LET'S ALL JUST MOVE TO NEW ZEALAND.

It's FAR, FAR AWAY, and suddenly everyone you know is heading there. Is it something in the water?

By Klara Glowczewska

The stories I hear time and again in New Zealand are all about remoteness, arrival, and desire. About how this land was separated from the supercontinent of Gondwana some 80 million years ago. About how it evolved into a sort of fragile Eden populated by flightless birds, lizards, and two species of bat found nowhere else. The human narrative doesn't begin until around 1350, when the Polynesian ancestors of the Maori arrived, making New Zealand the last landmass of any significance to be settled. Next came the European explorers (the Dutchman Abel Tasman in 1646, the Englishman James Cook in 1769, and the Frenchman Marc-Joseph Marion du Fresne in 1772), followed by missionaries, whalers, sealers, loggers, gold prospectors. "All those people coming down over the generations," as one local sums it up for me, "just looking for their right to exist in this little bit of paradise."

The latest wave—today's gold rush—is the travelers and home-abroad buyers now flocking to this Colorado-size country of just 4.5 million people in the middle of the South Pacific, proximate to nowhere. "New Zealand is about many of the things we obsess about now," is how Michael Venner, a Maori cultural guide, puts it. "Natural beauty, clean air and water, physical activity, health and wellness. Forest bathing!"

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And the remoteness? "It used to feel like a problem," says Alex Robertson, whose father, financier Julian Robertson, has for years owned three of the country's premier lodges and is among the largest American landholders here. "Kiwis called it 'the tyranny of distance.' But now it's an asset. New Zealand is the best place to be in the WCS: worst case scenario. Who wants to be close to everything that's happening in the world these days?" Robertson, who is managing director of the Tiger Fund, founded by his father, adds that "over time technology will make the trip here feel easier and easier. And talking investments—they're not making any more of this land."

The latest class of big property owners in New Zealand is a deep-pocketed who's who of international celebrities and tycoons, including James Cameron, Peter Thiel, Shania Twain, Matt Lauer, Bill Foley, Ben Harper, and Anthony Malkin. In Auckland, the country's largest and most diverse city, 22 percent of the houses are now foreign-owned, the demand driven mostly by Chinese buyers. "As a country, we are a luxury brand for them, like Gucci," a local tells me. "They want everything New Zealand: houses, but also baby formula, manuka honey, the antlers of New Zealand stags to use in traditional medicine."

Americans aren't far behind in seeking solace and some sort of cosmic wellness in New Zealand—not to mention a safe place to park their dollars. In the week after Donald Trump's 2016 election, 17,000 U.S. citizens—10,000 in just the first 24 hours—registered to receive information about New Zealand's residency requirements, 13 times as many as in the previous year.

I have come to see for myself what makes this place such a magnet. And because long voyages are part of the fabric of life here—from the Polynesians' epic migrations to what New Zealanders today refer to as "the OE," or overseas experience—I have created my own journey of discovery across the country's North and South islands: 12 days in six lodges and a villa, taking three domestic flights and half a dozen helicopter rides (it's how one rolls when one is dealing with some of the world's most varied and extreme terrain).

And while I have lashed myself to a purely journalistic mast—I'm looking, not buying—I have been forewarned. "Many of our clients leave with property brochures," says James Cavanagh, the group general manager of Eichardt's Hotel in Queenstown, one of my planned stops. "Whether they will or they won't, they want to." Buy into the dream, that is.

"Queen Elizabeth has stayed here four times," says the general manager of Huka Lodge, pointing out a discreetly placed photograph of the queen and the Duke of Edinburgh in a small room with views of lawns and the trout-rich Waikato River. "This is her favorite dining spot." Huka, in the North Island's central Lake Taupo region, has launched many a love affair with New Zealand. Its guest books date back almost 90 years and are filled with the names of "the ordinary, the wealthy, the titled, the celebrated, and the distinguished of many countries." (This in the words of the biographer of its founder, an avid Irish fly-fisherman named Alan Pye.) Minutes after my arrival, I'm all in.

To begin with, there's the breakfast spread. "We have 38 different suppliers," says Paul Froggart, the executive chef, adding that "there is a lot of culinary competition in New Zealand." Huka, which is open to diners not staying here—if they're lucky enough to score a reservation—features more than 21 dining venues for its 19 suites and two cottages. I am booked in the four-bedroom Owner's Cottage, along with two friends. We lounge about on our private stone terraces, which have a pool and hot tub overlooking the Waikato's short run of rapids. The understated, down-to-earth luxury of the "cottage" and its cocooning seclusion suggest a kind of Platonic ideal of, well, home.

Domesticity on our minds, we look up Sotheby's real estate listings for Lake Taupo. My friends, who are not immune to the siren song of property buying opportunities, and I find 19 "luxury homes" available (prices on request), the photos showcasing floor-to-ceiling windows and terraces with views of shimmering Lake Taupo (from which the Waikato River drains). Roughly the size of Singapore, the lake occupies a caldera formed 26,500 years ago, when the Taupo supervolcano exploded in the most violent eruption on earth in the past, oh, 70,000 years. Its ashy fallout likely contributed to the last Ice Age. Now, that's real estate with a backstory.

As global interest in proximity to beauty like this has helped send property values across New Zealand soaring, pricing many locals out of the market, the country's parliament passed legislation →

KLARA GLOWCZEWSKA (HELICOPTER, EXTERIOR); MIZ WATANABE (LOUNGE); JULIEN CAPMEIL (MAN)

in August prohibiting purchases of existing homes and residential land by most foreigners. But all is not lost: The law doesn't apply to new condos. Also, buyers can apply for exemptions from the Overseas Investment Office if they can demonstrate that their ownership of what's called "sensitive forestry land" will bring sufficient benefits: creating jobs, enhancing agriculture, or conserving the environment. As one local entrepreneur explains, "With a population under 5 million, we don't have enough core wealth. We need foreign sponsorship to drive development."

Julian Robertson, for one, is regarded as something of a local hero for his contributions to the economy. His Farm at Cape Kidnappers, on the North Island's Hawke's Bay, where I head next, was a 150-year-old spread fallen on hard times when he bought it in 2002 for what was described to me as "the price of a New York apartment." Robertson *père* got 6,000 acres of undulating pastureland and forest atop craggy sea cliffs, one of which is home to the world's largest mainland colony of gannets. It's trophy real estate on steroids.

An 1860s portrait by John Crombie of a Maori man with *ta moko*, the facial tattoos historically worn by the socially prominent.

He used part of the property to build a state-of-the-art 22-suite lodge and a world-renowned Tom Doak golf course. ("We have Chinese clients who fly down by private jet from Hong Kong, about nine hours, just for four nights," the golf pro tells me.) But Robertson also revived the farm, with Black Angus cattle and breeding ewes roaming the well-tended pastures.

In addition he was instrumental in creating the 6,177-acre Cape Sanctuary to restore and protect endangered native flora and fauna. A 6.6-mile predator wall that extends six feet above ground and nearly five feet below traverses the cape from coast to coast, keeping out rats, rabbits, cats, stoats, weasels, and opossums—invasive species that arrived with human migrations. ("Cute, but they all must die," a guide says of the opossums, which strip the bark from trees.) We walk through a protected forest of pines and ferns, the ground soft with needles; we see gannets—a whole cliffside squawking and fluttering; and we inspect the kiwis, which a researcher charmingly describes as "that lovely, innocent, slightly daft bird of ours." Inside the Cape Sanctuary their survival rate to breeding age is 85 percent; outside, it's 5 percent.

By day's end I'm once again on the Sotheby's site. It extols Hawke's Bay as New Zealand's premier wine region and its fruit basket. Nearby Napier is a "much-photographed Art Deco gem." And Havelock North, right next door, is "one of the most desirable places to live, with historic homes and tree-lined streets."

Queenstown, on the South Island, is the outdoor adventure capital that gave rise to bungee jumping. It too draws foreigners, including American tech entrepreneur and venture capitalist Peter Thiel, who bought one of his two New Zealand properties here and is famously rumored to have installed a panic room in his house. Which, once you've spent time in New Zealand, feels like an oddly irrelevant gesture.

The flight here from the North Island requires no ID and no security check (nor do any domestic flights). On a seat in our row, two empty wineglasses seem to symbolically toast an era of innocence long vanished elsewhere. Security is a big part of New Zealand's allure, and it is expressed in many forms: a stable democratic government, low crime, abundant energy resources, and forward-thinking environmental policies. "I can drink from any stream or waterfall," a local tells me. And the typical visibility, according to a helicopter pilot, "is 50 miles—we have no pollution."

The endless view from the terrace of the Penthouse at Eichardt's, where we stay in Queenstown, looks make-believe: a strip of white sand beach, the intense blue of the 50-mile-long Lake Wakatipu (of *Lord of the Rings* movie fame), and all around and into the distance, as if cradling the lake and delineated with startling crispness, the jagged mountains aptly called the Remarkables.

Catching the adrenaline-fueled spirit of this place, we head out cycling with John Thomassen, an outdoor guide, around nearby Arrowtown (population 3,000). Judging by the well-preserved 19th-century houses and the shop-and-restaurant-lined main street, one senses that this center of the 1860s gold rush is in the throes of another boom. "House prices are doubling every three years," says Thomassen, who does real estate on the side. "They went up 29 percent in 2017 and 25 percent the year before. It's a good time to be flipping houses in Arrowtown." And Queenstown? "It's the most unaffordable place to live in New Zealand," he says.

Too bad. Not that I'm looking, but Homestead Peaks catches my eye: a dozen lots on Lake Wakatipu, with the Remarkables as a backdrop. "The land is naturally terraced by glaciers," says Sotheby's listing, "allowing for uninterrupted views from every house." The upside: Foreigners are eligible to buy, if they fulfill a residency requirement by living here full-time for six months. The downside: $2,235,000 per lot, before any building costs. (Only five were unsold at press time.)

I have no real estate dreams at Minaret Station, probably New Zealand's most unique lodge. It's just four chalets on the slope of a vast glacial valley in the Southern Alps, the largest range on the South Island, and the only way in and out is by helicopter. I've come here for what I have long heard is its special brand of high country thrills, and I am fortunate to discover them with one of the area's most irrepressible authorities, Matt Wallis, the founder, with his brothers, of Minaret, and its gregarious host. (Tragically, he died a few months after my visit.)

"Everything is here. The world is here," Wallis tells us as we fly in from Queenstown. He leads us on a hike [CONTINUED ON PAGE 106]

JOHN CROMBIE/1827–1878/PORTRAIT C. 1860 (MAORI MAN); KLARA GLOWCZEWSKA (HUKA LODGE); SIMON DEVITT/PHOTOFOYER (HELENA BAY); JACQUI CAMPBELL (GOLFER)

PRIVACY, PLEASE
Clockwise from top left: The two-bedroom Alan Pye Cottage at Huka Lodge; Helena Bay has five suites and four private beaches—ideal for takeovers; the Penthouse at Eichardt's can arrange for you to tee off on top of the world.

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NEW ZEALAND

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 80] past glacial waterfalls and streams, shows us the fine points of sheepherding on the Wallis family's 50,000-acre ranch, and on day two takes us on a helicopter excursion to demonstrate his world-in-a-grain-of-sand theory.

As the helicopter rises, a vista of shardlike peaks unfolds, the result of the continuously colliding Pacific and Indo-Australian tectonic plates (in geologyspeak these mountains are among the most "dynamic," or fastest-rising, in the world). The 9,951-foot Mount Aspiring, "the Matterhorn of the South," is topped with snow. ("We heli-ski there—just drop people off," Wallis says.) Glaciers appear, riddled with crevasses in ethereal shades of blue, and he sets us down on a white, windblown bit.

Next we fly over a giant fjord called Milford Sound, and the water turns Caribbean blue as we head out to the Tasman Sea, the 1,400-mile stretch of Pacific between New Zealand and Australia. The Southern Alps' heavily vegetated westernmost slopes plunge, Jurassic Park–style, toward the sea. I have never seen a coastline so primordially wild. "This area gets more rainfall than any part of the Amazon rainforest," Wallis says, which explains the lushness after all the ice and snow. "See what I mean? Who else has all this? The world in a bottle."

We land on a beach strewn with black granite boulders draped with hundreds of fur seals. Galapagos II. After dropping us off, the helicopter heads out to sea, a hook dangling below. "He's going to get your lunch," Wallis announces. A lobster cage was sunk earlier, and the catch will be grilled for us in a fairy-tale clearing surrounded by the craggy New Zealand beech trees that inspired the look of the talking tree creatures in *The Lord of the Rings*.

"Even if they're in New Zealand, people still have empires to run," says Neil McFarlane, general manager of Helena Bay, a five-suite lodge in the North Island's upper reaches. "That's why we invested in a cell tower." Like most of the lodge's VIP clients, we are whisked here in 45 minutes from Auckland aboard an AgustaWestland AW109S Grand, the Maserati of helicopters. Opened in 2016 as one of the country's newest swank lodges, Helena Bay belongs to Russian steel billionaire Alexander Abramov, who installed Swarovski crystal chandeliers, antique Persian rugs, heated floors, an arctic plunge pool in the large spa, and a gallery-style display of Eastern European paintings. "The staff-to-guest ratio is 54 to 10," McFarlane, a former merchant marine captain, tells me. "It's the superyacht ratio. That was the vision."

Indeed, Helena Bay's atmosphere is more shipshape than Kiwi-convivial. (I was asked to sign a nondisclosure agreement protecting the identities of the other guests.) All the same, its 800 acres and four beaches are strikingly beautiful: bright green hills that recall Scotland or Yorkshire, a patch of forest lit with glowworms, and mysterious humplike remnants of old Maori *pa* sites, fortified lookouts facing the Pacific.

Northland, as this area on the North Island's tip is called, is heavily Maori. It's where Maori tribes still own the most land (overall it's just 5 percent of what they once did) and where the Te Kongahu Museum of Waitangi opened three years ago to commemorate the complex history of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi between the British and the Maori chiefs. No sooner was it signed than it was decried as a land grab. This was followed by declarations of war by the Maori, further land confiscations, Maori marginalization, and, finally, a Maori protest movement that spawned a legal process of claims and settlements, which is expected to be completed by 2020. This nearly two-century "conversation," as the museum calls it, between the colonizer and the colonized is widely dwelled upon here.

We ponder it all from our penultimate perch: the Landing, 1,000 acres of rolling hills with farmland, a nature reserve, a vineyard, five beaches, and four private, staffed villas. (Ours is called Vineyard Villa, and our "guest service manager," Laura Moreno, used to be a sort of in-flight concierge for Princess Diana and her boys.) The Bay of Islands, which it overlooks, is both a water sports heaven—100 square miles of inlets, peninsulas, and 144 islands—and a rich repository for the early histories of both the Maori (the Landing has 43 registered Maori archaeological sites) and Europeans, as the first British missionaries, led by Samuel Marsden, landed and settled here in 1814.

"I fell in love. It's a folly," says Peter Cooper, the Landing's owner, a California-based, part-Maori billionaire who made his fortune in private equity and real estate after emigrating to the U.S. in 1989. He spotted the neglected and environmentally damaged property from a helicopter and knew he wanted to revive it.

During a tour Cooper gives me of his five-bedroom stone-and-wood, Maori art–filled house overlooking the bay (it too is available for rent), I sense that as much as he wants to make the Landing a commercial success—he applied for 44 title deeds to build and sell more villas—he also has an emotional investment in it. He stops in front of a photograph of his family from the 1920s. "Look, my forebears," he says. "My grandfather on this side was English. His wife, right here, my grandmother, was Maori. This is my other grandfather, who was Danish. My uncle, who played on New Zealand's national rugby team, the All Blacks, was in the Maori Battalion in World War II." He pauses. "That right there is the key thing to understand about New Zealand. We are all very much a mixed race, Maori and Pakeha [as people of European descent are called]. Our 'conversation' has at times been more of a struggle. But it is unique, and it is important that it continue."

I spend my final day in New Zealand with Michael Venner, the enlightening guest relations manager at Kauri Cliffs, another Robertson lodge. On a tour of the 6,000-acre farm and golfing property—which includes protected land—he points out beaches with traces of *kaingas*, or Maori fishing villages; plants used in traditional medicine; forest paths where silver ferns grow; and, shooting up into the sky, giant kauri trees, which are among the most ancient (Jurassic period) and longest-lived (2,000 years) in the world.

"The old, learned Maori people had a very interesting connection with the world above—the stars, other realms," Venner says. "It was an invisible world, but they were able to articulate it very beautifully, in their art, poetry, and songs. And they counseled others from that kind of eternal place, which was bigger than who they were."

And the land? I think of all the people who want a piece of it.

"In Maori culture we do not own the land," Venner says. "Our responsibility is to the generations to come. We are just the *kaitiaki,* guardians." «

TO BOOK *My trip was brilliantly organized by New Zealand specialist (and native) Sarah Farag of Southern Crossings.* SARAH@SOUTHERNCROSSINGS.COM. *K.G.*