



NEW ZEALAND

FROM VICTORIAN MANSIONS TO MODERN, ART-FILLED HAVENS, NEW ZEALAND'S FAMOUS LODGE SCENE IS ALL ABOUT INDEPENDENCE, PERSONALITY AND UNBEATABLE LOCATIONS.

GLACIER SOUTHERN LAKES

IT'S TOUGH TO FIND A RECENT TRAVEL STORY ABOUT NEW ZEALAND THAT DOESN'T MENTION "THE LORD OF THE RINGS" OR "THE HOBBIT" MOVIES, ALL OF WHICH WERE FILMED AGAINST THE COUNTRY'S STUNNING, DIVERSE NATURAL BACKDROPS. BUT WHILE IT'S TRUE THAT THOSE MOVIES HAVE GREATLY BOOSTED NEW ZEALAND'S TOURISM INDUSTRY (HOBBITON, A MOVIE-THEMED EXPERIENCE OUTSIDE OF AUCKLAND, RECENTLY WELCOMED ITS ONE MILLIONTH VISITOR), ON A RECENT TRIP WAY DOWN UNDER, I FOUND MUCH MORE TO GET EXCITED ABOUT THAN ELVES AND WIZARDS.

by Sandra Ramani
Photos courtesy of Worldwide
Excluding New Zealand

With world-class food and wine, hip shopping and innovative design, today's New Zealand buzzes with a vibrant, "Kiwi can-do" energy. This can also be felt in their **signature lodge scene**, which is all about unique, independent inns (no chain brands) set in breathtaking locations and celebrating the local bounty. While the cities do offer more trendy, style-driven hotels, if you're into nature, cuisine and bragging on Instagram, here are five noteworthy lodges to check out.

WHAREKAUHAU COUNTRY ESTATE Set on the southeastern coast of the North Island, a short helicopter ride over from capital city Wellington, this lodge is tucked on the edge of a 5,000-acre working sheep and cattle farm that stretches from the beach, through ancient forests and up into the hills. The 13 cottages have a breezy style, with cozy couches, fireplaces, homemade cookies and private patios. Rates include gourmet breakfasts, evening drinks with other guests and four-course dinners. Don't miss the farm tour – where you'll get to see a sheep get sheared and sheepdogs at work – and a tasting trip into the nearby Martinborough wine region. It's no wonder Will and Kate made this their first stop on a recent trip down under. www.wharekauhau.co.nz

THE LODGE AT THE HILLS Once the private vacation home of noted jeweler and entrepreneur Sir Michael Hill, this contemporary, art-filled lodge is available for single-use only – so whether you're two or 12, it's all yours. About 30 minutes outside of Queenstown, the lodge sits on the edge of 500 mountain-backed acres, part of which includes a championship golf course dotted with striking sculptures. Fire pits, an outdoor pizza oven, a wine cellar, beautiful gardens, a pool and six plush bedrooms make this ideal for a group getaway – as do the private chef and staff, who make you feel instantly at home. All meals, including house wine and snacks, are included. www.thehillslodge.co.nz

MINARET STATION Talk about a grand entrance: All guests (and most of the supplies) arrive by helicopter to this four chalet hideaway, nestled into a glacial valley in the Southern Alps. Owned by a family that also operates a sheep farm and (conveniently) a heli company, the unique lodge is all about nature and relaxation. Hike in the surrounding valley, spend the day down at the farm or just get cozy in the luxe rooms, which have oversized beanbags, fur throws, gas fireplaces on the decks and views



FRANZ JOSEF GLACIER



GEORGE CROSSING

for miles. Despite the remote setting, meals here are a fresh, gourmet affair. www.minaretstation.com/alpine-lodge

BLANKET BAY

Though nearby cities Queenstown and Wanaka are known for adrenaline-pumping activities like bungee jumping, heli-skiing, speed boating and mountain hiking, once you get to this scenic spot on Lake Wakatipu, you'll just want to exhale. Featuring more of a rustic, classic lodge style than some of the other options, Blanket Bay puts you into instant relaxation mode with friendly, on-point service, in-room perks like steam showers or private terraces, and fun touches like a communal

game room. Plus, you'll never be hungry: Along with the delicious meals, you'll find complimentary treats in the extensive mini-bar. www.blanketbay.com

OTAHUNA LODGE

Owned and operated by an American expat couple, this legendary lodge (once New Zealand's largest private residence) is all about the details, from the glass of wine you're offered at arrival and the complimentary communal pantry stocked with fresh-baked goodies and drinks, to the flexibility to enjoy dinner anywhere in the historic Victorian mansion. Add to that, breakfasts in the airy kitchen, guided tours of the gorgeous grounds

(home to flower and veggie gardens, ponds and even a small forest) and some of the best service in the country, and you'll never want to leave. When guests venture out, they usually bike into the local village, horseback ride or hit the area vineyards, but save time for on-site experiences like a cooking class with the noted chef – or just lazing by the pool. www.otahuna.co.nz

With Air New Zealand's (www.airnewzealand.com) just-announced **new service from Houston to Auckland** (direct flights will start this December), it's now easier than ever to make the trip. Quirky and comfortable, Air New Zealand currently features a Middle Earth-themed "epic safety video" featuring "LOTR" director Peter Jackson and some of the movies' stars – but maybe that will change once the next three "Avatar" sequels start filming there soon.

Photography by Joann Dost



LODGE AT THE HILLS



OTAHUNA LODGE

Photography by Stephen Goodenough