

WILD AT HEART: A private helicopter meets guests disembarking from a jetboot ride along the Motukitaki River. Interior of Motukitaki Lodge (far right)

ULTRA OUTDOORS



## Splendid ISOLATION

Space has never been in short supply in New Zealand – national parks occupy more than a tenth of the entire country. What has been limited, until now, is rural accommodation that is as impressive as the surrounding wilderness. *Tim Jepsen* heli-hops from mountain to vineyard to sample the best of the islands' new boltholes



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Our helicopter crested the ridge and plunged towards the coast. The scenery of New Zealand's Fiordland National Park unfolded on all sides in a rush of glaciers, forest and snow-capped peaks. Far below, surf crashed on a black-sand beach. Waterfalls tumbled over towering cliffs and in the distance rivers shimmered silver in the sun.

It was scenery beyond compare. Line upon line of mountains disappeared into a hazy horizon, the only limit on a wilderness of apparently boundless grandeur. We had landed amid the fissured ice, skimmed lakes of ominous blue, and wheeled above the glittering, fractured coast. These were some of the world's finest landscapes, and we were seeing them in the best way possible.

But not for us the perfunctory 20-minute sightseeing flight: we had been in the helicopter for several hours, and revelled in every minute. Now, though, the sun had begun to sink and the shadows were lengthening. Rick, our pilot, gave us the word. It was time for home.

In a perfect world, home for many visitors after such a day would have been one of New Zealand's 31 luxury lodges. Until recently, most of these would have had more than a hint of the traditional Victorian hunting lodge, the basic model for many Kivi lodges since the first, Huka Lodge, opened its doors to guests in 1924.

Not any more. Our day in Fiordland had been no ordinary day, and what lay before us as Rick landed at Minaret Station was no ordinary lodge.

Our New Zealand trip had started conventionally enough, with a day in Auckland to decompress after the long flight from London. We took a ferry to Waiheke

Island, a kind of New Zealand in miniature, graced with pristine countryside, easy-going people, fine restaurants and a succession of compelling small wineries.

Next morning we headed south, to Wellington, and a brisk helicopter transfer to nearby Wharekauhau, the lodge that Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge chose for a rest day before starting their 2014 New Zealand tour. As we came in to land we could see why – the rural setting is private and peaceful. Wharekauhau was also our first look at the new generation of New Zealand's lodges.

Wharekauhau has been a working sheep station since the 1840s – one of its great charms – but these days only 15 per cent of its income comes from sheep. In 1982 New Zealand had 70 million sheep; now there are fewer than 30 million. Drought, artificial fibres, competition from China and the removal of subsidies have reduced the demand for wool. Many stations have gone to the wall, others are muddling through, and some, like Wharekauhau, have diversified.

Many, though, have needed a helping hand, which has arrived in the shape of North American benefactors who have fallen in love with New Zealand. The US investment billionaire Bill Foley bought Wharekauhau in 2011. A neighbouring farm belongs to the film director James Cameron, who won Oscars for *Titanic* and *Avatar*. Julian Robertson, a North Carolina hedge-fund billionaire, has three lodges, including one of the newest, Matakauri, near Queenstown, whose £7,200 a night four-bedroom Owner's Cottage also hosted William and Kate last year.

Wharekauhau and its 5,500 acres are perfect for doing more or less nothing – strolls on the beach, hikes in the



ABOVE: PAR. The sleek Lodge at The Hills is set close to New Zealand's most exclusive golf club



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An exhilarating  
helicopter ride over the  
Fiordland glaciers (right).  
Modernist simplicity at  
Annandale's Seascope  
Cottage (below)

hills – but we stirred ourselves to visit nearby Martinborough, one of New Zealand's most prestigious wine regions. And I'm glad we did, for while the area is tiny – it produces just two per cent of New Zealand's wine (and New Zealand produces just one per cent of the world's wine overall) – the intimate and informal tastings at some of its 30 boutique wineries were among the highlights of our trip.

As we sipped flinty pinot gris at the tiny roadside Schubert Wines, locals dropped by on mountain bikes to chat and pick up a couple of bottles for supper. Elsewhere, tastings took place in glorified sheds, garages crammed with steel tanks, or, more usually, out among the vines chatting with producers. Ramshackle? Slightly, but charmingly so, and certainly not to the detriment of the wines, which are exceptional, with Schubert's pinot noir, Escarpment's 2012 pinot gris, and the innovative creations of Lance Redgwell at Cambridge Road deserving a special mention.

**I**f fine wine was among the highlights of Wharekauhau, then sublime food was the abiding memory from our next destination, Lodge at The Hills, a dazzling exclusive-use property 45 minutes' drive from Queenstown, New Zealand's "adventure capital". Lodge at The Hills opened to guests last year but began life as the private home of Sir Michael Hill, a Kiwi entrepreneur who bought what was then another struggling sheep farm and transformed it into The Hills, New Zealand's most exclusive golf course (club membership is limited to 200 people).

If you're a golfer, then you'll relish the Lodge's private par-three practice hole and its direct access to the course, which is regularly voted one of the world's best outside Britain and the United States. If not, then there's the swimming pool, tennis court, a glorious garden, magnificent views, striking contemporary interiors, faultless service, flexible concierge arrangements – and, of course, that food.

We had already come to expect fine food in New Zealand, from an extraordinary first-night meal at The French Café in Auckland to the gourmet burgers that had us queuing round the block at Fergburger in Queenstown. But John Pickens, the Lodge's head chef, is at the forefront of New Zealand's culinary trend, one that has seen the fusion cooking pioneered long ago by Kiwi chefs such as Peter Gordon combine with the "molecular gastronomy" of Heston Blumenthal and others.

Thus a caprese salad at the Lodge became an odyssey of taste, temperature and texture. No simple basil here, but rather basil oil, basil sorbet and tiny baby-basil leaves; and no straightforward slices of tomato, but rather subtle smoked compotes and intensely flavoured jellies. A rack of Central Otago lamb with juniper, sour cherry jus and caramelised cauliflower was followed by a "deconstructed" cheesecake of lemon curd, lemon sorbet, freeze-dried raspberries and white-chocolate powder.

As in Wharekauhau, you could happily spend days at the Lodge without straying far from home, but we took another helicopter – you're never far from a helicopter in New Zealand – deep into Mount Aspiring National Park, where,



*It was a landscape of boundless grandeur. We skimmed lakes of ominous blue and wheeled above the glittering, fractured coast*

after a magical, silent walk through forests of fern and native bush, we boarded a jetboat for an exhilarating hour of white water and glorious views on the glacier-fed Matukituki River to Wanaka.

Here we met Rick and the helicopter that would take us into the Fiordland wilderness and thence to Minaret Station, which is not only one of New Zealand's standout new-wave lodges but also one of the world's great wilderness retreats. Like many memorable destinations, the luxury of Minaret Station does not lie in its fixtures and fittings – though it is comfortable enough – but in the unique experience it offers. It is unimaginably remote for a start, hidden high in a beautiful glaciated valley at the heart of the Southern Alps. A helicopter is the only way in, appropriately enough, given that the property belongs to Sir Tim Wallis, the larger-than-life pioneer of New Zealand's helicopter industry.

Before Sir Tim bought it in 1995, Minaret Station was part of another failing sheep farm (it had seen off nine different owners in the 40 years from 1860 to 1900 alone). Sir Tim turned it, thanks in large part to his helicopters, which can muster its 25,000 sheep (up from 1,200 in 1994) and thousands of deer as nimbly as any dog.

As elsewhere, though, the farm still needs a helping hand, which is partly why Sir Tim and his four sons

opened its remarkable mountain outpost – a cosy lodge building and just four self-contained suites – in 2011.

If you're lucky enough to reach this hideaway, you can walk (guides are available), read or simply relish the utter seclusion. Or you can board helicopters to go heli-hiking, sightseeing, fishing or hunting. In winter you can choose from glacier and heli-skiing activities that are so good you'll need to book months in advance to secure them.

But much as we loved Minaret Station, it's easy to see how it might be too remote for some, which is where our last stop, Annandale, came in. From Queenstown we flew to Christchurch, a city now coming back to life after the terrible earthquakes of 2010 and 2011, as we discovered in a fascinating tour of the downtown area – part derelict, part reborn – before another helicopter hop to the nearby Banks Peninsula.

The Peninsula is a little piece of pastoral perfection, its meadows and rolling hills ideal sheep and cattle country. Yet Annandale, on its easily accessed northern shore, is yet another working farm (founded in 1843) that has diversified with the help of a new owner (the US-based Kiwi businessman Mark Palmer) and sought a more contemporary approach to the classic New Zealand lodge.

We stayed at Scrubby Bay, one of Annandale's luxury villas, a modern marvel of cedarwood, glass and stone that looks out to sea, a picture of peace where the only sounds are the waves, the wind and the skylarks' song. It is one of four exclusive-use properties (see Places to Stay, overleaf) that dot the farm's 4,000 acres, all of which are very different, but all of which, in the words of Lyndsay John, Annandale's manager, are designed as places to stay "where the world can't find you". They are certainly that – though New Zealand is already a place where the world can't find you, which is one of its charms. But the beauty of places such as Annandale is that, even as you relish the seclusion and scenery, you can rely on the fine food, the wine and the other creature comforts at which New Zealand also excels. It doesn't hurt to have a helicopter at your beck and call to help pull it all together – and that too can be easily arranged.



# The ULTRA GUIDE TO NEW ZEALAND

## 5 PLACES TO STAY

### ANNANDALE

Couples visiting this working sheep station near Christchurch should book the Shepherd's Cottage, a romantic one-bedroom hideaway in the hills, or Seascape, a one-bedroom modern tour-de-force of sublime views and cutting-edge technology. Scrubby Bay sleeps up to eight and The Homestead, the original farmhouse, sleeps up to 10 (from £2,160).

**Houses on Annandale** (0064 3 304 6841; [annandale.com](http://annandale.com)) cost from NZ\$770/£330 to £2,160 a night, room only

### LODGE AT THE HILLS

Dazzling contemporary interiors distinguish this lodge from New Zealand's other exclusive-use properties. The tailored concierge service offers flexibility when it comes to dining or organising your activities. Golf on the adjoining course is an obvious lure, but the proximity of Queenstown means there's no shortage of other outdoor options. **Lodge at The Hills** (0064 3 442 0502; [thehillslodge.co.nz](http://thehillslodge.co.nz); exclusive use for up to 12 guests from £13,000 nightly; three-night minimum stay)

### MATAKAURI LODGE

Matakauri bears the light, bright hallmarks of New Zealand's go-to lodge designer, Virginia Fisher. Her white and clean-lined interiors are perfect complements to the airy views over Lake Wakatipu, a feature of the peaceful setting just minutes from the bustle of Queenstown. **Matakauri Lodge** (0064 3 441 1008; [matakaurilodge.com](http://matakaurilodge.com); double half-board lodge room from £410, two-bedroom Owner's Cottage from £5,220)

### MINARET STATION

New Zealand's most remote and intimate lodge – accessible only by helicopter – has just four suites and sits at the heart of breathtaking mountain terrain high above Lake Wanaka. Hike, hunt, fish or heli-ski by day and by night eat superlative food, read by the fire or sit in a hot tub under the stars. **Minaret Station** (0064 3 443 5860; [minaretstation.com](http://minaretstation.com); double full-board chalet from £865, helicopter transfers from £780 per person)

### WHAREKAUHAU

This working farm and lodge close to Wellington provided the first stop for

Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge during their royal tour last year. The main lodge enjoys views across the fields to the sea, and the 13 spacious cottages have contemporary interiors. There is plenty to do in the area, from hiking to wine-tasting. **Wharekauhau** (0064 6 307 7581; [wharekauhau.co.nz](http://wharekauhau.co.nz); double half board from £430)

## 4 GREAT EXPERIENCES

### THE ULTIMATE HELI TOUR

None of New Zealand's many helicopter tours can match this four-hour flight over South Island's Fiordland National Park, the country's finest wilderness. Glacier, beach and alpine lakeshore landings are included, as well as flights over the region's best landscapes, including Milford Sound. **Alpine Helicopters** (0064 3 443 4000; [alpineheli.co.nz](http://alpineheli.co.nz); tours from £3,900 for up to five people)

### JETBOAT WILDERNESS RIDE

High-adrenaline rides at speeds of up to 50mph up and down the Matukituki River near Wanaka, on South Island, are combined with gentler moments to watch wildlife, walk through the bush, and admire the glaciers and other majestic scenery of Mount Aspiring National Park. **Wanaka River Journeys** (0064 3 443 4416; [wanakariverjourneys.co.nz](http://wanakariverjourneys.co.nz); from £100 per person)

### WINE TASTING

Choose bespoke trips to boutique wineries such as Obsidian on Waiheke Island, near Auckland, or Escarpment and Cambridge Road in the prestigious Martinborough wine region. [waihekewine.co.nz](http://waihekewine.co.nz), [winesfrommartinborough.com](http://winesfrommartinborough.com)

### PRIVATE YACHT CHARTER

Charter a 75ft, eight-berth yacht to fish, swim, dive, waterski, watch dolphins or hike in otherwise hard-to-reach corners of the Bay of Islands, north of Auckland, the prettiest of New Zealand's many beautiful seascapes. **Bucket List Charters** (0064 21 966 531; [bucketlistcharters.co.nz](http://bucketlistcharters.co.nz); from £2,250 daily for up to 15 people)

## 3 PLACES TO EAT

### THE FRENCH CAFÉ

Simon Wright's cooking has more than once seen this Auckland institution



**EAT, PLAY, LOVE** Visual and culinary stimulation at The French Café in Auckland (top); the Escarpment Vineyards in Martinborough (above); Jack's Point golf course, near Queenstown

voted among the world's 10 best restaurants. Book the chef's table in the adjoining French Kitchen for one of Australasia's most memorable private dining experiences.

**210 Symonds Street, Auckland** (0064 9 377 1911; [thefrenchcafe.co.nz](http://thefrenchcafe.co.nz))

### RATA

Josh Emmett's culinary journey as a chef included stints at Gordon Ramsay at The London West Hollywood and The London NYC, which won one and two Michelin stars respectively. On his return home to New Zealand he opened Rata, the restaurant of choice in Queenstown.

**Te Nuku, 43 Ballarat Street, Queenstown** (0064 3 442 9393; [ratadining.co.nz](http://ratadining.co.nz))

### WHITEBAIT

Paul Hoather is the force behind more than 20 years of fine dining in Wellington at The White House and, latterly, Charley Noble. His newest venture, Whitebait, showcases his sophisticated take on seafood in a contemporary setting of glass, wood and stainless steel.

**1 Clyde Wharf, Oriental Bay, Wellington** (0064 4 385 8555; [white-bait.nz](http://white-bait.nz))

## 2 GREAT GOLF COURSES

### THE HILLS

Guests at Lodge at The Hills have direct access to this exclusive course; others need to book well ahead. The modern sculptures dotted around the course are almost as striking as the fine lake and mountain setting.

**Arrowtown, near Queenstown** (0064 3 409 8290; [thehills.co.nz](http://thehills.co.nz))

### JACK'S POINT

This John Darby-designed course is carved from the high country of a former sheep station near Queenstown, and has a challenging array of bluffs, natural bush and undulating tussock grasslands, plus fine views of Lake Wakatipu and The Remarkables mountain range. **Jack's Point, Kowarou Falls, Queenstown** (0064 3 450 2050; [jackspoint.com](http://jackspoint.com))

## BEST OF THE REST

### LODGES

Blanket Bay ([blanketbay.com](http://blanketbay.com)); Kauri Cliffs ([kauricliffs.com](http://kauricliffs.com)); Treetops ([treetops.co.nz](http://treetops.co.nz)); The Farm at Cape Kidnappers ([capekidnappers.com](http://capekidnappers.com)); Kinloch Lodge ([kinlochlodge.co.nz](http://kinlochlodge.co.nz)); Huka Lodge ([hukalodge.co.nz](http://hukalodge.co.nz)); and Otahuna ([otahuna.co.nz](http://otahuna.co.nz)). These and 23 other lodges are members of the Lodges of New Zealand ([lodgesofnz.co.nz](http://lodgesofnz.co.nz))

### HOTELS

**Auckland** Hotel DeBrett ([hoteldebrett.com](http://hoteldebrett.com)); Hilton Auckland ([hilton.com](http://hilton.com)) **Wellington** Museum Art Hotel ([museumhotel.co.nz](http://museumhotel.co.nz)) **Queenstown** The Spire Hotel ([thespirehotel.com](http://thespirehotel.com)); The Dairy ([thedairy.co.nz](http://thedairy.co.nz))

### RESTAURANTS

**Auckland** The Sugar Club ([peter-gordon.net](http://peter-gordon.net)); Depot Eatery & Oyster Bar ([eatatdepot.co.nz](http://eatatdepot.co.nz)) **Wellington** Ortega Fish Shack & Bar ([ortega.co.nz](http://ortega.co.nz)) **Queenstown** The Bunker ([thebunker.co.nz](http://thebunker.co.nz)); Madam Woo ([madamwoo.co.nz](http://madamwoo.co.nz)); Fergburger ([fergburger.com](http://fergburger.com))

