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RETREAT TO REFINEMENT

Belinda Luksic indulges at two of New Zealand's most luxurious lodges, discovering why they are as sought after for their sense of exclusivity, cuisine and exquisite service as they are for the adventures to be had in their incredible natural surrounds.



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01 Huka Lodge overlooks Waikato River 02 Cosy riverside dining at Huka Lodge 03 Fine fare at The Kinloch Club 04 The Huka Lodge lounge

There's something grand about The Lodge at Kinloch Club. From its sweeping entrance and expansive whitewashed stone interiors to its stunning framed vistas of Lake Taupo and prestigious Jack-Nicklaus signature golf course, New Zealand's newest luxury lodge is nothing short of spectacular.

Designed by award-winning architect Andrew Patterson and perched above the fairway and green in Kinloch, a small hamlet near Taupo in Central North Island, the main building is a minimalist take on a contemporary Scottish castle.

Inside, Virginia Fisher (she of Huka Lodge and Dolphin Island fame) has created an opulent medieval mélange of gold and pewter velvet lounges, tactile throws, chainmail chandeliers, gilt-edged mirrors, huge fireplaces and slate floors. It's gorgeous.

The subterranean spa, a hushed space of quiet elegance where I disappear for a traditional Maori massage, has therapeutic sports massages and signature treatments using Manuka honey from the lodge's private estate. For some outdoor action, golf fans

can spend their days on the green or take a private lesson with a PGA coach.

For those who hanker for something different, the lodge has heli-day trips to Treetops, its sister property in Rotorua.

Dinner in the lodge restaurant is an estate-to-plate four-course degustation menu – paired with excellent wines – with produce sourced from the owner's 2000-hectare private estate. Breakfast is cooked to order – poached eggs on a bed of golden haloumi, kale and avocado for me – and served before magnificent picture-perfect views.

Scattered along the hillside facing Lake Taupo, a short stroll or buggy ride away, are 10 luxury one- and two-bedroom villas. Spacious and light, with seamless outdoor terraces, there is a cosy den and full kitchen with Nespresso machine and local goodies. In the evening, a fire burning in the lounge, I crank up the stereo and run a luxuriously deep bath.

Cruising Lake Taupo

It's grey and drizzling when we set out the next morning for a guided hike of the Kawakawa section of the Great Lake Trail. Starting in Kinloch, the relatively

easy 10-kilometre walk winds up through lush wetlands dense with ferns and lichen-licked trees to a promontory overlooking Lake Taupo. Storm clouds gather low in the sky and everything looks smeared in Vaseline.

This hole, or caldera, in Central North Island – left behind when a massive volcano erupted about 2000 years ago – is New Zealand's largest freshwater lake. It's about the size of Singapore, with a rainbow trout population to match.

Kawakawa Bay, a near semi-circle of water on Lake Taupo with a narrow slash of grass and stony beach, is where we end up almost three hours later. Simon Jolly from Chris Jolly Outdoors is waiting with a tender to take us out to the sleek *MV Levante*, a Riviera 4000 Offshore private charter.

On board, we practically have the lake to ourselves. A mother duck and her brood paddle past. Raindrops ping the darkening green waters, sending out perfect seismic ripples.

The boat sluices the glassy water, navigating the secluded western bays of the lake and stopping at the modern Maori rock carvings of Mine



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05 The Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course at The Kinloch Club 06 Day trips by helicopter are available from The Kinloch Club 07 Luxurious suites with amazing views await at The Kinloch Club

Bay. On the return journey, racing storm clouds to shore, I mention a desire to catch a trout. Without a word, Jolly drops a fly in the water and hands me the rod. Within minutes, the line dips and I strike, pulling the rod up sharply and landing a gleaming fish. Trout isn't commercially fished in New Zealand so you won't find it on any menus, but with enough notice and a fishing licence, most restaurants will happily cook your catch.

An oasis of calm

At Huka Lodge, my hire car and bags whisked away and a glass of champagne pressed into my hand, that's exactly what happens. The fish disappears to the kitchen, and I retire to the lounge where a fire is crackling in the hearth. New Zealand's oldest lodge is an oasis of calm in a region famous for its boiling geothermal mud pools, geysers and steaming craters. Sitting on the edge of the Waikato River, it has an impressive roll call of guests. The Queen has stayed here, as has Dick Cheney, designer Miuccia Prada and funnyman John Cleese.

The two-storey main lodge, with its mounted animal heads on the wall and snappy tartan-meets-safari decor, is a cosy affair. Close by is a hot tub and heated pool, croquet lawn and tennis court. The comfortable guest suites are immaculate and look down across manicured lawns to the river. Ducks waddle along the riverbank and water birds career across the sky and land with an ungainly skid on its surface.

Heeding the lodge's advice to keep the French doors shut, lest I invite a visit from a curious duck, I sink down into the chaise longue and watch the show. There is time enough for activity - in the morning, a horse ride at Poronui, the third of Taupo's luxury lodges - but for now, I'm content to sit and do nothing.

As darkness unfurls, I make my way to the main lodge for dinner. Wine is poured and then my entrée arrives, a crown of pale pink trout served sashimi-style and garnished with flowers. It's a meal fit for a queen. ♦

Travel file

Accommodation
hukalodge.co.nz
thekinlochclub.com

Getting there

Air New Zealand has daily flights from Australian cities to Auckland with connecting flights to Taupo. It's a 15-minute heli-transfer or limousine ride to Huka Lodge. The Lodge at Kinloch Club is a 26-minute drive. airnewzealand.com.au

More information
greatlaketapo.com



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