



**It is not often that** a hotel renovation has a nation holding its breath. But the \$NZ25 million refurbishment of New Zealand's most famous property, Huka Lodge, was a hot topic during its year-long closure. Would the makeover by its new owners, Baillie Lodges, render the century-old property unrecognisable? Or would the country's original luxury lodge still offer the same intimate experience loved by rock stars and royals alike?

The good news for returning guests – and Huka has plenty of those – is that many of the lodge's most-loved elements remain unchanged. The oversized suites, each with a river view, expansive bathrooms and carpets that feel like walking on air (thanks to a double layer of underlay) are as inviting as ever. The first-name service is still friendly, and there are plenty of tucked-away spots for a romantic evening of private dining: from the wine cellar, where a 4,500-strong collection of bottles is stored, to the Green Room, an al fresco space protected by high hedges.

There have also been some significant changes. Most striking is the way the lodge now invites the outside in. The addition of floor-to-ceiling windows in the dining and lounging areas, as well as an expansive outdoor terrace, mean there are now plenty of places where you can sit and drink in the spectacular surrounds, especially the emerald-green Waikato River that curves around the lodge.

"This room is my favourite part of the renovation," says Kerry Molloy when I join him for a drink in the waterfront River Room. Huka's general manager for the past 11 years, Molloy suspects his name is inscribed in the inventory of the lodge's furnishings. ("When they made the sale, they probably said, 'Yes you can have the sofas, but you have to take this old guy as well,'" he laughs.)

The connection with the outdoors has entirely changed the feel of the lodge. Back in 1984, when former owner Alex van Heeren transformed a compact fishing lodge into a luxury retreat, the vibe was very much Scottish Highlands hunting lodge, complete with mounted animal heads and lashings of boldly coloured tartan. (No wonder it was a hit with Queen Elizabeth II, who stayed no fewer than four times.)

As the number of suites eventually grew from 10 to 20, not counting the two private villas, the need for more space became evident. The challenge was to revive the property without losing the intimacy for which it was renowned.

Baillie Lodges founder James Baillie



wisely decided to make his job easier by getting the band back together. He called on the talents of interior designer Virginia Fisher and landscape designer Suzanne Turley, both of whom worked on the original 1984 design, and the Auckland-based Christian Anderson Architects, who worked on the Alan Pye Cottage, one of the lodge's two premium villas.

Fischer – who was a young designer when she first worked with Huka but is now an industry legend – has reinvigorated Huka's look. There are still plenty of bold colours, but they are combined in ways that feel much more contemporary. Teal walls and sofas are matched with olive and lime cushions, while charcoal walls are set off with ochre and rust carpets and cushions.

Eye-catching buckles, inspired by vintage suitcase straps, are a recurring motif, cosy blankets are draped over almost every chair back, while some of the treasured, original oil paintings are still on the walls. There are even occasional, more muted, tartan touches, nodding to the past.

## TRAVEL NEW ZEALAND

# A new dawn

Aotearoa's most famous holiday lodge, beloved by royalty and celebrities alike, is entering its next era, writes **Ute Junker**.



### Need to know

**Rates** From \$NZ2728 (about \$2500) a night per suite, including return transfers from Taupo airport. Also includes breakfast and dinner, pre-dinner drinks and complimentary minibar.

**Families** Children aged 10 and older are welcome.

is replenished daily, so when a craving for cheese and crackers and a bottle of red strikes, you are always covered.

Local flavours are front and centre, whether it's the lamb and snapper served at dinner, the turndown treat of Afghan biscuits (a traditional favourite for Kiwis), the Cranky Goat cheese we nibble on in front of the fire one evening, or the rotating selection of gins served during aperitivo hour. (The spiced cinnamon version from Wellington's Bureaucrats Gin is my new favourite.)

If you want to explore a little further afield, Huka's activities include everything from fly-fishing – the lodge's original raison d'être – to helicopter excursions to Rotorua or to acclaimed Hawke's Bay winery Craggy Range for a two-hour guided tour of the estate, including wine tastings and a five-course lunch.

Or you could opt for something simpler, such as our half-day excursion that combines a bushwalk through a nearby tall-tree forest and a cruise on nearby Lake Taupō, an extraordinary lake in a volcanic caldera that is 16 times the size of Sydney Harbour.

A dip in the crystal-clear water is invigorating, but not as exciting as the thrill when I reel in a huge trout. The kitchen staff promptly add an additional course to our meal that night, allowing us to feast on the ultra-fresh fish. Now that is service. **L&L**

*The writer travelled courtesy of Air New Zealand and Huka Lodge.*



Clockwise from top left: The terrace overlooking the Waikato River; breakfast by the water; a bright ensuite; al fresco dining by the fire; Huka's gourmet cuisine.