

Great Mercury Island, a private resort off the coast of New Zealand's North Island.

Wild at Heart

New Zealand's rugged landscape can inspire poetry in even the most jaded of men. And when traveling to the country's pristine retreats with your daughter, you can't help but become reflective. BY SAMUEL PICKERING

Photographs by Con Poulos

ELIZA HAD WAITED AT THE AIRPORT FOR ME for six hours. I had been waiting to see her for three months. At the beginning of the new year, I had worked my way to Australia by lecturing on memoir writing on the *Statendam*, a Holland America Line cruise ship sailing out of Auckland, New Zealand. When the voyage ended, in Sydney, I boarded an Indian Pacific train and rode the rails across the continent, arriving in Perth three days later, and settled in to write a third book describing life in Australia. On my travels in the past, family accompanied me. On this trip I was alone, the children having graduated from university and busy in their elsewhere. For her part, my wife, Vicki, stayed in Connecticut to plan home renovations and to care for her pack of rescued mutts. Canines, I am afraid, appeal more to long-term wives than do aging husbands, the dogs howling less and being neater, not messing up house and days so often. Before leaving I whimpered but then barked; I told friends I thought it important to give Vicki practice in being a widow.

Now my daughter, Eliza, and I were on the South Island of New Zealand, an alpine country of snowcapped mountains crashing steeply into fjords and running out into long ridges that coasted into easy flat plains, a land, too, of exuberant people who spoke in superlatives. "How wonderful," a waitress exclaimed when I ordered a piece of chocolate cake. "It's been lovely having you fly with us," a pilot said at the end of a flight. On an earlier visit, when people saw me taking notes at a farmers' market in Dunedin, on the southern end of the South Island, they began feeding me so much food—cherries, homemade cheeses, sandwiches stuffed with roasted lamb—that I practically bleated.

For the sake of pages, I have spent decades meandering both time and place, wandering the unshaven outback of Australia and other corners of the world, staying in sundry accommodations. On the historic end, I spent a night in the hotel in Aleppo where Lawrence of Arabia set up his headquarters during World War I, sleeping in what an aged porter told me was Lawrence's room. On the low end, in a restaurant in the basement of a hotel in Bukhara, I ordered dough balls stuffed with poultry. When I bit into the first ball, feathers exploded into my mouth, enough of them to refurbish not just a molting chicken but the bird's larger cousin, a buzzard. On this three-month stint in Australia and New Zealand, I longed to glimpse the golden high end of travel; as a writer who has devoted many words to the natural world, I wanted to compose paragraphs that, to mix metaphors, both blossom and take flight and maybe make people look closer at and appreciate more the world's richness. Eliza and I were touring luxury lodges in hopes not simply of giving me writing material, but of enjoying each other's company, filling pages in the scrapbook of memory. In the future, when dusty years separated us, we could turn to those pages and see ourselves smiling together amid some of the most rugged and beautiful landscapes, the recollections not chilly, like the high New Zealand Alps, but warm and comforting.

ACCORDING TO AN OLD TALE, IT'S NOT A TREASURE CHEST that lurks at the end of the rainbow. Instead, a grove of trees gleams like jewels under the drizzle of colors, the leaves immune

to the gnawing of time and caterpillars. Otahuna Lodge seemed to me the end of the rainbow. The house sits atop a small rise twenty minutes outside Christchurch—the largest city on the South Island—its driveway shaped like a scythe, curving lazily up to the house. Sir Heaton Rhodes, a parliamentarian who at various times headed the ministries of health and defense, built the retreat at the end of the 19th century. Otahuna is the largest private historic residence in New Zealand, listed by the Historic Trust as Category 1, a status that preserves architectural integrity and protects against thoughtless alteration. The house is a white and gray clapboard with chimneys rising red from the roof. A mélange of turrets, dormers, scalloped verandas and balconies woven like trellises, Otahuna is so symmetrical that it flows into a comfortable symmetry, one emblematic of varied lives well lived. The owners are Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, thirty-one-year-old graduates of Haverford College, in Pennsylvania. Two years ago they purchased the lodge and moved from New York to New Zealand, jettisoning careers in publishing and real estate. Every day for four months, Hall told me over dinner, forty to fifty craftsmen worked on the house, restoring and updating it. The lodge had been open for less than a year.

Inside, it smacked almost of Mission architecture, its rooms lined with panels carved from local *kauri*, *rimu* and *jarrah* wood. Furnishings were leathery and comfortable. Campaign chests sat on Pembroke tables, and on wallpaper in the drawing room, clusters of wisteria dangled white against a blue sky. Throughout the house, large canvases opened walls like windows. Beside stairs in the entrance hall glowed a painting of the lodge, its sky watery and grass green as a summer pool, the whole picture cool as evening. Above a desk, a portrait of a Maori chief radiated heat, the man's face saffron, tattoos eddying across his brow, a greenstone idol hanging from his neck and grinning maliciously.

Otahuna was a place in which one escaped the raw fret of daily life and gathered the self. Eliza and I eagerly explored the property, some thirty acres of wood and garden. Along the driveway stood an English oak, the sort that spreads broad across 18th-century prints, exuding stability. Limbs broke from the trunk big as culverts, their ends bushy with leaves. Walking around the trunk took me fifteen strides. Eliza climbed the tree. As children age, they vanish into themselves, leaving the past behind in mists: for the children, hazy recollections of childhood; for the parents, the fog of tattering memory. For a moment, as my twenty-two-year-old daughter climbed the tree, she was my little girl again, a feeling that roiled my emotions but which made me intensely happy.

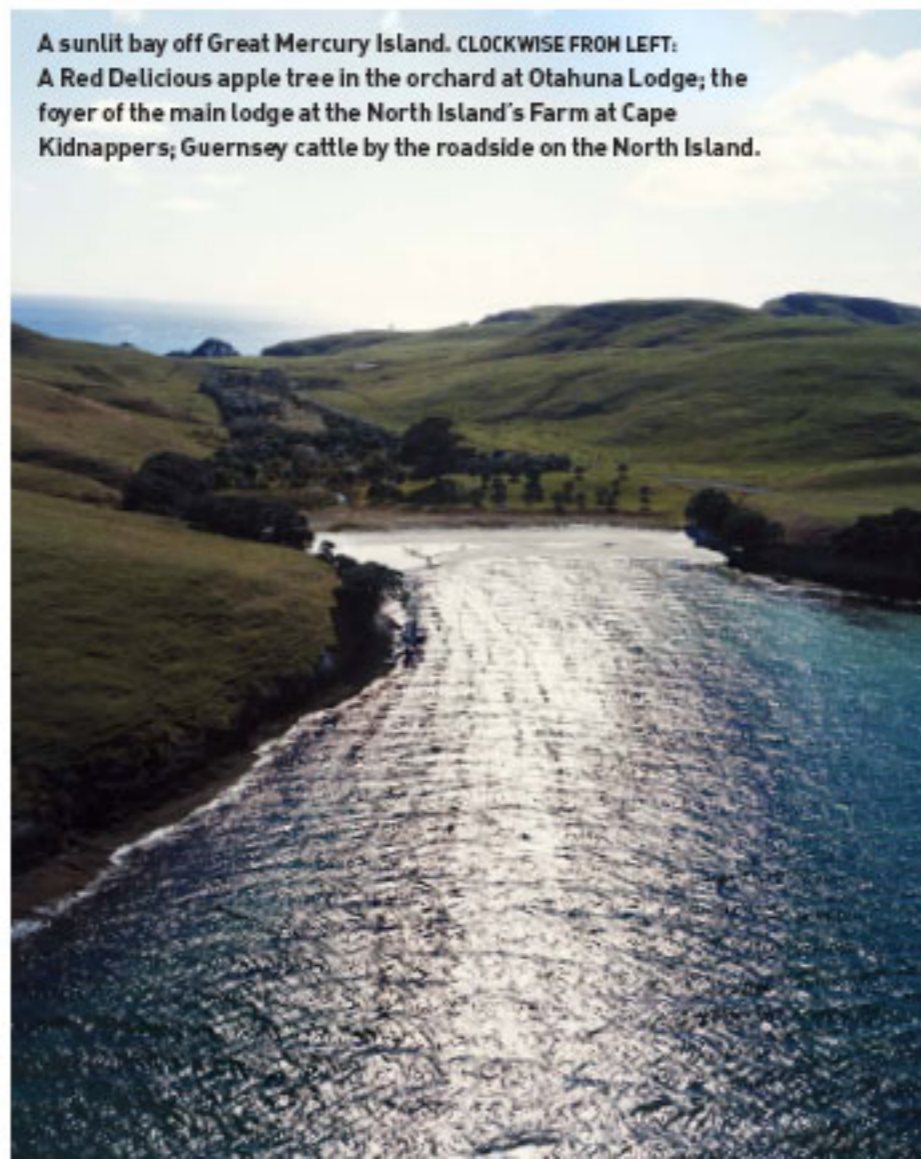
We marveled at huge Monterey pines, their bark looking like thick, hardened streams of stale chocolate tinged with white, and a madrone tree, its bark shredding in herringbone, leaving the trunk orange and claret. Early the next morning, we roamed again. The air smelled like vernal grass, and birds rang in carillons, the notes high and celebratory, not thunderous or dark—blackbirds and bellbirds and magpies fluting. Fantails swirled around us, their breasts bibs of orange tied around their necks by black and white ribbons. We watched gray clouds scud across

The author with his daughter, Eliza, in the wine cellar at Otahuna Lodge, on the South Island. The cellar holds 1,000 bottles.





The cliffs at Cape Kidnappers, above the South Pacific. CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Apple financière with apple sorbet at Otahuna Lodge; a crayfish freshly caught off Great Mercury Island; Great Mercury's main communal lounge.



A sunlit bay off Great Mercury Island. CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A Red Delicious apple tree in the orchard at Otahuna Lodge; the foyer of the main lodge at the North Island's Farm at Cape Kidnappers; Guernsey cattle by the roadside on the North Island.





It was the sort of landscape into which I dreamed of vanishing, hoping that I would achieve real immortality, not as an abstraction but as the blood and bones of insects and animals.

the sky, day baying blue and gold at their heels. On a path we came across a hedgehog. The spiny mammal looked like Beatrix Potter's Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, so I sat and asked about her bookshelf companions, Squirrel Nutkin, Peter Rabbit and Jemima Puddle-Duck. The hedgehog did not roll herself into a frightened ball. Instead, she stared at me, then, shivering her back, tossing my nonsense aside, she shuffled off the path and disappeared into a mound of English ivy.

Meals at Otahuna were, to use my mother's favorite dinner-table word, "divine," beginning with canapés and wine tastings in the drawing room with Hall and Miles. Guests could eat in their rooms; on the porch; in the wine cellar, a stone house in which game once hung; or in the formal dining room, agapanthus twisting through a garden of the house's original wallpaper, pale light drifting down from chandeliers. Eliza and I ate our dinners in the dining room, each of the five courses and its wine selection introduced by chef Jimmy McIntyre. The food was so good—white bean and eggplant garlic soup with chorizo and oregano, accompanied by a Kaituna Valley Pinot Gris; a main course of duck confit over mushroom-and-onion risotto paired with Crater Rim Pinot Noir—it seduced me into sensualism, delaying tasting in order to lengthen anticipation.

Because I'd lost twenty pounds in Perth, living on baguettes, cheese and yogurt, I tried to be abstemious. I failed. At breakfast I piled fruit on muesli but afterward buttered slices of homemade sourdough and asked Jimmy to cook mushrooms and tomatoes for me, throwing in bacon and eggs for good measure. So that I wouldn't slap on new pounds, I jogged for an hour before dinner. I left the lodge property, running beside and behind it, where Christchurch was slinking slowly into the country, but the land was still rural. Above me shadows swooped across the bare hills. Sheep grazed in paddocks, one bursting with Arapawa sheep, their coats brown. In other paddocks, red deer started at me, 152 to be exact, the stags trumpeting.

FROM CHRISTCHURCH, ELIZA AND I FLEW TO NAPIER AND THE Farm at Cape Kidnappers, a lodge and sheep station midway up the coast of the North Island. The station was old, but the lodge had only recently begun welcoming guests. Some 6,000 acres, Cape Kidnappers was an all-purpose place, wonderful for visiting, with something for all sorts of vacationers: a farm with 2,000 cattle and 4,000 sheep, perfect trails for trekking, a bird sanctuary, a resort with a spa and a golf course. The road from Napier to the lodge switched about, following an old track and in a sense taking us out of the familiar everyday world. We passed gullies

A gannet colony at sunrise on Cape Kidnappers.

bristling with native plants: tea trees; black tree ferns, their fronds whirling upward; and cabbage trees, their spikes of flowers darkening into detumescence. Braids of sheep followed trails worn above gullies, while cattle stood dark atop the hills, looking as if they had been cut from tin. Most of the land was bare, as naked as it was when the first white settlers arrived, in the 19th century. Still, it looked weathered and so rugged that it seemed muscular. Great fingers sloped toward the ocean, snapping off at the knuckles at the tops of bluffs, these pushed high out of the seabed by volcanoes. In its seeming emptiness, the place was wildly alluring, the sort of landscape into which I dreamed of vanishing, hoping that I would not be found but would instead achieve real immortality, not as an abstraction, like the soul, but as the blood and bones of insects and animals.

Australasian harriers, brown and red, cruised low, scouring the ground for prey, their tails shuttering white. Because Jo Speedy, an outdoorswoman and ersatz naturalist working at the lodge whose family had once owned the cape, knew that birds mattered to me, she took Eliza and me to see the four gannet colonies on the farm. When fully populated, they were home to almost 24,000 individuals. Gannets are elegant birds, the stuff of poetry, not broken freeverse but polished quatrains. The birds are rewhite with black epaulets of primary feathers along the wings, yellow tinsuring their heads and blue lids revolving around their eyes. Of course, behind the smoothest verse lies perspiration. Fittingly, the smell of fish hung over the colonies, turning the air stale but awakening the imagination instead of tarnishing the sight, making one see birds falling from the air and cleaving the sea like white arrows.

One of the best times Eliza and I had on our two-week trip was the three hours we spent with Jo Speedy. A woman of indeterminate age, she bounded like a gazelle, leading us over hills where she said she'd never taken guests. Cattle studied us, then bundled awkwardly down slopes. We gazed at the land, reaching—as people do when they have the leisure to dream—for a consciousness beyond words. As we trudged across the sides of hills, following sheep trails, Jo told stories. A sharp rock jutting from the sea was called the Tooth. A young Maori had accompanied his older brothers on a fishing trip, carrying his grandmother's jawbone (as one does). When one of his brothers refused to give him a hook, he broke his own nose and baited his grandmother's teeth with his blood. The Tooth, Jo told us, is the only remnant of the jawbone still visible, waves having worn away the roots of the other teeth, dropping them to the sea floor.

The station at Cape Kidnappers stretched under the lip of a ridge, a succession of farm buildings with a silo rising from the middle. The interior of the main lodge was a blend of rustic and country- (continued on page 111; turn page for *Native Intelligence*)

Native Intelligence

When calling the telephone numbers below from the United States, except for those that are toll-free, first dial 011-64.

WHEN TO GO

New Zealand's closest continental neighbors may be Australia and Antarctica, but the country has neither the former's suffocating heat nor the latter's deep freeze; it's hot enough for swimming in the summer and cold enough for skiing in the winter. Dad and I caught the tail end of summer, in March, when we could still eat Pinot grapes off the vine and gaze at the stars while wearing light sweaters.

GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand (800-262-1234; airnewzealand.com) has two

fourteen-hour flights a day from Los Angeles to Auckland, New Zealand's biggest city and an international flight hub. The carrier also offers in-country flights (and there really is no other way to get around), which are refreshingly straightforward, with none of the long waits endemic to U.S. airports. Flying from Napier to Kerikeri, in the North Island's Bay of Islands, was a little like taking a bus; we strolled across the tarmac, tossed our bags into the bottom of a twenty-seater and took off with a distinctly Kiwi lack of fuss.

GETTING AROUND

Organizing an itinerary in such a rugged and sparsely populated country, whose most exciting properties are often the remotest,

can pose a challenge for even savvy travelers unless they book through **Seasonz Travel** (9-360-8461; seasonz.co.nz). The outfitter has exclusive access to Great Mercury Island and a roster of iconic hotels and lodges and can organize both the mundane and the remarkable, including airport pickups, private chefs, behind-the-bar wine tours and helicopter day trips. Sam Porter, Seasonz' owner and a former director of Abercrombie & Kent's Around the World private-jet tours, stayed with us for two days on Great Mercury Island, going on an early-morning trail run with Dad and teaching me to catch my first fish. If that isn't personal attention, I don't know what is.

WHERE TO STAY

After I'd been thirty hours in transit from New York, pastoral, intimate **Otahuna Lodge** felt like paradise to me; a night spent on a down-soft bed in one of its seven suites didn't do anything to change my mind. Dad and I stayed in the Rhodes Suite, the house's former master bedroom, which includes a private veranda, an octagonal sitting room, a fireplace and stained-glass windows that turn the sunset lavender. Be sure to wander the lodge's potager garden and orchard to inspect the heirloom tomatoes, herbs and fruits before enjoying them during one of chef Jimmy McIntyre's grand five-course dinners. If you can't visit in New Zealand's summer, when the produce is at its best, try for September—the beginning of spring there—when the property erupts in thousands of daffodils. Suites from \$1,100, master suites from \$1,560, including breakfast, dinner and drinks. 224 Rhodes

Rd., Tai Tapu, Christchurch; 3-329-6333; otahuna.co.nz.

An acclaimed Tom Doak-designed golf course occupies much of the prime cliffside real estate of the 6,000-acre **Farm at Cape Kidnappers**. Non-golfers (like Dad and me) have numerous other ways to experience the jaw-dropping scenery, however, such as hiking, horseback riding and, my own favorite, rough-and-tumble four-wheeling. An activities coordinator circulates during cocktail hour to arrange the next day's expeditions; oenophiles shouldn't miss the chance to book a vineyard tour to sample the world-renowned Hawke's Bay Sauvignon Blancs. Suites from \$1,380. 448 Clifton Rd., Te Awanga, Hawke's Bay; 6-875-1900; capekidnappers.com.

On the helicopter flight from Auckland, ask your pilot to circle **Great Mercury Island** before landing so you can choose which of its fourteen white sand beaches to sunbathe on first. Snorkeling, fishing and water-skiing are just a few of the myriad aquatic activities available, while landlubbers can tour the working Black Angus farm and hike through stands of untouched bush. The compound's two houses are dug into the hillside, like hobbits' dens—though they're far more luxurious than anything J.R.R. Tolkien or Peter Jackson could have imagined. More like a private country than a hotel or lodge, Great Mercury Island is booked for only one party at a time and is ideal for reunions or extended-family vacations. From \$23,000 a night, all inclusive, for up to sixteen guests. Contact Sam Porter at Seasonz Travel to reserve, sam@seasonz.co.nz. —ELIZA PICKERING



MAP BY COURTNEY WOTHERSPOON



The Queen Anne-style main building at Otahuna Lodge.

WILD AT HEART

(continued from page 91) club Western, the colors reflecting the shifting burlap of the hills. Tools hung along halls, among them wooden rakes and pitchforks like those stored in my family's barn in Nova Scotia. Public rooms were an eye-catching miscellany of iron, animal skins and wood. Heavy metal grain barrels clustered against walls. Lanterns sat on window ledges, and weathervane-like creatures stood on tables, often rams with horns curling like chambered nautilus.

Our cabin was a Ridge Suite, facing the ocean and fields moldy with sheep. From below, the suite resembled a farm shed with a porch. Details of the cabin were countrified; doors, for example, slid like those on barns and encouraged people to wander outside and simply look. Before dinner, I sat on the porch and listened to the cheery ringing of crickets. Walking to the lodge, I watched small flocks of local white-eye birds foraging the scrub and, best of all, I trailed after New Zealand pipits, which were bobbing their tails and twisting about to study me, almost as if they were inviting me to fall in line behind them.

INSTEAD OF FOLLOWING THE BIRDS, WE followed a schedule, the length of the trip determined by my having agreed to teach an English class at the University of Western Australia. Thus, our last stop in New Zealand was Great Mercury Island, a private island co-owned by the New Zealand financier Michael Fay. It was a thirty-minute helicopter ride from eastern Auckland, a trip we took with Sam Porter, the owner of Seasonz Travel, the company that sanded the rough, jigsawed pieces of our trip together into a smooth whole. During the year, Sam takes groups to the island, often when the Fays are not in residence. On this occasion, Michael and his wife, Sarah, greeted us when we landed. "This place likes people," Michael said, and so did he. They were people, to paraphrase Thoreau, who embraced life, nay, shook it, so that when they came to the noose end of their days they would know they had lived. On our arrival, Sarah fixed lamb sandwiches for us, and the chef, Mark Zajzman, made "dessert," slices of smoked salmon slathered with caviar.

Designed by Savin Couelle, a French architect who lived in Sardinia, the Fays' house sat on a hill overlooking the island's harbor. The entrance was an underground tunnel, and from within, the house seemed Moroccan and caravansary-like. Great windows opened on the front and side, and ceilings billowed into vaults. Here and there, boulders bulged from the white walls like shoulder blades, and nets of beams crossed ceilings. The floors were tile and polished stone, and stained glass glittered unexpectedly from nooks. Eliza and I slept upstairs in the Shipwreck Rooms. A sail blew back from my bed, while driftwood sprawled across the white sand of the walls. The wood was local; one of the pieces was Pohutukawa, a gray beam bulging, the wood corded into hard veins.

The island consisted of 5,500 acres populated by 300 head of Angus cattle and 1,000 Romney sheep. During the next week, many heifers would be sold, and the sound of cows bawling for their young would tear through the hills in harsh currents. On our days there, however, the cattle were quiet. After I surfeited myself with "dessert," Michael popped me into his pickup truck and took me for a drive, Eliza following behind with Sam. Michael and I examined sheepdogs: Huntaways, rough and barking; eye dogs, or Border collies "tweaked" for New Zealand. Past lowlands and hills suitable for grazing, the land rose sharply. At water's edge, limestone bluffs fell jagged and toothed like saws, white or yellow, depending on the time of day. On the bluffs, Pohutukawa trees drove roots between rocks like mountain climbers hammering pitons into seams; native vegetation spread prickly along gullies. Here and there gorse bloomed yellow, the plant impassable, like concertina wire. A tree farm of Monterey pines covered the highest parts of the island. Below the forest stood a grove of very old Pohutukawa trees, their limbs writhing. The grove seemed as primitive as an eclipse, the sort of place that is so still, it blows a creative wind through the mind.

That night we ate on the terrace of the Fays' house, starting with sausages made from island lamb—the best sausages I have ever eaten, the filling pure and unadulterated by crumbs, gristle or antibiotics. The

next day we fished, riding to the far side of the island in Michael's catamaran. Normally Eliza can become seasick standing motionless on land. On this trip she caught a university of fish, many more than anyone else in the boat. Ebullient, she bolted beer and swelled into sunny good spirits, the rock of the boat not affecting her. I, on the other hand, drank Coca-Colas to settle my stomach. When I was a boy, my family spent summers at Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, and early every morning I fished, catching my breakfast. My confidence in my casting has since receded, and I worried that I would hook an earlobe or spear a jugular vein rather than a fish, so I mostly let others cast for me.

For lunch we returned to the harbor, where Mark, the chef, pared a *kahawai* that Eliza had caught into sashimi. Then we ate, practically grazing the sea, starting with black abalone, fried and with a dark, earthy flavor. Next came courses of salmon tempura; a crayfish cocktail; a salad swimming with avocados, fried scallops and red snapper fresh from the hook. Mark threw table scraps off the pier, and after lunch I watched huge rays scrape them off the bottom, their wings like black veils, an underwater breeze occasionally flipping their edges over into gray. My eyes followed a flock of white-fronted terns swirling and fishing. Little shags beat low and fast over the water, and across the harbor a pair of paradise shelducks sunned themselves beside a water hole. Late in the afternoon we returned to fishing, with which Eliza continued her success, hooking platters of red snapper, then a juvenile black-backed gull. The gull was a slow learner. Once the hook was pried out of its beak, it returned to filching bait.

Rarely do I envy. But that night on the terrace, I recalled Michael's remark: "This place likes people." How nice it would be, I thought, to return with Vicki and all three children and spend a week. They could fish, kayak and water-ski, and I could roam and meander with the cattle and sheep and maybe think about things I had not thought about in a long time. "If my ship comes in," I muttered.

Of course, I am an inland, birdy person, and I don't have any ships on the sea. ✕