

Screen GEM

You've seen **New Zealand's** beauty in Hollywood megahits, but writer Darrell Hartman chronicles why you'll want to see this jewel for yourself

a FAR-FLUNG DOMAIN OF FJORDS, rain forests, volcanoes, coral seas, and an almost pre-modern population density, New Zealand can seem more fantasy than reality, the fruit of some ambitious storyteller's overactive imagination. So small wonder this two-island nation stood in for Middle Earth in the movie versions of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and the *Hobbit* films, the second one coming to a theater near you in December.

But why settle for an armchair experience at your local cinema? New Zealand's surfeit of world-class luxury lodges can bring its jaw-dropping scenery to your doorstep, and the country's outdoorsy culture makes it one of the top spots on Earth for an action-packed retreat.

Tempted? Here, the plush digs and adrenaline-stoking thrills experienced by our adventurous reporter on a 10-day, four-stop tour of both the North and South Islands. You'll be green with envy and ready to follow in his footsteps. We sure are.

**CALMING
INFLUENCE:**
On the South
Island, writer
Darrell Hartman
kayaks across a
mirror-smooth
Lake Wanaka.



First Stop

The Farm at Cape Kidnappers Lodge

Hawke's Bay

AFTER MORE THAN 24 HOURS of flying and layovers from New York, I arrive midmorning at this nearly 6,000-acre estate that is part coastal farm and, well, entirely transporting, with its dramatic location on a windblown headland. Haute agro-rustic best describes the main lodge, with its rough-hewn planks and crossbeams, sliding barn doors, and walls hung with beautiful old hand tools. Cowhide rugs and an elk-antler chandelier add a dash of Aspen chic. As I sip from a rejuvenating cup of tea (very correctly, Harney & Sons) on the enclosed dining terrace, the smells of lavender and rosemary waft in from the lawn while pristine fairways beckon, and beyond them the great blue-gray scoop of Hawke's Bay.

The view is no less breathtaking from my suite, one of 22 on the property. Mine, a standalone cottage with 15-foot ceilings, has a bathtub deep enough to double as a holding pen for a half-dozen of the property's Perendale sheep at shearing time. My options spread out before me, I indulgently opt to soothe my jet lag with a massage at the spa, then spend the rest of the afternoon resting my weary self by vegging out in my suite's wicker recliner.

Come evening, I do drinks in the "snug," a circular lounge that resembles a silo, albeit a spotless one strewn with fur pillows. On my second night, I prep for dinner in a thick, butterscotch-toned leather armchair by the fire — 18-year-old single malt could hardly ask for better settings. The menu changes daily at the restaurant, which turns out a superb lamb shank in a cumin reduction and richly flavored homemade ice creams. The kitchen outdoes itself with the morning selection of cereals and fresh fruit — after all, this temperate region produces some of New Zealand's best fruit. Bordeaux-style reds are another local specialty.

Above all, it's the sheer grandeur of Cape Kidnappers' surroundings — from windblown hills dotted with grazing livestock to a woodland preserve containing endangered and rarely seen kiwi birds — that makes it a magnificent introduction to the country.

From \$576 per person, double occupancy. 011-64-6875-1900; capekidnappers.com

Getting Active

Exhilarating bumpy rides

I can tour Cape Kidnappers' golf course on a golf cart, but I opt for an ATV excursion of the sprawling property instead — for the sheer excitement. On a "quad bike," as Kiwis call them, I head out to see the striking offshore rock known as the Shark's Tooth and the Black Reef gannet colony. Descending the steeper hills requires some serious concentration, but my fearless guide, Aidan, leads the way, opening and closing all the farm gates along the way. We end up at surf level, watching waves crash through craggy blowholes. The sun beams, and barely a cloud dots the sky. "Typical Hawke's Bay weather," Aidan shrugs.

We return to the lodge via a puddled gully thick with sinuous trees — a place that looks straight out of *Jurassic Park*. I scope out the best-looking trails for mountain biking en route, and next day start pedaling at sunrise. The effect of rosy early light hitting the sandstone cliffs? Pure magic. I return to the lodge the back way, on a rolling forest trail smooth and wide enough for a car, with long and curvy downhill that make it perfect for a real bombing run, if you're in the mood for one — which I am. I lay off the brakes, rip around the corners, and get an even bigger adrenaline rush than I did while zipping around on the quads.



HEAVENLY SETTING:

Clockwise from top left, a cozy room with a view; the inviting lodge; scenic mountain bike ride; sightseeing on quad bikes.



Second Stop
The Lodge
at Kauri Cliffs
 Northland

WHEN I VENTURE farther north, I see mellower, greener topography. Not much goes on up in this balmy region known for its citrus orchards, and the Kerikeri airport is about the size of a gas station. Shortly after I land, the clouds roll in, giving me my first dose of New Zealand's famously changeable weather. A feathery rain falls by the time my chauffeured Land Rover pulls into Kauri Cliffs.

The scale of the place, the 22 suites, the balance of coast and forest, the sight line from the front door straight through to a dreamy expanse of water — these elements make Kauri Cliffs feel similar in some ways to Cape Kidnappers. (Owner Julian Robertson, a retired American hedge-funder, developed both properties.) But with its clapboard siding and white-columned wraparound porch, the main lodge looks quite different, a grandiose Hamptons beach house with a dash of Southern plantation. And here, the back nine pretty much start right underneath the balcony.

With its biscuit-toned carpets and armchairs, porcelain vases, and antique desks and cabinets, Kauri Cliffs has decidedly clubby vibes. A two-minute walk through ferny woodland takes me to my room — plenty big, with solid cement and pewter bathroom surfaces. The gingham throw pillows, wicker recliners, and beige color scheme lend these plush lodgings a summery feel, and I can already envision myself listening to morning birdsong on the veranda. From my room, a stone pathway leads to the gym and spa. At the half-enclosed heated pool, I hear the falling rain as I lower myself in. After a wet day, the dry heat of the sauna truly hits the spot.

From \$605 per person, double occupancy. 011-64-9407-0010; kauricliffs.com

Getting Active

Tall in the saddle and casting a line

The velvety ridgelines beg to be ridden — but how? I decide to go on horseback, with the added bonus that I'd end up riding along the beach. My guide, Kate, is tan and weathered-looking, her ponytail a loose sheaf of sun-bleached hair. Very obviously a horsewoman, she puts me (hardly a seasoned rider) at ease. Through cow and sheep pastures we clop, and into a shady glen full of fantastically gnarled pohutukawa trees that look out of some exotic fairy tale. My horse, Nibbler, stubbornly lives up to his name, but the edible terrain runs out at the beach, where he happily trots through the plush sand. The wind runs through my hair, the waves come crashing in. I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be.

Well, except fishing. Post-storm swells stir the crab and shrimp up from the seafloor, which means the red snapper should be biting. My guide, a wiry Englishman named Richard, picks me up after lunch, drives me to Pink Beach, throws some dead bait onto my line, and we fish from atop rocks and wade in up to our ankles, too. "It looks shallow, but there are some monsters in there," Richard beams. "It's pretty snaggy, though."

Twenty minutes in, and several new hooks later, I haul in a beautiful five-pounder with an underbelly as soft and white as marshmallow. Richard throws it in the cooler. That evening, Kauri Cliffs' chef turns it into sashimi and then, with some expert pan-frying and a dash of seasoning, one of the most satisfying dinners I've ever had.



LAND AND SEA: Counterclockwise from top, horsing around in a lush, shady glen; fishing for dinner; catch of the day.



Third Stop
Otahuna Lodge
 Near Christchurch

I'VE SOILED MOST OF MY SOCKS at this point, and am thrilled to learn upon arrival that Otahuna offers guests complimentary laundry service — just one of many thoughtful touches that make this genteel, seven-suite getaway feel like a staffed and stately English home. Indeed, it was just that for many years after a local bigwig named Heaton Rhodes built it in 1895. More recently, two former New York-based financiers relocated here to buy the property, lovingly restore it, and convert it into a beautiful lodge, a rare gem in a country that lacks much in the way of heritage properties.

Upon entering, I'm whisked into an aristocratic past — by the hand-carved woodwork, the stained-glass windows, and the formal dining room, still clad in its original gold-leaf wallpaper. During my stay, I learn it's one of seven places in the house where guests can take their meals, my other two favorites being the cozy library and the turret, a signature element of the building's somewhat idiosyncratic High Victorian style. One of the 15 wood-burning fireplaces is in my bathroom — a perk of staying in the Verandah Suite. I'm flattered to learn that the Duke of York, later King George VI, slept in this very room in 1927.

Gardens account for 19 of Otahuna's 30 acres, and walking paths make exploring them easy. I wander through a cutting

OUTDOOR PURSUITS:

Right, hoofing it in the mountains, and rip-roaring river fun. Below, a fireside bath, not a bad muscle relaxer.

garden, formal garden, hothouse, and neat rows of quince and apple trees. With 120 types of fruits and vegetables grown on-site, the kitchen improvises daily menus based on what's in season and does an impressive amount of preserving and pickling. The poached eggs I eat at breakfast, taken from the chicken coop, could not taste fresher, and they come with fresh carrot juice and porcini mushrooms that had sprouted up the day before. I doubt that even the Colonial-era aristocrats had it so good.

From \$500 per person, double occupancy. 011-64-3329-6333; otahuna.co.nz



Getting Active

High-country sightseeing and high-speed river cruising

The earthquake that rocked Christchurch two years ago badly damaged the caves at nearby Akaroa, once a popular spot for kayaking. So instead, I head to the mountains to take a train, a wonderfully scenic one. My journey aboard the TranzAlpine begins on the Canterbury Plains, but soon I'm in tussocky high country the color of Dijon mustard, heaving through inky tunnels and looking down (way down) onto gravelly riverbeds.

I get off at Arthur's Pass, where my guide, David Hiatt, has driven to meet me. From there, he takes me up a hiking trail to a stunning waterfall. Rather poetically, the Maori named its tumbling threads of water after the flax strands they used for weaving. The English, less romantically, called it Devils Punchbowl.

Back in David's car, we descend through glacial plains and columns of brushy pines — parts of the *Narnia* movies were filmed here — and take a brief picnic break at Castle Hill, where I can't resist clambering over the enormous boulders. But we soon move along to one of the activities I'd been most looking forward to: jet-boating, a Kiwi institution of sorts that lives up to the hype. In one of these roaring, river-plying machines, we tear up and down winding river shallows at 50 mph, torpedoing through channels barely wide enough for the boat, the grinning skipper edging up against protruding rocks for extra thrills. When he slides into 360-degree turns, I can feel my guts sloshing up against my ribs. All 30 minutes of the ride are a blast.



Fourth Stop
Whare Kea Lodge & Chalet
Wanaka

ABOUT AN HOUR'S DRIVE over the mountains from Queenstown, in the Southern Alps, lies the picturesque little resort town of Wanaka, built around the wide end of an elongated lake. A few minutes outside the center, I arrive at Whare Kea, a six-room lodge with a sunken main room where two glass walls give me an eyeful of the mountains and that lake. I get a similarly mesmerizing view through the glass wall in my bright, comfortable room. Despite Persian rugs and camp-inspired leather armchairs, the accommodations are nothing too fancy. It's the only lodge I stayed where it felt all right to pad around the lounge in socks.

If the view ranks as the real star here, the culinary program runs a close second. Youthful chef James Stapley would be considered a culinary wizard almost anywhere, let alone in a somewhat unassuming, albeit fast-growing, alpine hamlet such as Wanaka. The first course he serves up, an earthy-sweet butternut squash and leek soup, takes my palate new places. Whether it's the cushiony softness of sous-vide Aoraki salmon or the air-light tempura shell on plump Bluff oysters, the textures are exquisite. The presentation impresses no less: painterly smears, edible mini-architecture. Best of all, Stapley welcomes guests into his kitchen to watch him in action.

From \$630 per person, double occupancy. 011-64-3443-1400; wharekealodge.com

Getting Active

Padding solo and trout-watching

Whare Kea's varied options encompass everything from hunting to heli-skiing. I start with a solo kayak excursion on the lake, so calm there's nary a ripple. Apart from a few diving ducks, I have the water to myself. Snow that fell two nights before casts the mountains in hi-def and highlights every craggy crease and fold. Given the stunning tableau, I periodically forget to paddle.

Fishing a high-country stream is on the agenda after lunch, when my guide, Paul, and a helicopter pilot come to fetch me. We take off from Whare Kea's lawn, and thus begins a most spectacular flight. I've choppered over the Himalayan foothills and Swedish Lapland's celebrated King's Trail, and been in low-flying planes over the Namib Desert and the Serengeti, but even those experiences don't compare to the up-close view I get of Kitchener Glacier, with its forbidding rock faces, shelves caked with layers of ancient blue snow, and a glacial lake the color of curacao. It is sublime and, amazingly, all seems mere feet away.

We had planned to touch down briefly at Whare Kea's

mountain chalet, its alternative overnight option, but thick clouds keep us away. Instead, our pilot drops Paul and me off at the stream, and we make our way along the shore in waders. I quickly learn I haven't been fishing all these years I've lived in the northeast — I've been blind fishing. For here, in gin-clear waters, you spot the trout first, sneak up, and then float your fly in front of the fish. Unfortunately, the phantoms wavering in the current don't seem all that hungry.

Having caught nothing, I feel a tad let down as I trudge across soggy cow fields to the car Whare Kea has sent to pick me up — but then I start imagining what Stapley might have in store for dinner. He doesn't disappoint, with a mouthwatering menu that includes plump fingers of crayfish meat stuffed into a perfect taco, and tender Hereford beef fillet served with chestnut mushrooms. I think of the snapper I'd landed at Kauri Cliffs, and of the other thing I'd caught during my trip: the New Zealand bug. For all the supersized myths and legends that get filmed here, the reality of the place is far grander. ■