



The Farm at Cape Kidnappers, above; Kinloch Manor & Villas, below

COSY-UP, KIWI STYLE

Warm winter stays in the finest lodges

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New Zealand's lodges sure know how to make an entrance. At The Farm at Cape Kidnappers the huge front doors are from Mexico, the stone floor in reception reclaimed from an ancient monastery, the elkhorn chandelier purchased at sale after Bruce Willis and Demi Moore split.

With its scale and gravitas there's more than a whiff of Game of Thrones to the Kiwi lodge vernacular. After all, these buildings must be equal to their cinematic locales, in the case of The Farm, high above the dramatic limestone cliffs of Hawkes Bay on the North Island's east coast.

Winter is the perfect time to cross the ditch and hunker down in one of these epic lodges. The last time I visited, my drive from Auckland was suitably cinematic, on narrow roads lined with trees weighted down with frost so thick we might be north of the wall (for you Game of Thrones fans), the bitumen coated with treacherous black ice.

Arriving at Hawkes Bay and The Farm is like passing through a veil into blazing winter sunshine and a verdant landscape of emerald-green, for this is one of the sunniest spots in New Zealand.

Weary from our long road trip (cue casual discarding of furs and swords), we sit by the roaring log fire, sipping Fat and Sassy chardonnay, downing Te Kouma oysters and planning our days ahead. Golf? The Cape Kidnappers cliff-top course is one of the most photographed on the planet. A massage? Perhaps a stroll through the extensive gardens on the lookout for the elusive kiwi.

Sprawling across 2500ha, The Farm and two adjoining properties on the Cape Kidnappers Peninsula constitute the largest private reserve in the country. Protected by a predator-proof fence, it's an important kiwi habitat. Allan, the head gardener at the lodge,

ensures the garden beds are maintained in a kiwi-friendly manner. Fallen fern fronds are not tidied away because this mulch provides the perfect habitat for insects that form the basis of the shy bird's diet. There might be as many as 100 birds living at Cape Kidnappers but spying one is tricky. According to Allan, less than 2 per cent of New Zealanders have ever seen a kiwi in the wild.

I'm not surprised these enigmatic little birds choose to live at the lodge; it would be my first choice. The Farm is nipped and tucked neatly into the forested hillside, with lush gardens of indigenous plants spilling down to lap around the main lodge building. Near the front door, a hedge of the charmingly named Corokia Frosted Chocolate is turning its customary winter brown.

Light and airy interiors by Aspen-based designer Linda Bedell echo the property's farm roots across 24 suites and a four-bedroom Owner's Cottage. The eight hilltop suites afford long views over the lodge to the Pacific Ocean. Above the bed in Suite 16 there's a quaint installation of old plough seats; sliding barn-style doors separate bed-

room from bathroom, where black and white gingham detailing sets a ranch tone. I've a view from the bath, the private deck, even from the enormous cloud-like bed.

Each blessedly silent morning, with cup of tea to hand, I prop on downy pillows and watch the sky dawn pink, cottonwool clouds drifting over the bay. A bracing walk is next, followed by breakfast: Ora king salmon, local mushrooms, perhaps Hawkes Bay pork sausage.

Lunch is taken in the sunny loggia where native vines scramble up pillars framing long lovely views to the distant snow-capped mountains. Tea can be enjoyed in the sheltered courtyard decorated with tubs of citrus and curvaceous clipped box, or the circular snug cleverly tucked inside the old farm silo.

The tariff includes breakfast and dinner (some packages also include lunch) with changing menus of best NZ fare: wild venison from Fjordland, east coast groper, sensational Hawkes Bay lamb. The Lodge has its own large vegetable garden and menus are designed around what's in season, even stinging nettles.

Farm-produced manuka honey features in the menu of the lodge's day spa, set in a little cottage at the top of the property. There's also a gorgeous infinity pool, lapped by gardens and affording more long views. Farm motifs continue in the large golf clubhouse, with shearing-shed references and woollen cushions featuring, what else, but sheep.

The course is a showstopper, with fairways wrapping around the cliff's edge, 140m above the sea. And how about a guided stroll minus clubs and putters along unmarked farmland trails and clifftops down on to the beach, one of a range of activities offered by The Farm team.

Sticking with the Game of Thrones theme, we're off to another of the country's leading golf lodges, the striking Kinloch Manor & Villas overlooking Lake Taupo, also on the North Island. Sister property to the famous Treetops, the lodge rises like a fortress from a steep hillside above the stunning Jack Nicklaus-designed championship course, gem-smooth greens tucked between tussocky folds and little gullies of native heather.

The monumental stone lodge was designed to counter the chilly southerlies blowing off the lake. Entrance is via a sheltered courtyard on the northern side. The entire building has been rendered with a material to encourage the growth of lichens, but the air is so pure in this part of New Zealand, the white exterior remains largely unsullied.

Heavy doors open into soaring rooms of stone and cedar. Go-to lodge designer Virginia Fisher tackled the interiors as she might a castle in deepest Scotland, with leather, hides and velvets setting a contemporary baronial tone. Think huge velvet buttoned sofas, bar stools decked in fur and looking like small mammals, chain-mail screens over the fire.

Every room in the main lodge frames spectacular views of the lake, the largest in the land. After dark, guests gather around the log fire in the bar before dinner, which might feature saltwater crayfish ravioli or elk from the farm at Treetops.

Accommodation takes the form of 10 timber-clad one and two-bedroom villas nestled in the tussocky hillside. The premium Manor Residence offers oodles of space, a living area with log fire, kitchen stocked with fancy teas

