



Kauri Cliffs



Cape Kidnappers

# Bloody Spectacular

BY JEFF WILLIAMS

What do two dramatic golf courses, an unforgettable fishing lodge and an enchanting city by the sea all have in common? Laying claim to New Zealand's beautiful North Island

**T**HE SUPERLATIVES COME quickly and explosively—spectacular, stupendous, staggering. The mind races to keep up with the eye as the images of the broad vistas crowd the senses. Where land and sea collide, there is always the potential for high drama, and on the North Island of New Zealand there are two golf courses that are giving Oscar-winning performances.

Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers are more than 8,000 miles from the East

Coast of the United States, 20 hours in the air from New York, several hours by car from Auckland. But these two courses, owned and developed by American Julian Robertson, are worth every mile, every hour and every minute. At the end of the journey lies a golf adventure so exhilarating, a landscape so enthralling, a country so abiding that weariness is instantly replaced by wonderment.

There is a little-known and surprising statistic about New Zealand and its

golfers. The ratio of golf courses to golfers—one for every 9,330 or so—is the highest of any country in the world. Higher than Scotland or Ireland or New Zealand's more famous golfing neighbor, Australia. The Kiwis love their golf as much as they love their sailing, their fishing and their rugby.

But as a golf adventurer, you might think New Zealand an unlikely destination. New Zealand might be more famous for the All Blacks rugby team and for



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COURTESY CAPE KIDNAPPERS

bungee jumping than for golf (former British Open champion Bob Charles notwithstanding). There were several fine courses on the North and South Islands, but nothing that had the ring, the buzz, the allure of Pebble Beach or Whistling Straits or Pinehurst or St. Andrews or Royal County Down or Royal Melbourne. Until now.

Robertson and his wife Josie have combined their love of New Zealand and their love of golf into two magnificent courses that are instantaneously amongst the brightest beacons in the golf world. Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers are more than wonderful courses; they are extraordinary loge boxes overlooking New Zealand's grand stage, its dramatic, mystical meeting of land and sea. They are about New Zealand as much as they are about golf.

"This is such a magnificent country that if we were going to do something here, we wanted to do the very best we could," says Robertson. "We had an opportunity to acquire these incredible pieces of property [each] for the cost of a modest apartment in Manhattan. We

then wanted to be very certain about how we would proceed with them, and golf seemed like the logical step. The land is just so good, so dramatic, that you pretty much are guaranteed a special place if you don't screw it up. What we've been able to do, if I can modestly say, is something really great."

Robertson's résumé of accomplishment is substantial. He is a pioneer of the world hedge fund market. His Tiger Fund, now closed, once had more than \$20 billion under management. He's been seen as a visionary by some, as an egomaniac by others. There is no doubt, however, that he has left footprints from his giant strides throughout the financial world.

Robertson first came to New Zealand in 1978 on a vacation with his family. They were keenly interested in geography, and New Zealand was blessed with a treasure trove of rich geographic details. So smitten with the country was Robertson that he ended up spending several months in Auckland.

He returned in the mid-'90s when he heard about the possibility of investing in

large tracts of oceanfront property—sheep and cattle stations that overlooked the Pacific. Here they were for the taking, nearly 6,000 acres each. He bought Kauri Cliffs in 1995 and Cape Kidnappers in 2001. Each magnificent property was awaiting a new owner to determine another purpose for the land. The Robertsons decided it would be golf, while retaining the prosperous ranching business.

What have they achieved at Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers? "This has got to be one of the greatest golf destinations in the world without question," says Jimmy Dunne, a managing partner of Sandler O'Neill, a New York investment banking company. He is also a passionate golfer who belongs to many clubs in the United States, Ireland and the United Kingdom. If there is a great course in the world you can think of, Dunne has played it. He came to New Zealand late last year at the behest of his friend Robertson.

"I have to say that it was absolutely awesome," says Dunne. "These are just such wonderful places to play—great holes, great views, great country. I don't think it gets any better than this."

The Robertsons built the Kauri Cliffs course first. Kauri Cliffs is about 120 miles north of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city and point of entry for nearly everyone coming from the States. Kauri Cliffs opened in 2001 and was quickly named the best new international golf course by a leading publication. Robertson chose Dave Harman, an Orlando-based architect, for the job. Though many big-name architects would have jumped at the chance to work with such lush land, Robertson wanted someone low-key, someone who would deeply respect the property and work to maximize it without mutilating it. That's just what he got from Harman. Kauri Cliffs is a scenic, scintillating experience, one that seems just right at every turn and on every shot.



Lodge at Kauri Cliffs

The back nine is the most adventurous, with the first four holes playing down into a marshy valley. Reaching the tee of the par-4 14th, the ocean vistas are revealed with spectacular views of the Cavalli Islands. Holes 14 through 17 sweep along the Pacific before turning up the hill with the long par 5 that finishes in front of the lovely plantation-style clubhouse.

The accommodations at Kauri Cliffs are as superb as the course. There are 11 cottages, each containing two one-bedroom suites designed in a contemporary cabin vernacular. The large bedroom with fireplace and ample seating area is fronted by a balcony with views over the course to the ocean. The bathroom and walk-in closet are enormous and enervating. Food at the clubhouse is modern New Zealand with an emphasis on its most scrumptious products: fish and lamb. There are also lovely small beaches on the property and one of the few remaining ancient Kauri trees. Fishing and hunting can be arranged, as can a tour of the farming operation.

If Kauri Cliffs were the only course Robertson owned, he could have called his mission complete. But 180 miles south of Auckland is Cape Kidnappers, a significant site in New Zealand's history

PHOTOS COURTESY KAURI CLIFFS



Kauri Cliffs

True enough. Cape Kidnappers unfolds chapter by chapter, playing through farmland on the front nine before reaching for the cliffs on the back. Many holes on the back nine play atop finger ridges that thrust themselves into Hawkes Bay. The par-5 15th is a runway to the ocean, followed by a dramatic walk to the 16th tee that was the idea of Josie Robertson. Doak conceived the 16th as a par 4 with its tee close to the 15th green. But Josie Robertson felt the best view on the course was from a promontory about 75 yards away on the edge of a cliff. Doak agreed that the view was so important to the experience that he converted the hole to another par 5. The course finishes with two strong par 4s, the 18th with a punch-bowl green and a semi-blind shot.

The clubhouse at Cape Kidnappers is so understated you might think it was the maintenance shed. It's designed to suggest a wool barn, with corrugated metal siding and barstools made of



Poronui Ranch

COURTESY PORONU I RANCH



Poronui Ranch Wine Cellar

tractor seats. The Robertsons will soon be building a lodge on the property, but good bed-and-breakfast accommodations can be found in the Hawkes Bay area. Also on the property is the largest and most accessible gannet colony in the world, which overlooks a rock formation known as the Tooth of Maui, important in native Maori mythology. Trips to the colony can be arranged, taken along a rustic farm road through the sheep and cattle ranch.

The Hawkes Bay area, with Napier as the major population center, is an oenophile's delight. There are several wineries in the area and the Robertsons own an interest in the TeAwa vineyard. New Zealand is well-known for its sauvignon blanc varietal, but is increasingly becoming a player in the red-wine market with cabernet sauvignon, merlot and pinot noir. The wineries in the area are excellent places to eat. Check out Craggy Range and Clearview Estate.

The golf experience in New Zealand can be amplified by the fishing experience. New Zealand has many renowned hunting and fishing lodges. In the middle of the island, a two-hour drive from Cape Kidnappers, is Poronui Ranch, a 16,000-



Poronui Ranch

acre spread. Poronui offers trout fishing in the various streams and rivers that run through it and helicopter flyouts to more remote places. There is nothing like seeing a rainbow or brown rise to a drifting dry fly and the feeling of its thrashing on light tackle. The ranch has seven simple but well-equipped cabins and a central lodge where hearty communal meals are served. There is also a meeting house with a workout facility and a 10,000-bottle wine cellar. Let's just say that roughing it is seldom this lavish and as much fun, with personable guides for each fishing

and hunting party, pre-dinner cocktails and wine and much story telling before the fireplace.

Do plan to spend at least two nights in Auckland. This small city is big on value and interest. Known as the "City of Sails," it was the host of New Zealand's 2003 America's Cup defense. The expansive Auckland waterfront is a forest of sailboat masts, and there are plenty of good restaurants that overlook Viaduct Harbour. If you go in late March, the beginning of New Zealand autumn, try the succulent Bluff oysters, which will be on the menu only a short time.

The experience of Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers—combined with New Zealand's many other adventures and pursuits—is sublime, extraordinarily rewarding and in the end so very natural. "It has been very important to us to make sure that we do things here that are in keeping with New Zealand's culture and its history," says Robertson. "We don't want to impose ourselves on the land and the people. We are caretakers here and we know how fortunate we are to have it. I hope what we have done will be looked upon favorably. We do love it here."

So will you. ■