





On the road to happiness

THE ONLY PROBLEM WITH FOOD WRITER *Michael Shaw's* FIVE-NIGHT, FIVE LODGE NEW ZEALAND DRIVE EXPEDITION, WAS THAT THE STAYS WERE EACH ABOUT TWO DAYS TOO SHORT.

AUCKLAND STOP: Mollies Auckland is one of the stops on a Relais & Châteaux food trail through New Zealand.

IN THE MID 1950S THE WORLD famous luxury hotel and restaurant fellowship Relais & Châteaux had the prescience to create unique discovery trails from which a beautiful area can be explored by car, staying in luxury accommodation, with the finest of food and wine available. These trails were little adventures in style and comfort. Later called "Routes du Bonheur" they always involve overland travel by car so that travellers can slow down, take in the scenery and enjoy the best that the area has to offer.

When I was asked to travel the Relais & Châteaux New Zealand "road to happiness" by driving between five luxury lodges, I was thrilled. Then as a food writer I felt a rising fear. Five nights with five fabulous meals may sound like a gourmands dream. But would it end up a gustatory iron man event blending into one great fog of foams and nages? The reality was five very distinct experiences; a luxury adventure trail for grown-ups with dramatic scenery, luxurious accommodation, cuisine and wines par excellence. Each lodge is a destination in its own right, all with true adventure opportunities like helicopter rides to distant hideaways, guided hiking or fishing and skiing in the winter. But we went for the food, and without exception it was of the highest standard. Local, seasonal, foraged and organic are buzz-words virtually without meaning now, but they were core to the practice of all the chefs we met along the way.



Our road to happiness began in Queenstown, on the South Island at one of New Zealand's newest superlodges, Matakauri Lodge. We then drove to Whare Kea lodge at Wanaka, then to Otahuna Lodge in Christchurch. The flight across to the North Island to Rotorua was about ninety minutes and then we set off by car to another acclaimed superlodge, Huka Lodge before the final drive to the well-known guesthouse Mollies in Auckland. All of the roads are good to drive and apart from Wanaka to Christchurch, easily managed in a single session. I would recommend taking a longer journey than we did though and settling in for at least two nights at each lodge. I was dragged kicking and screaming from every site wanting to take in some more of the clean air, serenity and just one splash more of the Pinot Gris.

Matakauri Lodge

Ropened after a renovation completed in 2010, Matakauri Lodge has garnered some serious accolades. The view of the peak across the lake is truly amazing and the design and execution of the lodge itself confirm



15 per cent GST, Suites start from NZ\$760 (about A\$585) per person per night plus 15 per cent GST including full breakfast, pre-dinner drinks and canapés, gourmet dinner and complimentary mini bar. matakaurilodge.com

Whare Kea lodge

Set on Lake Wanaka with sweeping views of the Southern Alps and the Mount Aspiring National Park Whare Kea Lodge is a secluded Alpine Chalet accessible only by helicopter. It was the most relaxed of the lodges we visited; there were no table cloths or candles in the dining room. But though there's less drama, the food is serious, beautifully crafted and presented and delicious. Chef James Stapely leaves nothing to chance. He chooses only the finest local produce, some from his garden, and only if it's to standard on that day. He combines modern process like thermomix with sound classical techniques. He produced an ethereal soup as part of the local, asparagus tasting plate, and while some are not convinced of Sous Vide for red meat, the lamb loins were sensational. James introduced a dramatic touch with one of his canapés, producing a decorative box in which were nori rolls with house, cold smoked Aoraki salmon, fresh horseradish and a topping of seaweed caviar. When opened, the manuka smoke rose to applause; wonderful. Though the cellar here has a broad range, we asked for one wine that could support the entire meal. The Wooing Tree, Central Otago Pinot noir was terrific; flexible enough to cope with seafood and asparagus and big enough for the lamb. Rich with berries and ripe tannins, it was an excellent suggestion by Michelle.

Rates: Deluxe Rooms from NZ\$1,400 (about A\$1,078) per night plus 15 per cent GST, Master Suites from NZ\$1,700 (about A\$1,309) per night plus 15 per cent GST including full breakfast, pre-dinner drinks and canapés, and five-course degustation dinner. wharekealodge.com

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that you're in for something great. Dinner is served in a small dining room, on the terrace or in some very private areas. It's such a treat, when you're used to heaving, bustling city restaurants, to dine in such a calm and secluded space. It adds more than privacy and romance. It's more a club-like world, with you at the centre. They'll go out of their way to get whatever food you're hankering for. They know what's in season or of standout quality at the moment, and chef Jonathon Rogers,

ON THE ROAD:
Top: Stunning views from Matakauri Lodge.
Bottom: Whare Kea Lodge is accessible only by helicopter.

under the direction of executive chef Dale Gartland, has sources throughout New Zealand. My advice is to take the degustation, with the wine flight suggested by the sommelier. Every year international chefs are invited to cook at Matakauri or one of its sister sites. This year Mark Best, Rick Stein and Shannon Bennet matched their food with wines from a New Zealand winery they chose.

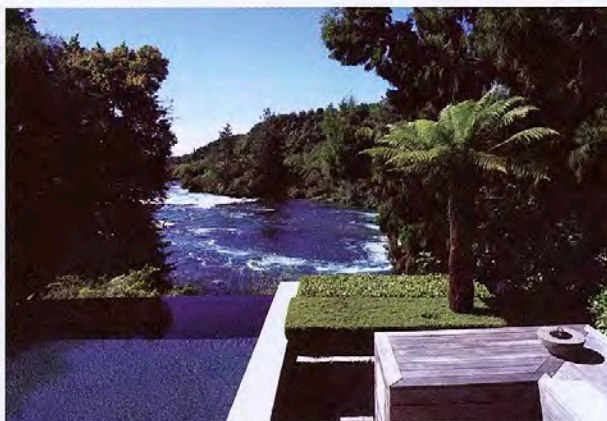
Rates: Lodge Rooms start from NZ\$595 (about A\$458) per person per night plus



Otahuna Lodge

Otahuna Lodge Christchurch is set in an exquisitely renovated, stately Queen Anne home about half an hour from downtown Christchurch, surrounded by 12 hectares of impeccably maintained, decorative and culinary gardens. Despite the classical setting the food is modern, beautifully crafted and paired with delicious wines cellared on site. Chef Jimmy McIntyre works with Steve, the head gardener, to produce about eighty five percent of the kitchen's requirements from the organic kitchen garden. Estate raised cattle, pigs and poultry are served as are house made charcuterie. (The parma style ham was exceptional, aged for a year in the cellar.) They have all of the old style features like apple cellaring and a mushroom house producing oyster, button and shitake (along with porcinis foraged from the estate). In an era of lacklustre farmed fish and battery everything it seems almost humbling to rely on what is found or seasonal, but there is nothing humble about McIntyres' food. He uses technique to accentuate, not overwhelm and his respect for the produce is obvious on the plate.

Rates: Suites from NZ\$1,100 (about A\$847) per night plus 15 per cent GST, Master Suites from NZ\$1,600 (about A\$1,232) per night plus 15 per cent GST including full breakfast, pre-dinner drinks with canapés, and five-course degustation dinner with matching wines. otahuna.co.nz



Huka Lodge

Huka Lodge is set on a bend on an emerald trout brook, looking down over the rapids from above the falls. Impossibly beautiful. And while we were there for the food, you have to know how spectacular the lodge itself is. The architecture is hushed and the decor chic-lodge with tones of blues and greens that play against that pellucid river. The accommodation is all suites, with fireplaces (as there are throughout the lodge) and views of the ducks, geese and a black swan idling in the water past the lawn. Outside of the main lodge dining room there are fourteen dining spaces, each one separate and some quite secluded and all with hushed drama. The green room is outdoors with walls of hedge, the terrace overlooks the rapids, the library, the fireplace patio, the wine cellar and so on, and all (except the cellar) with that view. The pre-dinner drinks by the fire make you feel like royalty (and they've all been to stay at some stage), it's so private and intimate and luxurious. Executive chef Michel Louws brings a very European sensitivity to lush local ingredients producing elegant cuisine without the heavy French buttery styles so beloved of gourmands and cardiologists alike. There are alternative mains in the degustation with even a vegetarian option. And of course the cellar is excellent. It's wonderful to be invited to take your time and dine at your own pace as we did under the stars with the sound of the

falls in the distance. Huka lodge is a must for any Route.

Rates: Junior Lodge Suites from NZ\$795 (about A\$615) per person per night plus 15 per cent GST, Lodge Suites from NZ\$1,395 (about A\$1,080) per person per night plus 15 per cent GST including full dinner, pre-dinner drinks and five-course dinner. hukalodge.com

Mollies Auckland

This is a small hotel in a grand old house with views over the harbour about five minutes from downtown Auckland. White-modern with quirky decorative touches and contemporary art everywhere, the interiors are relaxed but theatrical. The dining experience is even more. Set in a glass conservatory, with only a few tables, candles aplenty, and those harbour views, or in the elegant main dining area for larger groups. Head chef Lance Tripp has a regularly changing degustation which is highly recommended, and an a la carte selection that is surprisingly affordable. His use of white chocolate in savoury dishes is stylish and extravagant, not faddish, while some simple sounding dishes were complex and refined. Some standouts among many were the elegant pumpkin and ricotta soup paired with a "lees aged" Sauvignon Blanc by Clos Marguerite and duck with chicken liver, soubise paired with a Ma Maison 2009 Martinborough, Pinot Noir.

Rates: Junior Suites from NZ\$600 (about A\$464) per night plus 15 per cent GST. mollies.co.nz

CITY & COUNTRY: Above left: Otahuna Lodge is in a restored Queen Anne-style home. Above right: Huka Lodge sits beside the rushing Huka Falls. Below: Mollies is five minutes from downtown Auckland.





GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand flies direct from Sydney to Queenstown up to three times a week. One way fares start from A\$340 and the flight takes around three hours. A number of one-stop flights via other New Zealand cities are available each day, but these can take from six to 17 hours. Business class seats are only available on the Sydney to Queenstown via Auckland route, which takes around 12 hours, and one way fares start from A\$1,174.

Air New Zealand operates up to five direct flights a day from Auckland to Sydney. One way economy fares start from NZ\$217 (about A\$168) and business class from NZ\$1,105 (about A\$855). The flight takes around three and a half hours. airnewzealand.com

GETTING AROUND

The drive between Queenstown and Wanaka takes around one hour on the Crowne Range Road, the highest main road in New Zealand and one of the most scenic drives in the country. Christchurch is just over 400 kilometres northeast of Wanaka and the drive takes around five and a half hours. Christchurch to Rotorua is around 900 kilometres so it's best to fly and Air New Zealand operates direct flights every day. Economy fares start from NZ\$119 (about A\$92) one way and the flight takes just under two hours. The drive from Rotorua to Taupo takes around one hour and Taupo to Auckland around three and a half hours.

WHEN TO GO

New Zealand has a largely temperate climate, reaching 20 to 30 degrees Celsius in December, January and February and 10 to 15 degrees Celsius in June, July and August. Those planning a New Zealand escape should plan based on desired activities, with hiking and driving tours in the warmer months and skiing in the winter.



BRING THE OUTSIDE IN:
Above: Huge windows make the most of the scenery at Matakauri Lodge.
Main image: Matakauri's heated infinity pool blends into the lake.

