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BUCKET LIST TRAVEL

LAP OF LUXURY

From magical destinations you can only reach via helicopter, to world-class wining and dining options, New Zealand's most sophisticated lodges are in a league of their own. So go on – why not treat yourself?

WORDS BY MICHAEL MCHUGH

MINARET STATION ALPINE LODGE WANAKA

It was a moment that will stay with me forever. It stirred my soul and made me happy – a contentment within a relatively small moment in time. A bucket list item checked off that I wasn't even aware was a bucket list moment until it was over.

Al, our guide and chef for the trip, suggested the helicopter drop us off at the waterfall that neighbours Minaret Station, and we walk back to our

chalet. As the spray from the waterfall and rush of rotated air from the ascending helicopter all whipped together, I grabbed my wife's hand. Walking closer to the waterfall, I realised then and there, that there was no place in the world I'd rather be – or anyone else I wanted to be with. And then, apart from the cascading water, there was complete silence. We had been dropped into a utopia that simply was paradise.

Leaving the waterfall, we strolled along the boardwalk into the warm wind, much like someone had a giant

This page: The lodge is linked by a series of boardwalks through the stunning scenery.

Opposite page: Minaret Station Alpine Lodge is accessible only by helicopter.

hairdryer on at half strength. We paused for a look at the conservation work the luxury station has done with the wetlands and surrounding land. As birds hopped back and forth and the odd rabbit zig-zagged across the plains looking for food, the river that passes the chalets cried out and we stopped to splash the water on our faces and have a drink. I put my feet on the slippery rocks as snow-melted alpine water rushed over them. The experience of simply being in the moment and enjoying what was around us was a moment of bliss.



rosé. After a fruitless punt at fishing we sat and chatted about the local region and the history of the property. It was a wonderful lunch to have lakeside.

MOUNTAIN MAJESTY

The 50,000-acre Minaret Station is part of The Alpine Group, which is owned and operated by the Wallis family. The Alpine Group started back in the early 1960s, when Sir Tim Wallis – known as ‘Hurricane Tim’ – first began introducing international guests to New Zealand’s wilderness.

The Group bought Minaret Station in 1995 and The Alpine Lodge was opened in 2010. This working high country farm is home to cattle, sheep and deer, which are raised for premium export and the domestic market, under the brand name Te Mana.

Through Kiwi ingenuity and Tim’s vision with his sons and their families, they have created a place that is world renowned – and as a Department of Conservation concessionaire they have access to remote locations, including Mount Aspiring National Park and Fiordland National Park.

Minaret Station Alpine Lodge is accessible only by helicopter, and is set in a glacial valley where the lodge itself is connected by a series of raised wooden boardwalks. Each of the four chalets boasts king-sized beds, ensuite bathrooms, and a hot tub on the deck that looks out onto mountain peaks. Wildlife comes to visit and parade in front of the chalets day and night. The lodge operates using hydro electricity generated from the nearby waterfall, originating from the station’s healthy annual rainfall and snowmelt. The drinking water is drawn directly from the snow- and rain-fed waterfall – you can’t get more pristine than that.

Sustainability is paramount within this wild environment, and all waste is removed from the property and recycled. Food waste and laundry are dealt with off site, to ensure the location is kept pristine. Minaret Station has also signed the Tourism Sustainability Commitment – which is managed by the Tourism Industry Aotearoa, and ensures economic, environmental and social sustainability throughout New Zealand.

Arriving at our chalet, my claim that “we must have a spa tonight under the stars” didn’t end up happening (we will definitely have to return one day for the experience).

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Instead, we had dinner in the main lodge alongside an Australian couple, who had that day got engaged on a nearby mountaintop, and a newly married couple from New York. It was a fun night – a celebratory night, with lots of storytelling and excellent food and wine that didn’t stop coming. And heading off to bed with full tummies and smiles on our faces, we had stories to share with everyone back home. We’d had a day we’ll never forget.

The day itself was what I would call perfect – one of those hot, bright blue sky days that Central Otago seems to deliver again and again. We were picked up in a helicopter from Wanaka Airport and then flown over mountain ranges that dropped down into Lake Wanaka, and over an island that had its own lake. Surely there’s a name for an island with a lake in a lake? Much like a ‘turducken’, a ‘lakelucken’?

We stopped alongside Lake Wanaka and AI made us lunch of fresh whitebait fritters, lamb and salads, all washed down with cold

Minaret Station is a working farm with sheep, cattle and deer.



**MAHU WHENUA
WANAKA**

Flying around in an Aspiring helicopter, I gaze down at the 155,00 acres of four adjoining high country sheep stations that stretch between Queenstown and Wanaka and make up the spectacular Mahu Whenua – which translates to “healing the land”.

Over the past 10 years a massive regeneration programme has been in place, with planting of native trees and bush, the development of paths and trails, and the return of native birds to the area. After swooping and circling this majestic land – some mountains still with snow caps – we arrive by a river and toast to our first night with a glass of Central Otago’s finest Methode Traditionnelle Maude Brut NV – the perfect aperitif.

Fiona (Fi) Stevens, founder and director of MajorDomo – the group that manages the Mahu Whenua property – says, “This is just one of many options guests can take part in while staying here.”

As we look out across the view alongside a corrugated tin shed, very much like an original gold mining hut, delicious finger food magically keeps appearing. “There are a number of walking and riding trails across the property, and all of the trails are easy access for tramping, mountain biking and horseriding,” Stevens adds.

Climbing back into our new mode of transport, I realise that I’m getting spoiled – as it’s starting to feel almost normal to get in and out of helicopters.

We circle and then land back on the front lawn of the eco sanctuary. Mahu Whenua is owned by John ‘Mutt’ Lange – music producer to some of the world’s greatest acts, including his ex-wife

Shania Twain, who originally designed the homestead but is now no longer involved. The horse-loving Twain had also designed and built an enormous horse stable, with an indoor arena, to accommodate her love of Spanish horses.

You cannot help but be impressed with the sustainable farming practices in place. Huntly McGregor, the farm manager, tells us that, “Over a million

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HUNTLY MCGREGOR

trees have been planted – which has seen a natural regeneration and native birds returning to the area”.

Many hectares now have predator-proof fencing in place – with a plan to eradicate ferrets and rabbits over time.

“More than 90 per cent of the land was placed under protective [QEII National Trust] covenants in 2015. It’s the largest conservation of private land in the country,” explains McGregor. And with this protection in place, it means that the Department of Conservation’s Motatapu Tramping Track – which winds across some of the Mahu Whenua land and forms part of the Te Araroa (New Zealand’s ‘Long Pathway’, running the length of the country) – can be enjoyed forever by everyone. The Macpac Motatapu,



Clockwise from top left: The food on offer is absolutely delicious; The lovely suites feature every comfort – including a copper tub under the window; Set amongst rolling hills, there are spectacular views at every turn.

a mountain bike and marathon race, also happens once a year across the gorgeous property.

Sipping our pre-dinner drinks, we sit and look out over the property. The beautiful view to Lake Wanaka and the mountains in the distance could quite easily be the best in the district. Dinner is then served in the library, by head chef Kayleigh Kilbey – starting with five-spiced duck with wonton rings and daikon, and a glass of the 2018 Valli Waitaki Riesling. It is absolutely delicious – as is the pan-seared local salmon, served with gnocchi and sweetcorn purée, and the mille-feuille for dessert.



We arrive back at our suite – appropriately named the Tui Suite, as every morning we see and hear tuis dart amongst the garden. There's one thing left to do. At the end of our king-sized bed is a big, free-standing copper bath, sitting beside the floor-to-ceiling window. It screams “fill me”. So on my last night I do exactly that.

I can't remember the last time I actually had a bath – and I've never had one in a copper tub. I lie there thinking about the sign I'd spotted over a gate during my morning walk through this spectacular environment. 'Sweet As', it had said, carved out of a giant piece of steel. 'Sweet As', indeed. 🍷





BLANKET BAY GLENORCHY

On our first night at Blanket Bay, located at the base of the Richardson Mountains, my wife and I are standing on the terrace from the wood-panelled bar, The Den, looking out across the lawn to the Humboldt Mountains across Lake Whakatipu, and views that take in the Dart and Rees Valleys. The lodge's American owners, Tom and Pauline Tusher, introduce themselves and are keen to learn where we are from.

The Tushers lived in Sydney in the 1970s, and Tom introduced the Levi Strauss brand to Australia and New Zealand. Tom tells us that when visiting Queenstown all those years

ago looking for new retail outlets, he couldn't believe the "beauty of the area". With a real estate agent he drove out to Glenorchy (which "wasn't much more than a track," says Pauline) where he saw this property that had "been on the market for some time".

Having bought the piece of rough, overgrown land about an hour's drive from Queenstown, the Tushers did nothing with it for 25 years other than lease it out to a local farmer.

"I only visited about five times during that time," says Tom.

It was in 1999 that building started on the lodge. Blanket Bay is now celebrating 20 years in business – and over that time it has not only been much awarded, it has also set the benchmark in hospitality across New Zealand.



The Tushers sourced wood from historic buildings across the South Island – for example, the floors are made from matai and black pine from old woolstores – and tradesmen from the US worked with the timber.

Pauline says that as the building grew, “What was originally designed as a home for the family got bigger, and so I said to Tom it would make a perfect lodge.”

The grand stone and timber architecture with beamed ceilings and large, open log fireplaces and floor-to-ceiling windows really is the perfect spot to relax and enjoy the surrounds.

The name Blanket Bay came about 150 years ago, when sheep owned by William Rees were sheared on the shore of Lake Wakatipu – just south of Glenorchy. After shearing the

Clockwise from top left: The lodge is set right on the lake, and the terrace is the ideal spot to enjoy the sunset vistas; Suites are light and bright; Every dish is considered and perfectly plated.



sheep, the eight Māori shearers slept under shelters with roofs made of blankets stitched together – hence the name Blanket Bay.

The lodge sits on Wyuna Station – a working sheep, cattle and deer farm, and originally a part of the Rees Station. The area saw the gold rush of the 1860s, when miners came seeking their fortune at the Invincible Gold Mine in the Rees Valley and later at Wyuna, where remnants still exist.

CHANGES OVER TIME

There are two distinct seasons with visitors, says general manager Tom Butler. “Our summer season runs between mid-November and April and attracts the American market ... and when we hit the winter months the lodge is full of Australian and New Zealand visitors,” he says.

Over the 20 years the lodge has been in operation, guests have become much more diet-focused – with many requests made around special dietary requirements. High demand has seen a growth in private villas, and two years ago a four-bedroom villa was built for multigenerational travellers – where guests have a server, concierge and chef on call for their entire visit.

Butler says, “The Tushers are very passionate and heavily invested in the running of the operation, and have a genuine interest about everyone when they are staying here.”

Executive chef Mark Sycamore says it’s very important to cook with local ingredients, understanding that “Queenstown is isolated from major towns and the sea – so it’s always a challenge getting great ingredients.

“THE OWNERS HAVE A GENUINE INTEREST ABOUT EVERYONE WHEN THEY ARE STAYING HERE.”

TOM BUTLER

Customers want to know where the ingredients have come from and they want to know that it is local. We put a lot of effort into building relationships with suppliers – and the bulk of our ingredients come from Central Otago.”

Fish supplies, he says, need to come from Bluff rather than the Whitianga. “It makes life easier with less travel times, and it’s a fresher product.”

Sycamore was executive chef from 2004 to 2010, and he returned in May 2019. He now finds the lodge much busier: “The dietary side of things takes most of our day, ensuring the right food is going to the right person and tailor-making the menu for each guest.”

As we enjoy our dinner on the terrace alongside the 30-foot vaulted Great Room, watching the sun slowly sink behind the mountain range as dish after dish of expert plating and flavours are matched perfectly with local wines, I wonder if the Tushers all those years ago ever imagined the great pleasure their vision would give so many. Congratulations on 20 years of making many visitors happy. 🍷