



A WALK IN THE CLOUDS

With celebrated wine regions, landscapes that take your breath away and outstanding produce, New Zealand is up there with the world's best destinations. Add luxury lodges to the list and it's heaven on earth, writes **Melissa Leong**.

PHOTOGRAPHY NIKKI TO



CLOCKWISE: Picturesque views at Wharekauhau Estate; discover the colonial charms of Martinborough, snow-speckled mountain views from Hapuku Lodge; where you can sample the region's best seafood (inset) and sip on the best drops at the Lodge.
OPPOSITE: Take the scenic route into the Bay of Many Coves.

LOCAL TRAVEL.



NEW ZEALAND IS so close, we could almost pretend Jacinda Ardern is ours (please be ours). But we tend to overlook travelling there in favour of more exotic climes, and while our intrepid spirit propels us forward, we may be missing one of the most dynamic, delicious and luxurious holiday destinations in the world. The Land of the Long White Cloud may just be one of the nicest road trips you can take minus the jet lag.

In a land of sweeping vistas, from wild coastlines to lush, verdant forests, it's obvious why it's the backdrop of choice for many a Hollywood blockbuster. Large enough to feel epic, yet small enough to get around at your own pace, the ever-changing landscape also makes for

ideal touring terrain. But when you're in motion all day, it's vital to find a comfortable place to rest your weary head – and if we're talking about a top-notch road trip, no ordinary digs will do.

Thankfully, dotted all over New Zealand is a network of 31 independently owned, charmingly run luxury lodges that showcase the finest of their surrounds. From architecture and culture, to produce and once-in-a-lifetime experiences, each is unique in its offering. They're nothing if not the perfect place to pull up stumps at the end of a long day of taking in cinematic landscapes, wineries or farm tours, and make a great way to punctuate your trip around the country, for those who relish the wide open road.

Flying into Wellington, on the southern tip of the North Island, it's a picturesque place of fresh breezes (Wellington beats Chicago as the windiest city in the world by average speed) and charming weatherboard houses, nestled around the hilly blue coastline. It's tempting to linger, but we're promised a stately country homestead for the night. It's 20 minutes by helicopter over the rugged Rimutaka Ranges for those feeling extra, but as this is a road trip, we're sticking to the ground (for now). A crisy two-hour meander

through the Wairarapa, and you'll happen upon Wharekauhau Country Estate, an Edwardian manor of grand proportions.

Still a working farm, Wharekauhau excels these days as host to well-heeled guests from around the globe, regaling them with seaside foraging excursions with its culinary team, hilltop hikes, spa treatments and A/V rides along the beach. Put your feet up in one of 16 custom-built cottage suites overlooking the rugged black-sand coastline of Palliser Bay and take in an ocean sunset from your bathtub, because, why not? To the manor house for aperitivo hour, and stay for the witty company and wine-fuelled chats (they happen a lot around here).

While in the area, cheese lovers and lovers of cheesy puns should scurry to C'est Cheese. Located in the nearby town of Featherstone, it's a one-stop shop to pick up picnic snacks before exploring Martinborough, one of the country's most underrated wine regions. Home to some spectacular pinot noir and chardonnay, think of it as the more left-of-centre, boutique destination for NZ vino.

Hopping over to the top of the South Island, it's off to the sleepy harbourside town of Pictou, on the fringe of Marlborough Sounds. Plan to arrive at dusk to take in yet another ethereal sunset





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: chic creature comforts at Wharekahu Country Estate; where you can go on a foraging excursion; the Estate's country charm is seen in its interiors, as well as the outdoor areas; Bay of Many Coves is built in to its natural surrounds; the Kereru Suite at the Bay of Many Coves; salmon and green-lipped mussel are served at the Lodge (inset); **OPPOSITE:** Bay of Many Coves.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
 stop by Cray and Coaster for locally caught crayfish; Marlborough Lodge's stylish country setting; extends to its grounds; artfully plated dishes are just as good as they look (inset); produce from the Lodge's grounds; the dining room looks out onto the manicured garden; the Lodge's head chef Alain Hauswirth plates up
OPPOSITE: one of the treehouses at Hapuku Lodge.



while on the water. The Sounds are home to some of the most celebrated salmon in the world, namely Ora King Salmon, but just one cove over in the aptly named Bay of Many Coves, you'll find a hidden hillside hideaway, where peace and quiet is only

outshone by a spectacular blanket of stars at night (be sure to nab the outdoor jacuzzi for Champagne and a spot of star gazing). Speaking of stars, we're told Harrison Ford and Calista Flockhart have just checked out of The Bay of Many Coves Lodge's top suite, they do say privacy is the last luxury.

Wake early for one of the most epic sunrises you're sure to see, before making your way down to the restaurant for a waterside brunch, featuring plenty of local produce, including the aforementioned silky salmon, as well as sizeable green-lipped mussels and more.

We did promise a road trip, however, so it's back in the car at Picton, and off to the Marlborough. Forget what you know about sauvignon blanc, New Zealand's largest wine region is going through a renaissance, and if you love

new-world wines, there's a lot to be said for revisiting this part of the world.

The Marlborough Lodge is our next stop with a story. The building, built in 1901, lived a former life in the centre of nearby Blenheim, as a Victorian-era convent. Relocated to its

bucolic new home not too far away, it is resplendent with lavender hedges and a duck-filled stream – welcome to your dream country home. With 16 acres of manicured gardens, a conversation fire pit, spa treatment room and a heavenly kitchen garden, a tour of the grounds with head chef Alain Hauswirth is an

afternoon well spent. "I'm not a flower chef," he laughs, while unearthing knobbly Jerusalem artichokes for our dinner, and referring to style over substance when it comes to the plate. Swiss-born and trained in Europe, he has cooked for the likes of Julie Andrews, Frank Sinatra and Roger Moore. James Bond's chef? I'll take my eggs scrambled not stirred, thanks.

Land to plate isn't a trivial notion here, nor, indeed, at any of the Lodges' stablemates. Drawing from immediate surrounds is not only a way of providing a compellingly local experience for travellers, but a conscious and sustainably pragmatic one, too. Hauswirth's cuisine treads a fine line between classic French technique and rustic simplicity, a style that effortlessly suits its place in the world, and visiting celebrated chefs like Christine Manfield regularly feature on the bill here, too.

One last leg, and we're gunning for the Kaikoura coast. An ancient destination for Maori tribes to gather an abundance from the ocean, the Hikurangi

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LOCAL TRAVEL.

Trench (at some places, up to 3,750m deep) feeds an array of sea life, including its famous crays and paua, as well as attracting pods of whales, dolphins and other sea life, close to shore. The reparations continue following the 7.8 magnitude earthquake in 2016, though the coastline community

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Make time for roadside stops at The Store at Kekerengu, and Cray and Coaster on Okiwī Bay, a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it retro aquamarine roadside wagon. Both make great stops for a quick coffee, while the latter is the best and cutest way to procure a tray of locally caught cray for the road.

Sandwiched between snow-speckled mountains and the wild Pacific Ocean, you’ll find Hapuku Lodge and Treehouses. Run by Luxury Lodges Chairman Chris Sturgeon and his chef/life partner-in-crime Fiona Read (who incidentally kicked ass on NZ MasterChef!), the space fuses quiet luxury with a heaping dose of heart. By the fire,

Chris explains the concept of *manaakitanga*. It means hosting, togetherness and welcoming. We want to open our home to you and to be proud of sharing what we have with you, he smiles, while topping up our Negronis. The exclusive nature of some of the Luxury Lodges’ guests means that privacy is valued, but gifted to all, regardless of whether or not you own a star on the Walk of Fame.

The *manaakitanga* continues, with a day that begins swimmingly – literally – with the Dusky dolphins of the Kaikoura coast. There’s no encouraged contact or coaching these wild creatures, it’s purely their choice how they choose to interact. From impressive acrobatics to eye





CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Hapuku Lodge general manager Chris Sturgeon and executive chef (and Chris' wife) Fiona Read; a bath with a view at the Lodge; the Lodge's pool looks to the Manakau Mountains; beekeeping in idyll surrounds; the menu makes the most of local produce; stylish country interiors at the Lodge. OPPOSITE: Marlborough's golden vines.



LOCAL TRAVEL



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE RIGHT: Hapuku Lodge offers helicopter rides to your mountaintop lunch; which includes local sparkling wine (inset); Dusky dolphins greet visitors on the Kaikoura coast; the idyllic grounds of Marlborough Lodge; the perfect spot for a nightcap at Hapuku Lodge.



contact, watching these dolphins is a life-changing experience.

If the high life is more your style, a fancy-as helicopter picnic atop a nearby mountain, piloted by the charming Dan Stevenson (the Prince Harry of the helicopter game) in one of his South Pacific Helicopters, is the most impressive way to spend an hour or two. Sweeping up over the coastline and over craggy mountaintops, it's a crystallising way to take in the sheer magnitude of the landscape, capped off with a bottle of local fizzy wine and some of Fiona's cracking sausage rolls.

Speaking of Fiona's cooking, this woman cooks with all the soul and style you could hope for in a high-end lodge experience. All of the produce she uses comes from within a few kilometres of Hapuku, and much of it from her own farm. Her generous approach to flavour, texture and balance is apparent in the simplest of dishes, and while the helicopters and dolphins are dazzling, so is her offering, albeit whispered humbly. While in the 'hood, have a round of fish and chips and whitebait fritters at Coopers Catch, and a



Manuka honey tasting at the very cute Bee Box in Kaikoura's tiny town is a must... just leave room for dinner.

New Zealand may be close and therefore overlooked, but that should be all the more reason for a regular visit to take a break from living life vicariously through screens and social media. Life is, after all, just like our stunning neighbour, all right there in front of us, should we choose to explore it. ✕

