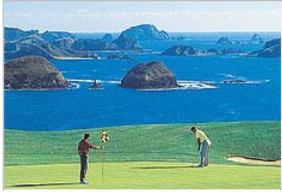


Vote for the greens

THE LUXURY LODGE TEST: Susan Kurosawa checks into Kauri Cliffs in New Zealand's Bay of Islands region | July 19, 2008

THERE is a recently opened spa at this much-awarded New Zealand lodge, a fact that might seem worthy of little more than a note in a checklist of conveniences. But what an enchanted spa it is, set in a glade of papery-barked totara trees, amid ferns and orchids flourishing in a veritable paint-chart of greens. Wooden paths lead to a low building with four snug treatment rooms where pleasures of the ilk of facials with cool jade and crystallised bloodstone await. Massages are deliberately firm, designed to ease away the kinks and knots of an outdoorsy day.



When the view's this good, keeping your eye on the ball is a challenge at the Kauri Cliffs golf course at Matauri Bay in Northland

These scented salons open on to a stream and shadowy glen that surely is territory for hobbits, pixies and bottom-of-the-garden fairies.

The couples room, with its spring-leaf tones, plunge tub, stone terrace and outdoor fireplace, is almost lovely enough to want to stay put, hang the attractions of lodge and land beyond.

The Spa at Kauri Cliffs also has a heated indoor lap pool; close to the main lodge is an outdoor pool with an infinity edge and there are two astroturf tennis courts and a gym.

But most guests are at Kauri Cliffs for activity of a different kind: the noble pursuit of golf. The game is played here on a par 72 championship course that weaves its way along corrugated clifftops overlooking Takou Beach, seeming to all but clutch on to this precipice as it curves around wind-battered pines and through marsh, forest and farmland. The course is consistently rated among the world's best by pro players and specialist magazines and organisations alike.

The par 5 fourth hole, tucked between bunkers and a great ravine, is named Cambo for New Zealand champion golfer, and 2005 US Open winner, Michael Campbell, who declared it one of the finest holes he'd played when first visiting here in 2000. He's now Kauri Cliffs's touring professional.

Kauri Cliffs, owned by US hedge-fund billionaire Julian Robertson and his wife, Josie, is at Matauri Bay in the Northland region on the far northeast coast of the North Island, set on a peninsula about 30 minutes by road from Kerikeri airport or four hours from Auckland via Whangarei.

It occupies a 2630ha estate, a panoramic emerald-green spread that covers native forest, subtropical pockets, densely vegetated valleys and cliffs with stirring views to the Cavalli Islands.

There's an edge-of-the-universe feeling here, abetted by the long drive from the road, past the oldest kauri tree on private land in New Zealand.

The main lodge, which houses the dining room, bar and public areas, is a lordly affair and the extravagant scale of its surrounds feels in the style of a feudal demesne, although there's no hint of serfdom here, just a limited number of guests dressed in pressed sportswear who have no intention of working, unless it's on their golf swing.

The architecture has the unlikely lines of a Caribbean plantation house, with a wide and columned encircling veranda of the sort made for rocking chairs. There are shutters and tongue-and-groove timber on interior walls and the vaulted ceiling of the main lounge.

French doors and bay windows let in light and views and the interiors are a fresh mix of pastel blues and lemons, wide-planked pale totara floorboards, baronial fireplaces, wrought-iron chandeliers and carefully chosen antiques. Guests gather for pre-dinner cocktails, as is the way in New Zealand lodges of this standard, before repairing for meals a deux or, in the case of the golfing fraternity, at larger tables where the talk is all of eagles and birdies and Tiger Woods's latest triumphs.

There are 11 wooden guest cottages with porches, each with a pair of mirror-image guest suites that feature gas

fireplaces, curl-up seating and loads of space, including a vast dressing room and twin vanity basins. The cottages are set at well-spaced intervals and edged with native forest; these habitats offer the same broad vistas as the main lodge: golf course, ocean and wideskies.

A clue to the core Kauri Cliffs clientele is the choice of glossy reading matter in our room: *Elite Traveler*, *The Private Jet Lifestyle Magazine*, with pictures of Woods and his Gulfstream jet.

The decor in the main building and the strand of cottages has been kitted-out by Auckland-based Virginia Fisher who is very much the designer of choice when it comes to New Zealand's top lodges. Hers is a smart and sporty style with painted wooden floors, soft furnishings in washed-out greys and caramels, deep sofas strewn with knee-rugs, Ralph Lauren influences, a few folksy trimmings and lots of bespoke items such as local artwork and rustic memorabilia.

We are visiting in late March and the weather is against us; in warmer months there are three private beaches on the Kauri Cliffs estate to enjoy for picnics and swims.

We take a four-wheel-drive tour and stop to walk across the so-called Pink Beach, south of the 6th green, named for its scatterings of crushed rose-coloured shells, and drink vacuum flask coffee under the branched dome of a pohutukawa, the New Zealand Christmas tree that flowers in a scarlet blaze from November to January. It's an eerie spot, rocky and craggy, smashed by wintry waves. Waihua Beach is longer and with fine sand; its little offshore isles look close enough to swim to, but only on a sparkling summer's day.

This four-wheel-drive tour with one of the farm staff is hugely enjoyable and gives different perspectives on the considerable environments of the Kauri Cliffs land parcel. There are marked nature trails with kingfishers darting above, waterfalls and glass-clear streams, farm dogs working mobs of angus and charolais cattle and Coopworth sheep. An albino turkey struts in front of our vehicle, clouds of sparrows whirling low over its head, and we can't help laughing when the driver points out the "beauty salon", which is actually the maintenance shed for the fleet of golf course grooming vehicles.

Also at Kauri Cliffs there's the prospect of possum hunting, pheasant shooting and rock fishing, all those rootin'-tootin' pursuits that require chaps to don hairy-chested costumes and grunt and swear a lot.

This rogue weather we are experiencing has its benefits. There is less guilt about cosying up indoors and making use of Kauri Cliffs as the ultimate bolthole. There are storm clouds and glistening rainbows and the prospect of executive chef Barry Frith's clever cuisine, which makes best use of New Zealand produce including lamb from neighbouring Waiaua Bay and Hawkes Bay near Napier plus succulent local crayfish and snapper. Plenty of delicious New Zealand wine, notably from the Robertsons' wineries, Te Awa in Hawkes Bay and Dry River in the Martinborough region, is a happy given.

The nearby town of Kerikeri is famous for its orchards -- oranges, mandarins, lemons, avocados and kiwifruit -- and its Puteki forest thick with ancient kauri trees. Also in the parish is the historic Waitangi Treaty Grounds where the 1840 accord between the Maori people and the British Crown was signed.

And of course this is the Bay of Islands region, where boating, sea kayaking, serious game fishing, snorkelling and even diving on the 1985 wreck of the *Rainbow Warrior* await.

But all that will have to be saved for next time, when hopefully the sun will shine on Kauri Cliffs and the gods of golf will avert their eyes as this novice player smashes a wayward ball down Cambo's ravine.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Kauri Cliffs and Tourism New Zealand.

Checklist

A Kauri Cliffs special winter offer, valid to September 30, is available for Australian residents. From \$NZ700 (\$550) a person a night including accommodation, cocktail hour, meals, a day of unlimited golf or a 50-minute massage each day; the deal does not include cart hire. An identical winter deal is available at sister property the Farm at Cape Kidnappers near Hawkes Bay. More: www.kauricliffs.com; www.capekidnappers.com.

www.newzealand.com