

NEW ZEALAND

Christopher Hill experiences natural New Zealand - in Style.

As his astonished brothers looked on, Maui pulled on his fishing line and 'Te Ika a Maui' (North island of New Zealand) rose from the ocean....'The Maori guide continues in passionate tones. It is easy to get lost in the magical stories of these fierce yet friendly people. Yet this captivating oral mythology stands in stark contrast to the helicopter that whisked us away from Auckland airport and deposited us at our boutique luxury lodge on an island on the famed Hauraki Gulf.

Clearly there was no better way to start a holiday and recover from a long flight, than to avoid all the airport traffic and simply take a 15 minute helicopter flight to a stunning spa lodge. The small indulgence of a sensuous massage that purged our bodies of the stale aircraft air was just what the doctor ordered. So by the time the champagne was served on the terrace overlooking the picturesque Gulf and the Coromandel Peninsula, we were rejuvenated and ready to embark on our 18 day "adventure that counts".

Waiheke Island has a burgeoning wine and olive industry. Our guide Paul took us on a tour of some lovely manicured vineyards and despite the early hour we decided to sample a few great local wines. The Goldwater Estate's 'Goldie' Waiheke Island Cabernet

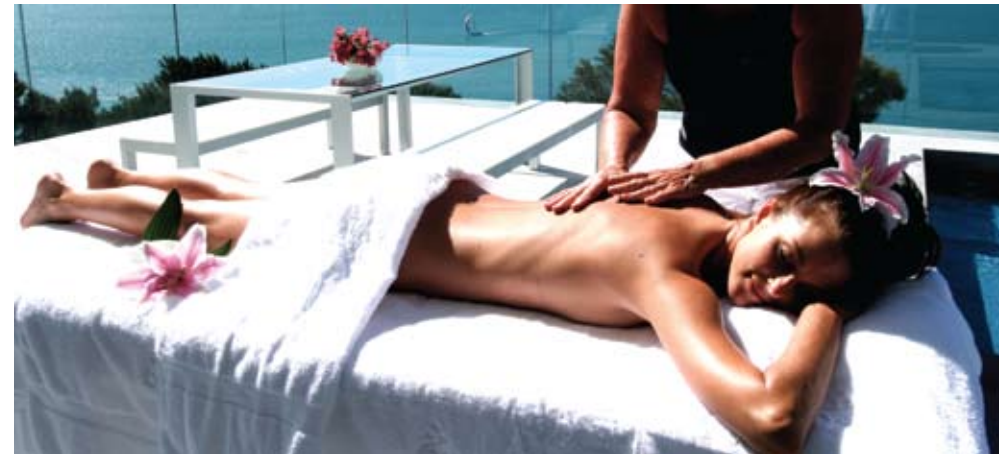
Opening Spread:
Rahimoana Pool
Left: Delicious mussels

Sauvignon Merlot 2005 was a personal favourite, with a fragrant aroma of cranberry, dark plums and black liquorice.

The island retains a rustic and vibrant atmosphere, buoyed by a thriving artistic community. For any art lovers it is well worth spending an hour or so wandering through various galleries and studios including wonderful creations in ceramic, oil and water colours, and sculptures by Eva Busch and Heina Petzhold. I was thrilled to stumble on a fabulous beach scene by local artist Mike Morgan, whom I first saw at an exhibition in New York a couple of years ago.

A recommendation from an old friend led us to try the Mudbrick Cafe, with its splendid views over the city. We arrived there not a moment too soon as my rumbling stomach was making his views heard. The food was just the tonic. The king scallops and crispy squid were divine as a starter; the milk fed lamb was exquisite and, despite feeling a little gluttonous, I managed to fit in the superb Banana and Chocolate Tart.

Stomachs appeased, we caught a ferry across to Auckland City, where our America's Cup yacht awaited us for our 3 hour match-racing experience. The two yachts, NZL40 and NZL41, were used in New Zealand's successful 1995 America's Cup campaign. I really enjoyed strategising with the crew members as we headed out of port. Our plans appeared to have been poorly hatched as we found ourselves behind, rounding the first of three markers. However, we caught a huge gust on the spinnaker leg and as the massive sail area billowed we found ourselves



Left: Massage Therapy at Eagle's Nest
Right: Eagle Spirit Villa deck

creeping into the lead. A thrilling tacking duel ensued and the finishing gun signalled our hard fought 3 second victory.

New Zealand brands itself as geologically "the youngest country in the world", and its first inhabitants are thought to have arrived a mere 800 years ago. Yet the recent association with J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings 'Middle Earth' evokes contrasting images of a country that at times appears as if it was transplanted from another world. A land locked in time with steaming crater lakes and spouting geysers as well as unique and remarkable flora and fauna. It is not hard to imagine the fierce Maori wars of 100 years ago set against a backdrop of lush towering valleys and rugged mountains.

Modern day 'Kiwis' (New Zealanders), affectionately named after the flightless national bird, are a fascinating cultural blend. The relative remoteness may have contributed to forging a hardy, resourceful and friendly people that like to laugh and treat rugby as the national religion. Migration from predominantly Pakeha (European) countries, as well as globalization has had a strong impact on the formation of the national identity. However, it is the continued impact of the strong indigenous Maori culture that makes this nation so unique.

It was quite apt that our first introduction to Maori culture should come on our arrival at the magnificent Bay of Islands. This idyllic spot was the landing stage for the first European settlers as well as the birth place of the Treaty of Waitangi. Wide spread lawlessness as well as a desire to extend the empire led to a treaty

between the tribal heads and the British. To this day it still stands as a cornerstone of what is now modern New Zealand.

Peering into the sunlight glistening on Waihi Bay, we were alerted to the presence of an advancing Maori 'waka' or war canoe by rhythmical shouts. The short synchronous paddle strokes gave the appearance of an elaborately decorated centipede walking on water. The craft filled with fierce looking men covered in tattoos and sporting 'meres', short fat clubs fashioned from greenstone or 'pounamu', made for quite a menacing sight. Fortunately we were deemed to be friendly and upon landing they decided to greet us in the traditional manner, by touching noses or 'hongi'. It is done to exchange the breath of life and is performed twice, once in remembrance of ancestors and the second time as the greeting.

As well as a historical landmark the Bay of Islands, situated on the very northern reaches of the country, is also the premier maritime adventure playground. A diversity of activities such as diving, snorkelling, kayaking and game fishing are all on offer. Still on a high from our sailing two days before, we decided the best way to explore was by boat. Lounging on the deck of a yacht, sails billowing and wind in our faces we were privy to an acrobatic display by some frolicking dolphins. What a shame that we missed the pods of whales that generally frequent this beautiful bay.

Our disappointment was short lived as we retired to our private villa, set on its own ridgeline, with views over the Bay of Islands. By the time I stepped out of the private heated lap pool, the cooking of our

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Left: Sumptuous lunch
Middle: Waiheke
Vineyard
Right: Legendary guide

personal chef filled the air with sumptuous odours. It always amazes me just how a day in the fresh air serves to stimulate the appetite. It is not as if soaking in a geothermal pool or luxuriating on a yacht can be classified as strenuous activities, yet my stomach was telling me otherwise. So we heartily tucked into a delectable dinner on our private balcony under the stars. It was impossible to imagine that this was once the "hellhole of the Pacific".

Our next day was to take in some of the most magnificent sights the north island has to offer. The drive from Waiheke Island to the Bay of Islands had heralded some beautiful scenery, but this paled in the relation to the magnificent scenery when viewed from a helicopter. There can be no better way to experience the majestic yet Jurassic natural beauty of New Zealand. Sweeping over beaches, hovering over volcanoes, gliding over thermal pools, it was fortunate that my camera memory card could hold so many images.

As we circled Mount Tarawera I was reminded of the immense power and balance found in nature. This mountain long revered by the Tuhorangi tribe, and a burial site for their chiefs suddenly sprang into life in the early hours of the 10th of June 1886. A huge plume of dark ash blackened the sky, whilst molten rock was sent hurling through the air. It is hard to imagine the shock and fear of the Tuhorangi as they ran for their lives, no doubt believing they had in some way angered the ancestral gods. Yet today nature has all but concealed this seismic event, leaving only a minor scar as a reminder.

Having the day before flown over the remote and mysterious Lake Tarawera, we found ourselves on a catamaran cruising on its shimmering waters. A few of us had taken up the captain's challenge. He claimed he would cook any fish caught in the hot sands of Hot Water Beach. Sadly my fishing line remained slack and it was my wife who claimed the bragging rights after landing an 11 pound Trout. True to his word the captain buried the fish in the geothermal sands to cook it. Not exactly a taste sensation, but great novelty value nonetheless.

Our next stop was to be Te Wai Pounamu (the South Island) and one of its wine regions. Central Otago is the most southerly wine producing region in the world. Many of the vineyards are on steep slopes and are some of the highest in New Zealand. And many benefit from glacial soils. A continental microclimate usually brings hot, dry summers, cool autumns and crisp winters. According to the New Zealand Wine [▶](#)

There can be no better way
to experience the majestic yet
Jurassic natural beauty



Left: Trout fishing
Right: Helicopter flight to Fox glacier

Board: "New Zealand wine is an experience like no other. Our special combination of soil, climate and water, our innovative pioneering spirit and our commitment to quality all come together to deliver pure, intense and diverse experiences. In every glass of New Zealand Wine is a world of pure discovery."

So to put the marketing to the test and with a spirit of adventure in our hearts we were delighted to undertake a private wine tour with a local expert. As it turned out there were plenty of wines for us to discover. I fear that my small wine cellar will struggle to contain all the orders we placed, but with so many great wines it was hard to make a choice. The wine experience was further enhanced when we returned with a bottle of Pinot Noir to be consumed on the terrace of our sunning and remote lodge. We watched the sun set over the Southern Alps its fiery red light reflected on the glassy waters of Lake Wanaka. Like good food, good wine is always enhanced by its surroundings.

Another hotspot for the South Island is the adventure capital of Queenstown. From bungee jumping to jet

boating to rafting, Queenstown has it all. I should have seen the omens painted on the wall, as we awoke to a cold and drizzly day. Despite making a solemn declaration that bungee jumping was clearly insane, I was coerced and cajoled into throwing myself off a perfectly good bridge. I can certainly attest to feeling an adrenalin rush, and in the few seconds it lasted, I was convinced that they had miscalculated my weight as I was hurtling towards the river. Then I felt a reassuring tug on my legs and the slow recoil of the elastic. It sounds like a cliché, but I have never felt more alive! I suspect it took my pulse a good day to recover. Perhaps one day I will have the courage to do it all again, but in the mean time I can wear my T-Shirt with pride.

The next day was another scenic highlight. Picked up by our beloved helicopter we were once again whisked away, this time to the Fjordland and magical Milford Sound. Experiencing this beautiful area from above is unforgettable. For those disinclined to believe in global warming there is also a stunning hike on a glacier. This is one of the few glaciers in the world that is actually advancing rather than receding.

Fjordland was once proclaimed by Rudyard Kipling as the 8th wonder of the world, and it is not hard to see why. The steep green crags reflected perfectly in the crystal waters appear as if they are floating in an alternate blue sky. An illusion only shattered by an occasional thundering waterfall that disturbs the still surface waters.

After twelve remarkable days spent flying, sailing, relaxing and eating sumptuous food, came the moment I had been both curious and cautious about; our volunteer project on a Maori reserve in Pelorous

Sound. When asked by friends: "Why would you want to spend your holidays on a volunteer project?", I instantly became defensive. "Well, I am going to do my bit to save the planet!", but in reality I knew that my four days of volunteering would, in all essence, make little difference to the state of the planet. Was I just trying to assuage my guilt? Would it change my life style? Would I be reborn? I was unsure. So why? I think my driving motivation was to experience something new, see a new country from a different perspective and get to know the people in depth.

Meeting our guide for the first time, flashes of the Maori wars came back to me. His muscular frame, determined stance and intense gaze were rather intimidating. That is until the illusion was shattered by a warm, disarming smile. "Manawa" (welcome) to our community, bellowed the deep voice with a huge grin and a firm handshake. I liked him straight away.

The next four days were easily the most enthralling of the journey. We were put to work on a sustainable organic farming project run by the Waitaha. Access to the site is only by boat or helicopter, as there are no roads and the property is bordered either by water or Department of Conservation land.

The history of the Waitaha is rather controversial. The book, Song of Waitaha: The Histories of a Nation, purports that the Waitaha were the first people to inhabit New Zealand. The author, Barry Brailsford, believes that a pale-skinned people originating from the Easter Islands sailed there more than 2000 years before any Polynesians set foot on the island.

Though this theory is widely dismissed by conventional scholars, forums and blogs abound with tales of oral histories and a peaceful people who were savagely subjugated by the Kati Mamoe and later the Ngai Tahu warriors and forced into slavery.

Despite this fantastical and possibly fictitious past, the volunteer project is well and truly rooted in reality. It aims to become a self sustaining farming concern that will help reverse the trend of young Maoris leaving the land to flock to the cities, thus losing their cultural heritage and values. The hope is that by providing a cash flow positive concern that is based on the old ways of farming, the Waitaha will not only be able to return to their ancestral lands, but will once again have reason to feel proud of their past.

I had harboured a few concerns over the quality of the home stay and was happy to find that though it was indeed simple, it was clean and comfortable. Any lack of comforts that may have been there, were easily compensated for by the warm and genuine nature of our hosts. Our host 'mother' was a particular 'salt of the earth' character, quick to laugh and a heart of gold.

In view of the fact that my farming experience extends to the cut flowers purchased at the local florist, I had made prior enquiries about other skills that might be of use to the project. As luck might have it there was indeed an opportunity for me to apply my marketing background to the development of a brand and 'route-to-market' for the Manuka honey project.

Manuka Honey is produced by bees that gather nectar from the flowers that grow on the Manuka bush which is indigenous to New Zealand. Studies have found that Manuka Honey contains very powerful antibacterial, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and antifungal properties, making it effective in treating a wide variety of health conditions. Healing properties, organic farming and a sound ethical concern, surely this was branding paradise. My head was 'buzzing' with ideas. ➤

Westland



In every glass of New Zealand Wine is a world of pure discovery



I ventured off with the resident beekeeper to inspect the hives, leaving my green-thumbbed wife to focus on helping in the organic garden. Here she tended to Garden Peace heirloom tomatoes, kumara (a sweet potato), carrots, apples, pears, and (of course) grapes.

For the ensuing days in Maori Bay, I let my creative juices flow. Sauvignon Blanc from the Saint Clair vineyard, delicious fresh vegetables and meats sourced from the property and living among the people gave me a real sense of ownership. Rather than producing something for a client, this felt much more like my own fledgling honey production. It was desperate to burst onto the market.

My wife, on the other hand, was getting her hands dirty in the garden. Planting native trees (rimu, tawa, matai, kahikatea, kowhai) in a specially cordoned-off area, where they hope to re-introduce kiwi birds. The national bird is unfortunately following in the footsteps of its larger, and now extinct, cousin the Dodo. Critically endangered, kiwis are currently only found on small outlying islands where they are safe from predators such as rats and cats.

So often I have visited countries and seen beautiful sights, learned about cultures and enjoyed lovely hotels. However, it wasn't until now that I truly felt I had deeper understanding and a bond with the people of one of my destinations. Here, I gained unique insights into Maori culture and a bygone era. The Maori have a term 'whanau' (extended family). In the short time here on this conservation area, living among these wonderful people I really did feel as if I was part of the family. I hope I played a small part in securing the future of this region and in fulfilling the vision of bringing back the Waitaha tribe to this special place. ■

Fjordland

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