

# HUKA LODGE

*A stay at Huka Lodge is just the remedy for leaving stresses behind and enjoying the finer features of Aotearoa (New Zealand) – nature, exceptional food and wine, and genuine hospitality, writes BELINDA CRAIGIE.*

There’s a moment, not long into my stay at Huka Lodge in Taupō, on the North Island of New Zealand, where I feel myself noticeably relax. It’s almost as if the waters of the Waikato River, on the banks of which this remarkable property is perched, have carried any stresses or worries downstream, plunging them into the rushing Huka Falls.

I have a hunch that Irishman Alan Pye may have identified the serenity-inducing potential of this destination when, in 1924, he opened a tented white canvas fisherman’s camp on the riverbank. It was 60 years later when Dutch entrepreneur Alex van Heeren opened the lodge as part of Huka Retreats, marking a new chapter for the luxury lodge category in New Zealand and attracting some of the world’s most discerning travellers. In 2021, Australian company Baillie Lodges brought Huka Lodge into its portfolio, joining the group’s properties in remarkable destinations like Kangaroo Island (Southern Ocean Lodge), the Daintree rainforest (Silky Oaks Lodge), Uluru (Longitude 131), Lord Howe Island (Capella Lodge), and Vancouver Island (Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge).

Huka remains among the most prestigious of the country’s luxury lodges. High-profile guests have included Queen Elizabeth II, who stayed four times,

along with the Dutch royal family — evidence of which I spot in signed, framed photographs standing proudly next to the property’s guestbook (which is brimming with compliments from guests from such far-flung places as Mexico, the USA, and Spain).

In the communal lounge area, where guests gather in the evenings to chat over pre-dinner drinks and canapés, there are hints of the lodge’s origins in the fishing memorabilia that adorns the space, while tartan carpeting and vintage furnishings together lend a refined, rustic feel.

Guest accommodations at the lodge include 20 junior lodge suites, each 49m<sup>2</sup>, as well as two standalone residences — the two-bedroom Alan Pye Cottage and four-bedroom Alex van Heeren Cottage — which, despite the quaint inference in their naming, are sprawling at 325m<sup>2</sup> and 364m<sup>2</sup>, respectively.

Each accommodation has been thoughtfully designed to make the most of 6.8ha of lush, natural surroundings. I’m instantly entranced as I enter my suite for the first time and see the river flowing, just steps away, through large French doors with floor-to-ceiling windows. Waking up, unmistakable native birdsong is a reminder not only of this special location, but also of the magic connection to nature that Aotearoa tends to instil in visitors and locals alike.

**BELOW** The serene setting of New Zealand’s Huka Lodge.



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF BAILLIE LODGES.





**LEFT** The star of the region is the thunderous and powerful Huka Falls.

**LEFT, BOTTOM** The Jetty Pavilion tucked away in stunning natural surrounds.



**AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES**

A stay at Huka Lodge can be as restful or active as you'd like. Onsite, there's a swimming pool surrounded by lush bush, an all-weather tennis court, and pétanque and croquet courses. Mountain bikes can be used to explore nearby tracks, and the staff can arrange an array of experiences by water, land, and air, such as boating excursions, golfing, hiking, and scenic heli flights. The Ata Mai Cultural Experience offers guests an opportunity to learn about Māori cultural traditions from a descendant of Ngāti Tūwharetoa, a local iwi (tribe).

Pye's legacy lives on at Huka Lodge, which remains a popular destination for fly fishers hoping to land the impressive trout that fill the waters of Lake Taupō and the Waikato River. Keen anglers can try catch-and-release on the lodge's riverbank, or the team can arrange for excursions with an expert guide to open fishing areas. I'm told it's not unusual for guests to bring their fresh catch back to the lodge for a chef-prepared meal.

Not quite the seasoned fisher, I decide to embark on a hike in the surrounding bush to reach Huka Falls. The walking path is closed due to damage caused by Cyclone Gabrielle, so I use the track usually reserved for mountain bikers. It's a relatively cruisy five kilometres

through lush native bush, in the myriad shades of green that have given Aotearoa its reputation as one of the world's most beautiful destinations. I pass many other friendly hikers on the route, all making the most of the clear skies and mild temperatures lingering at the end of the summer.

I hear the falls before I see them — a chasm causing the water of the Waikato River to thunder through with all its might. I turn a bend and there's the river below me, with Huka Lodge visible through the bush. Reaching the falls, and the throng of people who have stopped to view them, I marvel at nature's ability to be, at once, so serene yet powerful.

Later, back at the lodge, I'm seated for dinner in the library-cum-private dining room, where I'm told Queen Elizabeth II dined when she visited. It's dedicated to Alan Pye and his vision all those years ago. Three-course meals are created using local produce, with menus shared with guests prior to dining. I love the inclusion of native ingredients such as kawakawa in the canapés, bread made with kūmara and Māori potato (taewa), and an amuse-bouche of pāua served in its kaleidoscopic shell.

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**LEFT** Fine dining with a European flair.

**LEFT, BOTTOM** The inviting swimming pool at the lodge. Credit: Belinda Craigie.



#### SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability philosophy at Huka Lodge is holistic considering the needs of the environment and the community. Recruitment is focused regionally, and the lodge supports local businesses for the provision of food, wine, and services, where possible.

In the kitchen, organic and free-range produce is sourced from suppliers who actively embrace sustainable practices. Single-use plastics have been reduced; recyclable materials are sorted; and solar power planning is underway. Those who drive an electric vehicle can recharge at the lodge's EV charging stations.

"One thing we don't have a shortage of here is water", General Manager Kerry Molloy tells me over an al fresco lunch on the verdant grounds, overlooking the river. A similar thought had crossed my mind the previous night as I drew a bath in my suite, with the river steadily flowing mere metres from my door. In 2019, the lodge embarked on a project to source fresh Waikato water, investing in a monitoring and purification system. A wastewater plant was installed, the output of which is used to irrigate the property's significant gardens.

In 2024, Huka Lodge will mark its centenary with a considered renovation, respecting a 100-year-old heritage of authentic hospitality on the banks of the Waikato River — the tranquillity of which I carry with me as I depart.

Rates start from NZD\$2,800 (about AUD\$2,534) per night, with a minimum two-night stay.

The writer was a guest of Baillie Lodges.

[hukalodge.com](http://hukalodge.com)

