



# KIWI AIM TO PLEASE

Beyond New Zealand's all-star attractions are two off-radar havens where Kiwi hospitality takes on beguiling new forms. Maria Shollenbarger makes herself at home on Waiheke Island and the Banks Peninsula





Here is a fairly universally held tenet: New Zealand is beautiful. Not just beautiful, actually; but *beautiful* said with italicised zealous conviction. Such is the outsized aesthetic prowess of this country – a prowess that owes not a little to its often outsized dimensions – that in its depiction on the page, New Zealand seems almost to mandate indiscriminate superlatives. Queenstown – those peaks! Those skies! The Bay of Islands – that limpid turquoise water! That's not just any middling beach crowning the tip of the North Island – that's Ninety Mile Beach (in truth, only about 55 miles long, but still considerable wow factor there). Those aren't just rather tall, rather pretty purplish mountains bracketing the southeastern side of Lake Wakatipu, on the South Island: those are The Remarkables. (As indeed they are, the first time you see them.)

But at the point when the capacity for magnificence is reached (and there is, for many, a threshold), places with more prosaic endowments become interesting. Places

that are still eminently photogenic, just not exhaustingly so. For New Zealand's purposes, this might mean places that are a bit less... Middle Earth, and with a bit more of what attracts us to Umbria, or Napa, or Stellenbosch, or even Cornwall. The ones in which we might stop to peer in the estate agent's window at what's on offer. Places, basically, we fancy we could live one day.

Some, like Otahuna Valley, a suburb of Christchurch, might be known to the more au fait visitor or expat; others, like Omaha on the North Island, are virtually off the grid. One in particular sits somewhere between the two. For decades, Waiheke – a 36-square-mile island in the Hauraki Gulf, about half an hour by ferry (less than 10 minutes by helicopter or seaplane) from Auckland – was the preserve mostly of Aucklanders, who kept or rented weekend homes here. Historically it has skewed decidedly left in terms of its politics and lifestyle, its rolling hills dotted with modest bachs, the slap-up timber and corrugated-iron-roof house that signifies the vacationer's ideal in this nation of seemingly innately modest people. Since before the 1970s, Waiheke attracted artists, poets and makers; long after the 1970s, many of them, and the free-love feeling, are still here.

These things are what attract many of its devotees. New Zealand fashion designer Karen Walker, for





Clockwise from right: the Marino Ridge estate villa above Owhanake Bay, Waiheke Island. The Annandale homestead at Pigeon Bay, South Island. Jonathan Rutherford Best, co-owner of The Oyster Inn on Waiheke Island

example, has the wherewithal to holiday almost anywhere in the world; but she has for years rented a bach close to Oneroa, Waiheke's main town, every summer. She holes up with her husband and daughter, and takes the ferry into the city as and when business requires, effectively reversing the commute many others make to their holiday homes. When we had lunch in Auckland a few years ago – the first time I myself visited Waiheke – she cited its “hippie hangover” as one of its most appealing attributes.

Andrew Glenn was raised in Hong Kong and lived for years in London, running national marketing and communications for Louis Vuitton and Topshop, among others. Together with his partner Jonathan Rutherford Best (pictured right), who founded the Urban Caprice events company, sold to Richard Caring in 2010, Glenn traded England's damp, chilly green shores for Waiheke's dry, temperate green ones in late 2011; they opened The Oyster Inn, a flip-flops-and-Panama-hats seafood café, with three chicly spare rooms and a fairly perfect boutique, right on Oceanview Road, the high street in Oneroa village. “There's a sign that greets you when you drive off the ferry: SLOW DOWN – YOU'RE HERE. I think that pretty much perfectly captures Waiheke,” says Glenn, who visited as a child, sailing in the Hauraki Gulf with family. “We're sort of in a different time zone spiritually.” Glenn cites how islanders recently rallied to see off marina developers whose intentions, it was felt, didn't hew to this ethos. “People come for the beaches, the vineyards and restaurants and the artistic communities,” he says; definitely not for the number of gigayacht slips. “Waiheke's roots are anti-establishment, and they still resonate. There's a very strong sense of community here; we all feel compelled to act as custodians of this island.”

There are those who've known for years that Waiheke is something of a 12-mile-long Valhalla on earth, its soft, coddling topography stippled with rows of olives and vines, its myriad bays lined with some 25 miles of beach, alternating tiny black pebbles and flour-white sands. Many bachs have been upcycled into chic beach houses; its winding roads are plied by vintage Land Cruisers and Mini Mokes. Its habitués range widely, from Walker and Glenn to Lady Gaga (who rented a villa at Church Bay, on the west coast), to packaging magnate Graeme Hart, New Zealand's richest man, who has bought up several parcels near Cable Bay on the west coast and constructed a spectacularly un-bohemian Bond-villain lair, surrounded by immaculate lawns, helicopter pad and opalescent sea.

Peter and Caroline Davey had Waiheke in their sights for many of the 20-some years they captained



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superyachts for oligarchs and Italian industrialists in the Mediterranean and Caribbean. After a happy stint living overseas, they repatriated in 2010, purchasing a stunning plot above Owhanake Bay, on Waiheke's north shore. They built a three-bedroom contemporary villa (pictured top) – all retracting glass walls, open chef's kitchen and multi-tiered decks and patios, each endowed with a more postcard-ready view than the last. There is a gym and private spa on the ground floor, striped by the shade of pines and pohutukawas. The pool is overlooked by a wide lawn, where braziers can be set up for sunset cocktails. Down the end of a meandering trail that cuts below the house, through sloping terraces of manuka trees, is a small private beach.

Marino Ridge, as the Daveys' estate is called, is run either as a luxe bed-and-breakfast, or on a buy-out basis. Based on the proclivities of their clients, the pair can make themselves discreet to the point of near invisibility; but far better to sit at the sleek white kitchen bench watching Peter shuck oysters from Te Matuku Bay – down the “bottom end” of the island – and prep conch fritters for supper, while he talks boat-making and wine, both in expert terms. (The Daveys are both accomplished chefs and the food is superb, with a pronounced inclination to the

organically healthy.) They will arrange private tastings at the best of Waiheke's two-dozen-odd wineries, some of which produce, rather unexpectedly, solidly good Montepulciano d'Abruzzo and Tempranillo reds. A few also have utterly charming restaurants – not to be missed are The Shed at Te Motu Vineyard

(pictured overleaf) and Mudbrick Vineyard, and the sublime Poderi Crisci, with its gorgeous gardens, its *bel far niente* lens on the Kiwi lifestyle and its charming Neapolitan owner Antonio Crisci. They send me out to Orapiu, on the island's sparsely populated east end, away from the artisanal cafés and galleries of Oneroa village, to explore on horseback the native forest that tumbles in great dark-green tangles down to empty, chalcidony-coloured bays.

Occasionally, from a high ridge, I glimpse enormous, low-slung houses set in seemingly unreachable coves. These parts, I'm told by Ed Coutts, are where his most low-profile-seeking clients stay. Supreme privacy, unfettered nature; and if they want the Saturday-evening bustle of The Oyster Inn, it's a 15-minute private speedboat ride away. Coutts returned to New Zealand almost 20 years ago from a banking career in Australia and California, intending an early retirement. Instead he found himself setting up Waiheke Unlimited, which now manages around 60 properties on the island, from staffing and helicopters to private chefs and spa therapists. It's perhaps telling, though, that his current favourite property is a bach, more than a century old and in the same family for its entire existence, which he finally convinced its 94-year-old owner to let him restore.

Down on the South Island, about an hour's drive below Christchurch, is a very different permutation of local living. From high above, the Banks Peninsula (pictured on previous pages) resembles a many-limbed starfish, fingers of land extending into the lower Pacific all around its perimeter, the spaces between them shallow





From top: the Seascapes villa at Annandale, South Island. The Shed restaurant, Te Motu Vineyard, overlooking Waiheke Island's Onetangi Valley

bays. The fingers are basalt and andesite lava flows that winnowed down from the now-extinct Akaroa volcano and into the sea in undulating ridges some eight to 10 million years ago. The Banks Peninsula is a drier, higher, more wind-buffed place than Waiheke, with an air of remoteness about it (James Cook, on sighting it around 1770, initially thought that it was an island). Whereas much of the surrounding Canterbury region is manicured in the style of the green and pleasant land on which it so assiduously modelled itself, here a far older history speaks through the landscape. Most of the Banks's reaches were logged by boat and homestead builders a century or more ago, leaving steep slopes carpeted in long grasses and the occasional stand of native totara trees. Cantabrians come to hike the peninsula's well-known paths, visit a handful of exceptional private gardens, and peruse the quirky galleries of the towns of Akaroa and Little River.

Mark Palmer was born on a sheep farm on North Island, but has been based in the US as a property developer for the past 30 years. In 2005, he acquired a farm on the west side of Pigeon Bay, called Annandale. Settled in 1843, it had been in the same family for five generations. "There was this wonderful historic homestead [pictured on previous page] right on the water, built in the 1880s and surrounded by fascinating gardens that had been created over a century," says Palmer. He and his wife restored it as a family holiday home; then they restored another, tiny one-bedroom shepherd's cottage of the same vintage, set a couple of miles away in a copse of totaras. The property developer in Palmer then began to see Annandale's potential, and the hobbyist restoration metamorphosed into a multimillion-dollar project. Palmer commissioned the award-winning Auckland-based architect Andrew Patterson to design two additional striking contemporary villas – one that accommodates large groups of up to 14, the other (pictured top) just a single couple.

Annandale comprises more than 4,000 acres of farmland and six miles of private coastline; the four accommodations are all several minutes' drive from each other, and the two contemporary villas are set in their own stunning private bays, with barely a road, much less another soul, in sight. "Quite honestly, I didn't plan to get into hospitality here," says Palmer. "I knew how I myself felt when I left my incredibly busy US lifestyle and came here to the smell of the sea, the native birds and the total privacy. Getting my boots



## *Two contemporary villas are set in their own stunning private bays, with barely a road, much less another soul*

dirty, opening a few gates and helping out around the farm is what restores my soul."

Palmer's gamble on there being like-minded others is paying off. Annandale welcomed its first paying guests in early 2014; Patterson's second villa was completed in / December of that year, and 2016 saw the staff refining operations through the recent high season of December-March. Its overarching themes of solitude and wilderness are beautifully supported by a hospitality team that includes private chefs who can be dispatched to prepare lunches and suppers (each villa has a full kitchen and a concealed butler's pantry), or discreetly leave an exquisite array of prepared foods for guests to plate up themselves, should solitude be the order of the day. ("I know that when I travel with my family, we most want to make the experience our own," says Palmer, "to relish our privacy without having to worry about either disturbing, or being disturbed by, anyone else.") One early afternoon I deposited myself at a prime spot by the bay, in the shade of a gum tree, and was presented with the mother of all gourmet picnics: Asian smoked chicken and cabbage-slaw

sliders, a panzanella salad of five heirloom tomatoes and feta, salmon-avocado éclairs and a proper pavlova. The preserves, lamb, beef and produce all come from the farm, which boasts heritage orchards and greenhouses as well as 7,000 stock ewes and lambs and about 600 head of Aberdeen black Angus and Charolais cattle, which grazed on the steep slopes behind the houses and noted me warily when I passed them early in the morning on blissfully lonely walks across the hills.

After the days on Waiheke, with its air of smiley bohemia, buzzy wineries and semi-ex-urban charms, Annandale was almost a visit to another planet. Yet when Palmer saw the entrance to the bay – the local children leaping off the jetty, the modest white church spire, the campsites – he said it reminded him utterly of the New Zealand of his childhood, 50 years ago. Home, at once comfortably prosaic and magnificent. A beautiful New Zealand indeed. ♦

### **HARBOUR MASTERS**

Maria Shollenbarger travelled as a guest of **Tourism New Zealand** ([www.newzealand.com](http://www.newzealand.com)). **Annandale**, Pigeon Bay, RD3 Akaroa 7550 (+6403-304 6841; [www.annandale.com](http://www.annandale.com)), from NZ\$700 (about £328) per night for the Shepherd's Cottage. **Marino Ridge**, 10 Oceanview Road, Matiatia, Waiheke Island (+649-372 9799; [www.marinoridge.co.nz](http://www.marinoridge.co.nz)), from about £307 per suite per day. **Waiheke Unlimited**, Waiheke Island 1842, Auckland (+649-372 7776; [www.waihekeunlimited.co.nz](http://www.waihekeunlimited.co.nz)), houses from about £195-£1,700 per day.