



Where it all began: The Bay of Islands, seen here from Eagles Nest, is the birthplace of modern New Zealand. Opposite: Lounging on a dock in the Bay.

marinas fronting little seaside towns and acres of sandy beaches. Russell, the former capital of the country and the prettiest of these towns, is reachable by a tiny car ferry from nearby Opuia. Because of its peninsular location, authorities have been able to eliminate non-native predators, turning the area into a sanctuary for the kiwi, New Zealand's national symbol. While there's little hope of seeing these shy nocturnal dust mops, residents hear them often at night. "Just listen for the sound of a strangled cat," one Russellite advised.

After a week of formal breakfasts, cocktail hours, and four-course dinners, Eagles Nest provided a welcome change of pace. The five-villa, 75-acre property in Russell favors a laissez-faire luxe. The villas, which vary in size and design, are all outfitted with full kitchens

and stocked with breakfast fixings and snacks. Want Thai takeout from town? Staff will bring it in. Prefer a bespoke feast? A private chef will whip up a meal in your villa's kitchen. Our three-bedroom, three-bath hideaway had a cool gray-on-white color scheme, a wraparound deck (all the better to showcase the sparkling sea view), an infinity pool and a hot tub, plus a back patio with a grill.

It's fine to contemplate the Bay of Islands from your private villa's deck, but in order to really see the area, you have to take to the water. We chartered the 54-foot *Cool Change*, a catamaran with revolutionary twin carbon-fiber masts designed in collaboration with America's Cup Team New Zealand, and spent half a day cruising deserted coves, watching bottlenose dolphins leap in the distance, and dangling our

feet over the turquoise depths. Before lunch, we moored off tiny Robertson Island and beachcombed on a shore sprinkled with thousands of pink, white, and lavender shells. Golden sand ringed many of the islands, where New Zealanders spend their summer holidays camping. Afterward, we wandered through Russell's two-street downtown, eating gelato and making plans for future adventures.

On our final evening, as we crammed our homeward-bound suitcases with purchases of honey, wool socks, and art, the private chef arrived. By the time we'd finished packing, a feast waited on our dining room table: grilled scallops, ceviche with mango salsa, steamed snapper with lemon and lime, barbecued prawns.

As I drifted off to sleep that night, I heard a *poo-WEEP, poo-WEEP, poo-WEEP* from the manuka and kanuka trees surrounding the villa. Kiwis, it turns out, sound more like hiccupping peacocks than strangled cats. If you don't believe me, I'd suggest booking the next available flight to New Zealand to hear for yourself.



## NEED-TO-KNOW NORTH ISLAND

How to go, what to do, and where to stay.

**GETTING THERE** The shortest 13-hour flight you'll ever take:

**Qantas** business class from LA to Auckland. Order dinner from the Neil Perry-created menu, watch a movie or two with noise-canceling headphones, then recline your seat into a bed and wake up in time for breakfast and arrival, jet lag free.

**Air New Zealand** also offers flights from LA and San Francisco to Auckland, and hundreds of domestic flights make in-country travel easy.

**GO Seasonz Travel** greeted us at the Auckland airport with driving directions, domestic air vouchers, local cell phones, and instructions to call anytime with questions. The eight-day trip had us fly-fishing, exploring a volcano by private helicopter, meeting a Maori elder in Hawke's Bay, and sailing in the Bay of Islands. *Departures: Any day through 2010; customizable itinerary from \$26,850 for two, including accommodations, all activities, most meals, and rental car.*

During nine days down under with **Southern World New Zealand**, travelers stay at Tree-tops, Wharekauhau, and Kauri Cliffs lodges, take a food-and-wine tour of Martinborough, land atop sacred Mount Tarawera in a helicopter, and cruise the Bay of Islands aboard a 72-foot motor yacht. *Departures: Any day through 2010; customizable itinerary from \$7,670 per person, including accommodations, most meals, and activities.*

**STAY** Among the five private villas at **Eagles Nest**, the top spot is the owners' villa, Rahimoana, a contemporary four-bedroom palace perched at the top of a hill with 320-degree views of the Bay of Islands. One- and three-bedroom villas have private pools and full kitchens. *Villas from \$1,275, including breakfast and snack provisions and a bottle of Champagne.*

Flourishes such as fresh shortbread in rooms, no phones or televisions (unless requested),

attentive-but-unfussy service, and a stunning riverside location have made 18-room **Huka Lodge** in Taupo one of New Zealand's most popular. *Doubles from \$700, including breakfast, predinner cocktails, and dinner, plus one lunch for two.*

**Kauri Cliffs** and its famed golf course look out over Matakauri Bay near the north end of North Island. The 22 cottage-style suites with private porches stand at the edge of native forest, which is home to a majestic 700-year-old kauri tree. *Doubles from \$1,080, including breakfast, predinner cocktails, and dinner, plus a guided nature walk or Maori greenstone carving.*

Travelers visit the 24-room **Lodge at Cape Kidnappers** in southerly Hawke's Bay for fine dining, golf on the cliffside par-71 course, tours of the resident gannet colony, and views of the ocean and surrounding 6,000-acre working farm. *Doubles from \$1,270, including breakfast, predinner cocktails, and dinner, plus a gannet colony tour.*

A glam 13-suite hideaway overlooking Auckland's city harbor, **Mollies** is a great spot for an urban overnight before a New Zealand lodge tour. Decor runs to animal prints and sleek white leather sofas, and every suite has a private balcony. *Doubles from \$370, including breakfast and one spa bath.*

Forested seclusion reigns at **Treetops Lodge** near Rotorua. The 12-room hideaway is a plush base for fishing, hunting, and hiking in the rugged surroundings. *Doubles from \$1,065, including breakfast, predinner cocktails, and dinner, plus a guided hike and one lunch or a \$50 spa credit.*

At 12-cottage **Wharekauhau Lodge & Country Estate** on Pailiser Bay at the south end of North Island, guests can roam the working sheep farm on horseback, surf cast in the bay, or sample their way through the wine cellar's local vintages. *Doubles from \$430, including breakfast, predinner cocktails, dinner, and a \$70 activity credit. VI.*