

DOWN BY THE RIVER

NEW ZEALAND'S FIRST LUXURY LODGE HAS AN EYE-WATERINGLY EMINENT ROLLCALL OF PAST GUESTS. WITH ITS NATURAL BEAUTY, SECLUSION AND FINE FOOD, IT'S NO WONDER HUKA LODGE HAS CAPTIVATED SO MANY.

STORY **MILANDA ROUT**

There are guest books, and then there is the guest book at Huka Lodge in Taupo, New Zealand. In the foyer of the main building it sits, as it has done for years, in between the kitchen and the dining room. But the names that have appeared in these books have also appeared on the pages of history – Queen Elizabeth II, Sir Edmund Hilary, Bill Gates, Dick Cheney, Charles Lindbergh; or have shaped our popular culture – Joan Collins, John Cleese, Robin Williams, Miuccia Prada, the Spice Girls, Naomi Wolf ... the extraordinary list goes on and on.

The clue to why there is a such guest list lies a few columns over in the comments section. “The best place in the world,” reads one. “Unforgettable service”, “staff amazing”, “food is incredible,” according to others. “Heavenly. Wonderful. Perfect in every way.” As WISH arrives on a beautiful late summer afternoon in early December, when the sun starts to set on the perfect green lawns that edge the jade-coloured waters of the Waikato River, it’s not hard to see how this place might elicit such praise.

Elizabeth II’s name may not appear in the current guest book but her presence is still felt. A signed photograph of her and her husband Prince Philip sits next to the lodge’s official visitor book. It is dated 2002, the last time the Queen stayed at Huka Lodge; that was her fourth visit. “She is practically a regular,” a staff member says, laughing, as she takes the WISH team to our suites, of which there are just 19 on the property. The path from the main lodge building winds through a lush forest of ferns and towering pine trees to the 42sqm suites, which are all hidden from view and dotted along the riverbank. They are bookended at each end of the 7ha property by two private cottages for larger parties (although calling them cottages is a bit misleading, as they are more like grand houses).

Each of the 19 suites has direct access to the river, a private deck and a pathway down to two lounge chairs where you can watch the world go by, or in this case, the fast-flowing current of the longest river in New Zealand. A few hundred metres on and these relatively calm waters turn into something more ominous: the famous Huka Falls, where 220,000L of water spectacularly cascade over the 9m rockface every second (enough to fill five Olympic swimming pools every minute). It is these falls and the river itself that captivated Alan Pye back in the 1920s and led to the establishment of Huka Lodge in 1924. It was not only the stunning waterway that caught the Irish immigrant’s attention; it was what lay just beneath the river’s surface that most excited him: scores of fly hatching on the reeds. To the trained eye, this meant fly-fishing paradise.

Pye purchased land immediately and built a small lodge so that he and like-minded anglers could fish for trout. The fisherman slept in canvas tents with slatted floors while Pye and his wife cooked for them every night and they ate together in the lodge. It didn’t take long for word to spread of this famous fishing spot and its good hospitality. The Duchess of York, later the Queen Mother, was one of the first royal guests at Huka Lodge in the 1930s – she indulged in a spot of fly-fishing and even signed one of the first guest books. International visitors slowed with the outbreak of World War II, while

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the decision by local authorities to install gates to control the flow of the river reduced trout stocks. Despite this, the Lodge continued operating past Pye’s death in 1973.

It was in the 1980s when Huka Lodge and the Waikato River transfixed another individual who would go on to transform it: the Dutch-born investor and lifetime wanderer Alex Van Heeren. His family had just moved to New Zealand from South Africa and he saw the property from the footbridge over Huka Falls. “I cannot readily articulate how the property held me in its grasp at that moment; however, it did – and still does to this day,” Van Heeren has written. “On first sight, it was the drama, beauty and magic of the location – Huka Falls, combined with the fast-flowing river; the sense of danger and the power of nature.” His interest was piqued further when he realised Huka Lodge was for sale. “I took responsibility for the renaissance of a beautiful property with a phenomenal history and a guest book that was already a Who’s Who of famous guests including the Queen Mother and Charles Lindbergh,” he tells WISH. “When we redesigned the lodge, I wanted to retain the simplicity while adding beautiful interior design and a high degree of comfort with buildings that would blend in with the natural surroundings.”

Van Heeren – who also owns luxury retreats in Fiji and South Africa – hired interior designer Virginia Fisher and spent millions of dollars renovating and rejuvenating the property soon after he bought it in 1985. “Huka Lodge was actually the first luxury lodge in New Zealand,” he says. “My aim from the outset was to provide our guests an experience where the main contributing factors would be the beauty of the surroundings and the people of New Zealand. Ultimate luxury is simplicity, generosity and beauty, combined with untouched nature.”

Food has always been an important part of Huka Lodge since its inception but has become more so in the age of gastrotourism – when eating is as important a part of the travel experience as sightseeing. British chef Paul Froggatt came on board as executive chef five years ago after serving his predecessor at a restaurant he was working at in Hong Kong. Froggatt started his career in West Sussex and trained in Michelin-starred restaurants in France before working in Singapore and then Hong Kong, where he was chef de cuisine at the Landmark Mandarin Oriental Hotel. It was here that he cooked for the then head chef of Huka Lodge, Michel Louws, which led to a phone call in which Louws offered him his job. “I walked through the door here and thought, wow, this is just amazing,” he says. “Now I live six minutes down the road.”

Froggatt believes they have raised the gastronomical



Clockwise: The Owner’s Cottage, dining on the jetty, the wine cellar, the dining room in the Main Lodge, and a Junior Lodge Suite



Visitors go out to learn about how the Maori lived off the land and collect native ingredients.



bar at the Lodge, partly by embracing ingredients that showcase New Zealand. This includes using produce grown on the property. “I foraged some blackberries from some bushes near my house and there is elderflower in the garden,” he says of the dessert – cream of elderflower with fresh blackberries and sparkling wine sorbet – that appeared on the five-course tasting menu that WISH was fortunate enough to experience the night before. It was served, with matching wines, in a candlelit underground wine cellar on the property, one of 20 private dining destinations available. Guests can eat in the gardens or in the property’s orchard, or indoors in the library or trophy room in the main lodge building. Van Heeren himself is a fan of dining outdoors. “We have many beautiful outside dining destinations – my favorite is always on the jetty right by the river,” he says.

Huka Lodge has also teamed up with Tom Loughlin, local bushman and *tangata whenua* (Maori for “people of the land”) to host foraging tours. Visitors go out with Loughlin to learn about how the Maori lived off the land and collect native ingredients like kumara and fern roots which Froggatt transforms into a gourmet feast that evening. There is a spirituality and sustainability element to the tour as well.

The Lodge also offers wine dinners, cooking classes and even cheese demonstrations. “People travel for good food and that gourmet escape,” says Froggatt. They are not the only culinary experiences on offer; there are winery tours and lunches in boats on nearby Lake Taupo or even picnics deep in the mountains. And this is where Simon Jolly and his helicopters come in.

“It’s pretty cool to get a helicopter from the lawn and get dropped off in the mountains,” says Jolly, who runs his family leisure company Chris Jolly Outdoors and has been working with Huka Lodge for years to create experiences for guests to explore Lake Taupo (which is 3½ hours south of Auckland) and the surrounding regions. “The good thing about Huka Lodge is its central location,” Jolly says. “You are close to the ski fields or you can fly over to Hawkes Bay.”

Over breakfast one morning at the main lodge, WISH indeed does witness a helicopter landing on the lodge’s front lawn next to the river. It is a rather spectacular sight watching the lucky participants – young honeymooners from the US – walk straight from their table on the outdoor terrace, down the gentle green slope and into the waiting helicopter. They take off, fly over the river and Huka Falls to go wine tasting. It is an extraordinary experience for the pair and one that will no doubt make it into the comments section of Huka Lodge’s famous guest book. hukalodge.co.nz



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 STYLIST **KEN THOMPSON**
 HAIR & MAKEUP **SARAH LAIDLAW**

This page:
 Polo Ralph Lauren double-breasted check wool
 overcoat, chenille cotton knit and floral silk wrap
 skirt; Salvatore Ferragamo ankle boots

Opposite page:
 Ermenegildo Zegna zip-front wool hoodie,
 cotton drawstring trousers, fine-gauge wool
 vest, leather sandals and leather sun visor

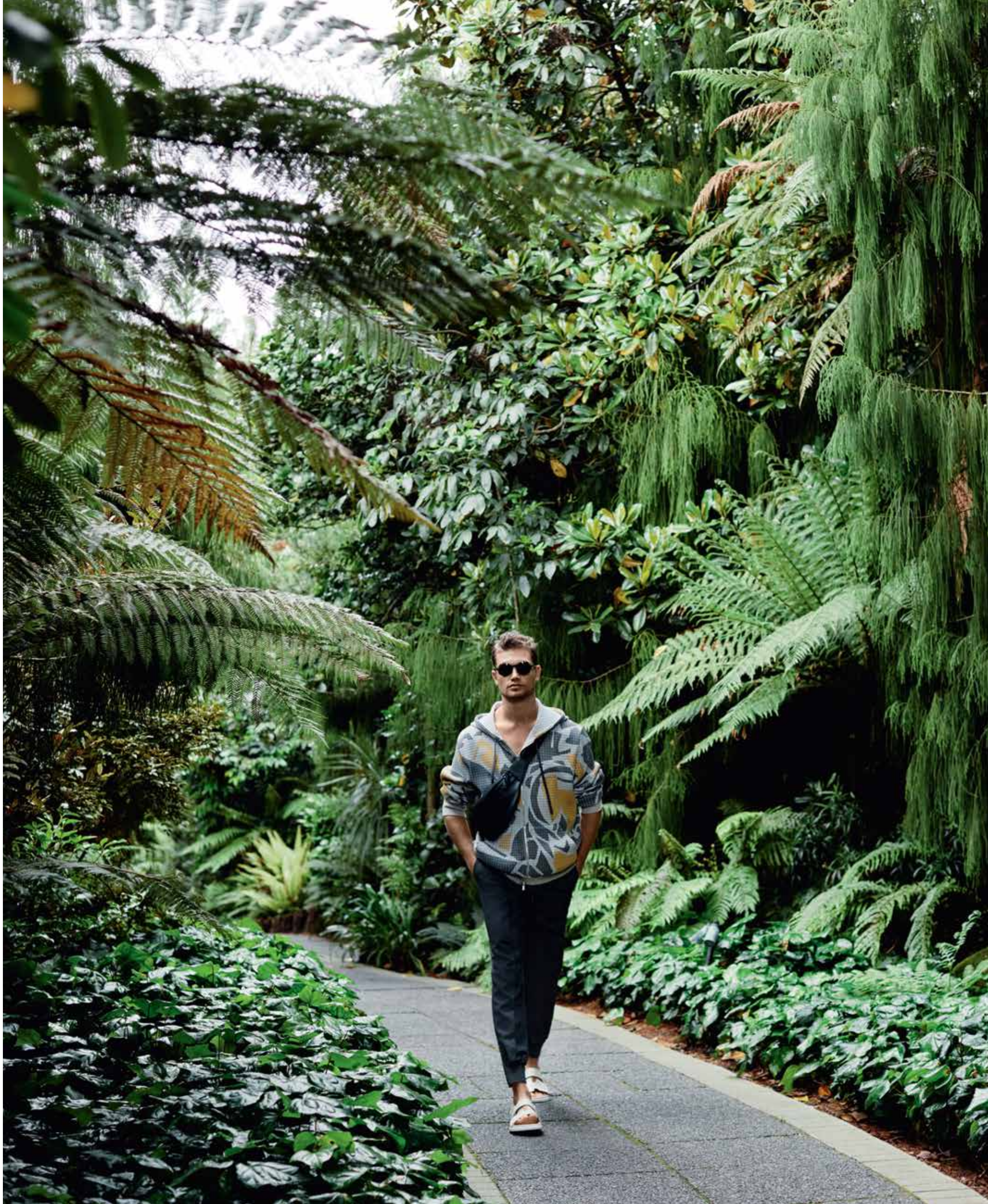


BACK TO
 NATURE



This page:
Max Mara animal print wool coat and
technical fabric drawstring trousers;
Prada leather cross-body bag and patent
two-tone slingbacks

Opposite page:
Hermès graphic print seersucker technical
jersey hoodie, cotton drawstring trousers
and leather sandals; Salvatore Ferragamo
leather bum bag; Giorgio Armani sunglasses



This page:
Giorgio Armani pleat-neck cotton viscose
swing coat; Christian Dior calfskin leather
sandals

Opposite page:
Burberry B Classic check single-breasted
wool mix cape, reversible check gabardine
bomber jacket, denim chambray shirt and
cotton denim jeans





This page:
Christian Dior toile de jouy belted cotton
trench coat and calfskin leather sandals

Opposite page:
Prada technical mohair jacket and nylon puffer
hat; Giorgio Armani denim chambray shirt and
wool drawstring trousers; Ermenegildo Zegna
leather sandals

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New Zealand; hukalodge.co.nz