED TO HIDE FROM YOUR FANS, WHERE WOULD YOU STAY?

BY KATE MONAHAN

They make up just over six per cent of visitors to New Zealand but, on average, luxury travellers spend twice as much as other tourists in New Zealand – up to about \$812 million per year. Even when you know the rooms of a luxury lodge average around \$2000 a night, it's still hard to comprehend the size of the spend.

But despite being one of the most expensive places in the country to lay your head, Huka Lodge feels cosy, almost homely. Inside, below a painting of a large stag, a fire roars and crackles, flames dancing on logs. A middle-aged couple sits on a plush sofa, heads down, quietly engrossed in books, oblivious to a Charles Goldie painting watching over the room.

Outside, the Waikato River flows by, clear emerald water turning into icy blue rapids above Huka Falls. It is 2.30pm on a Monday in August, and while most people are at work, members of the world's rich and famous are relaxing at New Zealand's premiere luxury lodge. About 20 guests are in for the night, some enjoying a late lunch out on the terrace.

Water is served in hand-cut crystal glasses; warm bread, made fresh that morning by the lodge's pastry chef, arrives at the table. If guests should get cold, tartan blankets are folded neatly over the backs of chairs.

By the river is space for two helicopters, with guests choppering in and out for day trips to Hawke's Bay wineries or a spot of fishing on Lake Taupo. It's how the other half lives, or maybe the top one per cent.

Huka Lodge is accommodation fit for a queen, and several have rested their royal heads here, including Queen Elizabeth II and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. It's also a getaway for celebrities, from Barbara Streisand to Kate Winslet to Bill Gates to Dame Kiri te Kanawa.

Rachel Hunter recently stayed the night with kids Liam and Renee, and new fiancé Jarret Stoll. Not that you are supposed to know about it.

Discretion is key, says manager Michael Nijdam. His policy is to neither confirm nor deny whether a famous guest is staying. "There are two different types of celebrities: the kind that want to be seen in OK! Magazine and the other celebrities, the kind who want to maintain their anonymity and privacy. We tend to get those ones at Huka Lodge."

A Dutchman and hotel school graduate, Nijdam has been managing lodges for 12 years, including in the US, Canada and New Zealand. He has a comfortable charm, in his woollen jersey, corduroy pants and shirt, sans tie. He holds out an arm for support as we cross the grass, opens doors, offers drinks and is, in short, the perfect host.

We sit in the library, with a fire crackling in the hearth – the lodge's fireplaces are lit 365 days a year for ambience – eating lunch. There is

butternut soup drizzled with truffle oil and a sprig of basil from the lodge's garden. A simple Caprese salad becomes a mouth-watering delicacy, with vine-ripened tomatoes and plump pillow-like Italian buffalo mozzarella, drizzled with balsamic vinegar and organic olive oil.

The lodge's executive chef is David Griffiths, former owner of famed Auckland restaurant Vinnies. Women in grey uniforms with white gloves quietly go come in and out of the room, as discreet as a light breeze.

Nijdam says luxury is all about the human touch. "It's staffing levels. You can create luxury and there are some beautiful lodges, but they don't have the staff. At the end of the day, hospitality revolves around humans."

At Huka, staff outnumber guests with about 65 staff in the off-season, and 85 during the peak. Nothing is too much trouble. When three Jewish couples from New York came to stay in the Owner's Cottage, Huka bought new pots and pans to cater for their guests' kosher food requirements.

The lodge has evolved since 1924, when it was just a handful of canvas tents beside the Waikato River, set up by young Irish fisherman Alan Pye. The current owner is Dutchman Alex van Heeren, who bought the lodge in 1984. It is now ranked number one among Australia/Pacific resorts in Condé Nast Traveler Magazine's 2007 annual readers' choice awards, and on the magazine's prestigious Gold List.

It was also ranked best hotel in the region by Travel + Leisure last year, and is listed in the Robb Report's list of World's 100 Ultimate Escapes.

IF YOU want a taste of the high life, expect to pay some high prices.

Hiring out Huka Lodge's private Owner's Cottage, tucked away from the main lodge, is \$11,215 plus gst per night for you and seven friends.

The price includes pre-dinner drinks, a five-course dinner, full country breakfast, and an infinity pool and hot spa overlooking the river.



ABOVE Rachel Hunter.
Photo Lawrence Smith



ABOVE The Owner's Cottage at Huka Lodge. Photo Kelly Hodel
ABOVE RIGHT Hall Cannon, one of the owners of Otahuna Lodge. photo Stacy Squires
ACROSS CENTRE Sweeping views across Blanket Bay. Photo David Hallett

Every detail is near-perfect, from the New Zealand original art on the walls, to the looping HL monogram of Huka Lodge woven into the towels and stamped on soaps and toiletries. Mirrors are heated so they don't steam up.

Most of their clients are internationals, but that depends on the time of the year. "About 35 to 40 per cent are from the US, and New Zealanders make up the second-biggest chunk, especially during the winter months. Australia is the third biggest for us," says Nijdam.

For Kiwis who want to stay at a luxury lodge for an anniversary or special occasion, deals can be had, especially during off-peak season. A twin-share room at Huka Lodge is \$730 plus gst per person, May to September.

Huka is one of only seven luxury lodges in New Zealand ranked as exclusive by Qualmark, all in the Guest and Hosted category.

The elite list is completed by Kauri Cliffs Golf Course and Lodge near Paihia, Treetops Lodge and Wilderness Experience, and Lake Okareka Lodge outside Rotorua, Wharekauhau Country Estate at Cape Palliser, Otahuna Lodge in Christchurch and Blanket Bay at Glenorchy.

They are small – all with fewer than 24 rooms – and intimate, with personal service, and excellent food and wine, catering to guests' every whim. Most cost about \$2000 a night per couple, depending on the season.

Not all lodges are created equal, which is partly why Qualmark established its exclusive category in 2004.

"We hand-pick the best of the best," says



Qualmark CEO Geoff Penrose. "Anyone can call themselves a lodge. There are a lot of properties that position themselves as luxury, but that is self-defined. We need someone to come in and prove and independently verify and determine those attributes."

Those few who attain it are by invitation only, among those who score 95 per cent or more in category assessment and are already at the five-star ranking. An anonymous assessor stays at a lodge, grading them on every interaction, including midnight calls on medical maladies and unusual food requests. Although not every high-end accommodation provider is Qualmark-accessed – and some are not as it is not compulsory, and some may feel they have nothing to prove – it is a guide to the best of the best.

Every New Zealand luxury lodge offers a different experience, says Darlene Jackson, a FIT manager with inbound tour operator Travel Time South Pacific, based in Hamilton. "Some are fishing lodges; others are eco-lodges. Then there are lodges in beautiful spots, on high country farms or in the bush, or in the middle of a sheep station," she says.

Visitors to Whare Kea, on the shores of Lake Wanaka, stay in a glassed alpine escape surrounded by snow in winter.

Guests at Treetops eco-lodge in Rotorua have more than 1000ha of native forest to explore, with activities including a horseback safari, bird watching, fly fishing, or a guided Maori food trail, finishing with a gourmet lunch beside a waterfall.

Many of the top luxury lodges in New Zealand are foreign-owned, with wealthy offshore investors falling in love with the scenery, and turning a dream into exclusive accommodation in a remote pristine setting.

Former president and CEO of Levi-Strauss, American Tom Tusher, was inspired by the landscape at Glenorchy, opening his award-winning lodge, Blanket Bay, in 1999.

United States investment guru and billionaire Julian Robertson owns Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers, both luxury lodges with expansive golf courses.

Treetops is probably the only New Zealand-conceived, designed and owned luxury lodge, the brainchild of John Sax, an Auckland-based property developer.

"It started when I was a nine-year-old, a Bay of Plenty boy, and my dad was a farmer,"

says Sax. "And as they did in those days, they cut down trees and had the wetlands drained for farming. And I thought, as a boy, it didn't have to be like that. So I wanted to turn the clock back and it probably wasn't economic, but I didn't care." In 1986 he bought land near Rotorua, and over the next 16 years developed his vision, including replanting natives and establishing wetland habitats. A sanctuary was born, including a game reserve, seven trout streams, four lakes and more than 70km of hiking trails.

The lodge opened in 2001, with eight suites and eight villas – you can drive a golf buggy between your villa and the lodge if you don't feel like walking.

New Zealanders have made up more than 30 percent of guests, followed by Americans, Europeans, Australians and guests from Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, China and Japan.

Like other lodges throughout the country, Australians are a growing market for Treetops. "Our biggest return rate is Australians," says Sax. "They can just hop across the Tasman. In the past, New Zealand has been considered the poor cousin, like Tasmania, but they have now come to realise what fantastic lodges we have, and they are accessible."

In just six years since opening, Treetops has made its mark internationally, largely due to word of mouth and glowing magazine reviews and ratings. In the recent Travel +Leisure magazine USA reader awards, it was rated the number one New Zealand property, and 25th in the world. Condé Nast Traveler USA magazine also named it top New Zealand hotel for 2007. Sax says there are four reasons people seek out Treetops.

"Firstly, the discerning traveller is looking for experiential places," says Sax. "They want good food and accommodation, but they want more. They want the experience. Two, it's very authentically New Zealand. Three, it's an eco-lodge. When we conceived it 22 years ago, people said we were nuts. Now people are more concerned with the environment and the wetlands. Four, is the culture at Treetops, which is relaxed Kiwi-style hospitality.

"We get the world's top CEOs and many Oscar recipients and royalty, right down to regular Kiwis who want a romantic weekend and some time out," says Sax.

Celebrities are treated the same as any other guest. Sax says that within the space



of a few weeks, Treetops was visited by celebrities such as Jamie Lee-Curtis, Jack Black and Adrian Brodie. "We want them to feel at home, part of the family," says Sax, "but their privacy is paramount."

IN QUOTING the \$812 million per year income from the luxury market, Tourism New Zealand CEO George Hickton says the market is so lucrative it has the possibility to withstand economic downturns and foreign exchange rates.

Most of the well-heeled tourists come from Western countries – the United States and the United Kingdom, followed by Australia and Asia.

The market is growing, mostly through word of mouth. "There is now a network of sophisticated accommodation which has given New Zealand a good reputation in luxury circles," says Hickton. "They expect extremely high quality accommodation, with food and wine to match. But New Zealand offers something beyond that, it's where the lodge is located. You can match Huka Lodge's facilities elsewhere, but you can't match the location, and same with Blanket Bay.

The Kiwi touch from lodge hosts is part of the appeal. "The level of service is incredibly personal, nothing is a problem," says Hickton. "It is friendly, genuine, not that overt European formality."

There is little in the way of paid media advertising of New Zealand lodges overseas. Journalists from specialist magazines or large newspapers are invited, with the hope that stories in the right places will find wealthy readers.

Luxury trade shows such as the International Luxury Travel Market in Cannes in December and the Asia Luxury Travel Market Show in Shanghai in June, give organisations such as the New Zealand Lodge Association the chance to explore new markets. Lodges and inbound tour operators build relationships with agents in the US, UK and developing markets to bring their wealthy clients to New Zealand.

Russia, South America, United Arab Emirates, Dubai, Hong Kong and other Asian countries are new markets, with potential for growth.

Colin McAnnalley from New Zealand



Encounters, an inbound tour operator based in Whitianga, deals with a lot of high-end clients. He believes there is the right mix of exclusive lodges throughout New Zealand, but says there are gaps on the West Coast of the South Island and near the glaciers, where there is no five-star accommodation. The Gisborne and Coromandel areas are also ripe for a high-end luxury lodge.

"While there is always a place for luxury travellers, the United States economy and exchange rate does have an impact. These people can afford it, but they don't want to waste money." Instead of staying at luxury lodges at every stop, they are mixing it up with boutique B&Bs and hotels.

North Carolina travel agent Karolyn Wrightson says her wealthy clients are rethinking splashing out in the current economy. Her travel agency, EssentialDownUnder, specialising in Australia and New Zealand, sends a lot of wealthy Americans to luxury accommodation in New Zealand, including Kauri Cliffs, Huka Lodge and Blanket Bay. "Clients who want to stay in these places, it's a status symbol type of thing," says Wrightson.

However, price has become an issue, with clients putting off their two or three annual overseas trips in favour of holidaying Stateside. "Most of these people have a second house in the mountains or shore [in the United States], so are probably holidaying there," says Wrightson.

There is accommodation for every budget, and other good options just a tier down from the super lodges. Wrightson likes the Charlotte Jane boutique hotel in Christchurch, Rocky Range Bed and Breakfast lodge in Alexandra, Fiordland Lodge in Te Anau, and the Wilderness Lodges at Lake Moeraki and Arthur's Pass – which are good, but are less pricey.

Diana Moore from Lake Okareka Lodge says the economy of the United States is not great. "But that doesn't affect our market too much. These are people with private jets and luxury yachts."

The lodge, just outside Rotorua, has views of the lake from every room, a baby grand piano, French 500-thread-count linen and toiletries from Italian luxury brand Bulgari.

It costs \$6500 plus gst per couple per night, which includes 24-hour butler service,



ABOVE LEFT Tuna lunch at Otahuna Lodge.

ABOVE JJ Sax, Natasha Sax and Treetops owner John Sax (far right) with Hollywood star Adrien Brody and friend.

a spa and massage room, wine cellar, an internationally trained chef and access to a jet boat, water skis and windsurfers. "We are targeting the top one per cent of the population, with a high net worth," says Moore.

The lodge is keen to host A-listers. "Celebrities are a target market for us because the lodge is so private and secluded," says Moore. "We make their agents aware of what we can offer. If, for instance, when Billy Joel performs in Auckland [in December], I will talk to his agent and if he wants to chill out for a few days, we can organise for a chopper to bring him down here."

Moore says luxury involves anticipating a guest's need before they know it themselves. It can also be about something many Kiwis already have – access to beautiful scenery, and time to enjoy with family and friends.

"A lot of our clients have simple taste," says Moore. "They are so time-poor. For a very busy person, such as Bill Gates, time out at a luxury lodge means time to chill out, and it is back to basics."

For others, it is about meeting Kiwis and getting stuck in. Otahuna Lodge, just out of Christchurch, is the latest to get Qualmark's exclusive rating. Built in 1895, the historic home was bought by Americans Hall Cannon and Miles Refo in August 2006. They have done extensive renovations and landscaping.

Cannon says New Zealand lodges are distinctive, globally.

"They are small and intimate and offer the best in accommodation and service, and highly personalised experiences, with the extraordinary hospitality that New Zealanders have," says Cannon. "Guests say they can stay in any hotel around the world, but when they come here, they know they are in New Zealand. They can talk to the chef about where they can buy artisanal cheese in Christchurch, or the owners about where to buy the best fish and chips in Akaroa. It's funny, but people who pay \$2000 a night want the experience and want to meet New Zealanders."

There are 30 acres of gardens, including daffodil fields and a potager-style vegetable garden which includes rare heritage lines. "Guests can go and pick vegetables with the chef for their evening meal," says Cannon. "When you live in a busy city you forget that your vegetables don't come from aisle 11 of the supermarket." YW