

THE AUSTRALIAN

TRAVEL+ LUXURY

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TOP DINING
SPOTS IN
BYRON BAY
AND BEYOND

THE NEW FRONTIER

Greenland lays out the welcome mat to tourists

BACK IN BUSINESS

One of NZ's favourite
lodges gets a makeover

BALI HIGH

Retreat to a hilltop
hideaway in Ubud





Huka Lodge's revamped terrace; the new River Room, top right; expanded dining room, above right



IN THE KNOW

Huka Lodge is a 3½-hour drive from Auckland (helicopter transfers available).

Flyfishing lessons, lake cruising, golfing, jet boating, cycling, white water rafting and scenic helicopter flights available. A guided walk through the Opepe Bush Historic Reserve is highly recommended. And don't miss a stroll to the dramatic Huka Falls.

From \$NZ3000 (\$2743) a couple a night, including a la carte breakfast, pre-dinner drinks and canapes, dinner with paired wines, minibar restocked daily and Taupo airport transfers. Children over 10 years of age welcome.

hukalodge.com

BETTER THAN EVER

One of New Zealand's beloved luxury lodges has emerged from a makeover

CHRISTINE McCABE

As New Zealand's Waikato River speeds from Lake Taupo to the dazzling Huka Falls, it passes by arguably the loveliest riverbank in the world. Sparkling tourmaline-green waters rush over rocks shining as brightly as polished onyx. The air ripples with a primordial energy, a kinetic fizz that drifts upwards through towering tree ferns to dance across manicured lawns towards the expanded terrace at the newly reopened Huka Lodge.

It is a sublime view that has mesmerised guests for a century. Huka Lodge began life as a fishing camp in 1924; 60 years later Alex van Heeren pioneered New Zealand's luxury lodge sector when he rebuilt the property. This month, with Baillie Lodges on board, the "grande dame" of this style of accommodation unveils an almost year-long, \$NZ25m (\$22m) renovation to emerge as an even better version of its fabulous self.

A reminder of its A-list appeal is found near reception where a visitors book is flanked by several framed photographs, including one of the late Queen Elizabeth II. She visited the lodge four times, taking dinner privately in the library, a room that remains respectfully unaltered. Upstairs, the cosy Piper Room pays homage to the late Don Ryder, who for 17 years piped guests to dinner (an essential hotel service for travelling monarchs).

The queen would love Huka's glow-up, cleverly designed to

better embrace the views and provide more room in the main lodge without changing the spirit of the property. The dining room has doubled in size, and a stunning new River Room frames the tumbling Waikato. French doors open on to an expanded terrace with double-sided fireplace. And beyond the main lodge there's a new day spa, gym, sauna and plunge pool alongside a light refresh of the 20 guest suites and two owner's cottages.

Following a dreamless sleep in a new king four-poster in suite 13, I head down to the riverbank with cup of tea in hand. Swallows dip and weave, a heron basks on the rocks, dense flax and ferns cast shimmering shadows. Downstream, a chap is preparing to cast. Flyfishing remains a popular lodge pastime.

Unfortunately, I've been struck down with pteridomania, an obsession with ferns first diagnosed during the Victorian era. At Huka, the ponga (or silver fern) and the giant mamaku (black tree fern) line riverbanks and grottoes; they shadow paths, with the trunks of spent ferns deployed in fencing and screens. Little leather leaf ferns cling to ancient tree trunks; other varieties tickle the waters of a gin-clear pond and waterfall. The gardens are immaculately maintained and dead fern fronds whisked swiftly stage left, yet head gardener Carmen confesses to loving "a skirt on a ponga". Me too.

Across the 7ha property, immense Leylandii hedges are deployed like the bosquets at Versailles, housing hidden garden rooms, a tennis court, croquet lawn, swimming pool, private dining nooks and the spa with two charming timber treatment rooms intended to resemble an upscale bach (Kiwi shack). Huka's original landscape designer, Suzanne Turley, has returned to create a new secret garden that wraps around the charming spa precinct.

Also back, 40 years after designing the lodge's original interiors, Virginia Fisher has overseen the refurb, channelling a 1920s and 30s vibe. Even the gym has a vintage feel, with tan leather medicine balls and benches.

Lodge decor takes flight in the expanded dining room with charcoal-coloured timber wall cladding, moody oil paintings framed in gilt, tobacco-coloured leather banquettes and cushions in a low-key, Burberry-style tartan. There are fireplaces indoors and out, and wood stacks so neat a game of Jenga may be required to extract a log. Velvet, timber, tartan and curios such as old eel traps and the inner workings of a 17th-century Dutch

windmill make for a layered and incredibly cosy look. The thoughtful staff, who address every guest by name, are kitted out in Rodd & Gunn trousers in a bespoke Huka green. And housekeeping is so on point that suites are whipped back into perfect shape in the short time I'm at breakfast, or while I'm enjoying a glass of Louis Roederer house champagne prior to dinner. The four-course evening menu changes daily, striking the right balance between haute and comfort. The Mount Cook alpine salmon is a standout, and on the menu again at breakfast served with labneh and poached eggs. Fine NZ wines are housed in a cellar, also available for private dining.

All suites are river-facing and a walk to the accommodation is like a stroll through the forest, with piwakawakas (fantails) flitting across the path, and ferns veiling a cloudless sky. Two premium owner's cottages bookend the property.

In suite 13 there is no television, but a burbling river soundtrack when the French doors are thrown open. Suites are unchanged other than a new bed, cosy sofa and recovered armchairs arranged around the fireplace. In the bathroom a large tub looks on to a bank of ferns, and there's oodles of space, although the shower is surprisingly snug. The exceedingly well-stocked gratis minibar includes local wines and house-baked shortbread.

The suites are lovely, but that beguiling river is the true star, whether you're walking barefoot on the lawn, dozing on a deck chair or tickling a trout. (Catch and release applies on this section of the Waikato.)

If you want to nab your own fish for dinner the lodge can arrange an excursion on nearby Lake Taupo, a vast expanse of water the size of Singapore, and chef will prepare your catch.

Huka Lodge is so beloved many guests return again and again. The last to leave when the lodge closed for refurbishment in May 2024 were the first to arrive when it reopened. The Drummonds have been visiting for 40 years. What do they think? "More light, more space, more places to sit ... and yet it feels like almost nothing has changed."

Huka Lodge, but better.

Christine McCabe was a guest of Huka Lodge, Tourism New Zealand and InterContinental Auckland.

newzealand.com/au
auckland.intercontinental.com