

Kiwis reveal leisure secrets



SPA INDULGENCE

By RACHEL OAKES-ASH

New Zealand is a nation of microclimates. The landscape from north to south ranges from alpine to thermal to rainforest, from rugged uninhabitable seas to beckoning crystal waters.

It's impossible not to feel the majesty of this terrain. The sparsity of population and the wonder of nature make it an ideal location to rest, relax and rejuvenate.

My mission? Experience four Kiwi spas across two islands in six days.

I start with Spa du Vin, a 45-minute drive south from Auckland in the lush fields of the Magatawhiri Valley.

Spa du Vin is the most recent addition to Hotel Du Vin, a 10ha working vineyard with 48 rooms and an award-winning restaurant.

Here, it's all about a journey. The destination? Bliss, though you would be forgiven for thinking Asia when first entering the renovated winery and cellar.

The interior of the spa building takes its design inspiration from the Balinese with day beds, a giant hanging iron bell, and a carved Buddha that oversees the light-filled main atrium.

Treatments begin when the therapist rings the Indian style bells in each room. Next time you hear them will be when it's all over and you can make your way to the relaxation room for chai tea and a good lie down.



Unless you're in the couple's treatment room, where you can relax and make hay in your own private bath with vineyard view.

You need a couple of nights to begin the relaxation process here and explore the region, but I am on a flight to Wellington before you can say "Om".

Wharekauhau Lodge is a two-hour drive from Wellington airport or a 15-minute chopper ride along the coast.

Thirsten Howell III types mix it with distant cousins of Rothschilds and Trump who wear gems they call "baubles" to the nightly five-course dinner in the main Cape Dutch-style lodge.

Wharekauhau is a working sheep station of 2000ha set on a cliff-top overlooking the black



replaced with cards featuring artwork from the region.

The six suites scattered around the property have claw-foot baths and glass doors that fold back to let in the private garden. Four-poster beds are surrounded with fur-style rugs and the floor tiles are heated. The spa is intimate and appealing, with Phytomer sea plant products from France.

Hot stone therapy is the signature treatment here. It's a two-hour process which will leave you melted on to the table and unable to move.

Another flight south and my final stop: Queenstown. The landscape is dominated by the Southern Alps that rise from Lake Wakatipu. It's a destination that gets under your skin.

If I were a golfer, I'd be rejoicing as I am staying at Millbrook resort, known for its 18-hole Sir Bob Charles golf course. Instead, I head for the spa with the golfing widows.

Opened last December and costing \$NZ 1.7 million, Millbrook Spa is set in the natural amphitheatre provided by the Remarkables mountain range.

At one of the two feature wet rooms I am placed on a huge, single piece of Australian Arcadia cedar carved into the shape of a mangrove leaf for a Vichy water massage.

After the wet comes the dry, and I change rooms for my third facial of the week.

But the products used at Millbrook are like velvet on the skin: I honestly thought I was being massaged with velour gloves. Yon-Ka is a French botanical skin-care range that uses plant and marine extracts with aromatherapy and I am its newest convert.

A soak in the mosaic tiled step-up bath surrounded by candles and I am ready for bed. It's been a long week. Sigh.

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE: Air New Zealand (www.airnz.com.au) flies from Sydney to Auckland, Wellington and Queenstown, and to Nelson from Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland.

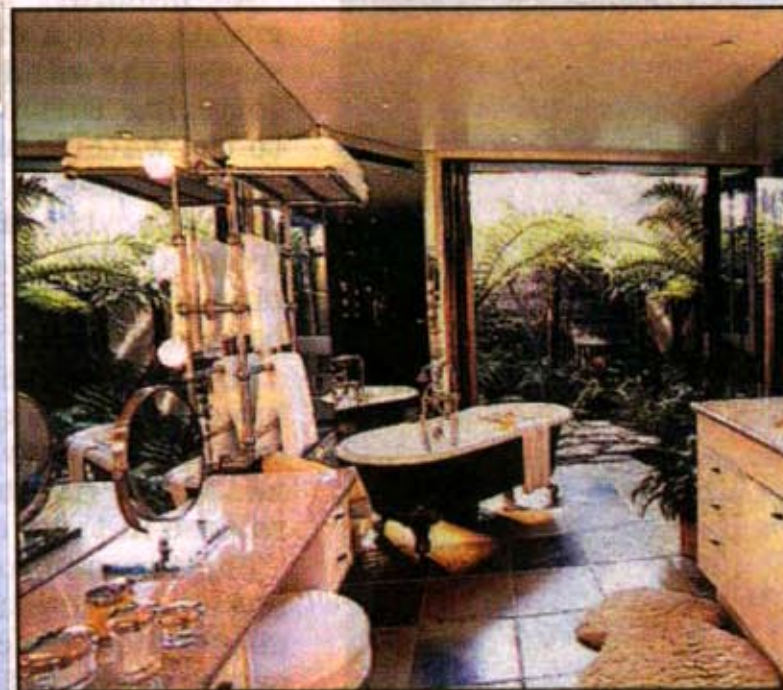
WHERE TO STAY:

❑ Spa du Vin at Hotel du Vin; www.peppers.co.nz or phone New Zealand 0011 64 9233 6314.

❑ Wharekauhau Lodge, a Small Luxury Hotels property; 1800 251 958, www.slh.com

❑ Paratiho Lodge, a Relais & Chateaux property; phone New Zealand 0011 64 3528 2100, or www.paratiho.co.nz

❑ Millbrook Spa, part of Select Hotels and Resorts; phone New Zealand 0011 64 3441 7000 or www.millbrook.co.nz



the Maori story of Wharekauhau. "It's a place where Maori wise men came, tribes would send young warriors here to learn about the Maori spirits."

I take a 20-minute flight from Wellington to Nelson on the northern tip of the South Island for my next destination.

My hosts are Californians Robert and Sally Hunt. She, Hepburn-esque with porcelain skin, upswept hair and earrings I could pay off my mortgage with. He, a distinguished type in comfortable Italian shoes. Their home? Paratiho Lodge, an hour's drive west of Nelson.

They are delightful dinner hosts and I find myself breaking bread with a self-made Irish telecom mogul, a film producer from London and a PR director from Hong Kong.

Art plays a major role at Paratiho: there are sculptures and paintings from every period, school and country. At turn-down time, chocolates are

sand beaches of Palliser Bay where the Tasman meets the Pacific. Bill Shaw is the larrikin owner, a salt-of-the-earth New Zealander with an All Blacks figure and a farmer's fashion sense.

Ten high-beamed cottages in

shades of cream and white, with four-poster beds and open fires, line the nearby clifftop. There's no TV or mobile phone coverage, but there are comfy designer chairs on the patio and home-baked shortbread.

It is here I watch the ocean

change from grey to blue to green and back to grey.

Anna Rotman runs the spa at Wharekauhau though it would be safer to say she is the spa — a one-room set-up off the vintage Hollywood-style indoor pool.

During my salt scrub she tells