Due

green hills, and a flock of black and effortless. white sheep atop these hills.

"THERE ARE MORE sheep than people North Island during the balmy days of spring from its rooftop balcony. It is in New Zealand." Although I had in November, with husband and baby boy in the brainchild of Singaporean heard the quote only once, it helped tow. Weighed down by work and motherhood, export Manjit Kaur and her shape my impression of New I'd entrusted the planning of our holiday to husband Michael Coutts, and Zealand — an endless horizon of Scott Dunn (scottdunn.com), a travel agency that they have lavished the property shades of green pasture converging prides itself on immaculate itineraries (with the with effort and exquisite attention with shades of blue sky, vast rolling best spots to stay, visit and dine) to make travel to detail, working with interior

Auckland, the largest city in Polynesia, is remodel it into a four-bedroom As it turns out, New Zealand is modern without being built-up, cosmopolitan luxury villa (furnished in Hamptons exactly how I'd pictured it, and so but not unfriendly, and buzzy yet laid-back. Its chic-style, no less). much more. I visited New Zealand's beautiful harbour is the reason it is also known. The villa's general manager, as the City of Sails, and from the wharf you can Craig, is also butler and concierge, sail into one of the array of islands in the gulf. while private chef Finn, who Waiheke Island, for instance, is a 30-min ferry-seemed far too qualified to be ride away, and welcomes travellers with luxury cooking just for us, used to head lodges, lovely white-sand beaches, as well as up a Relais & Châteaux kitchen. gourmet cuisine and wine.

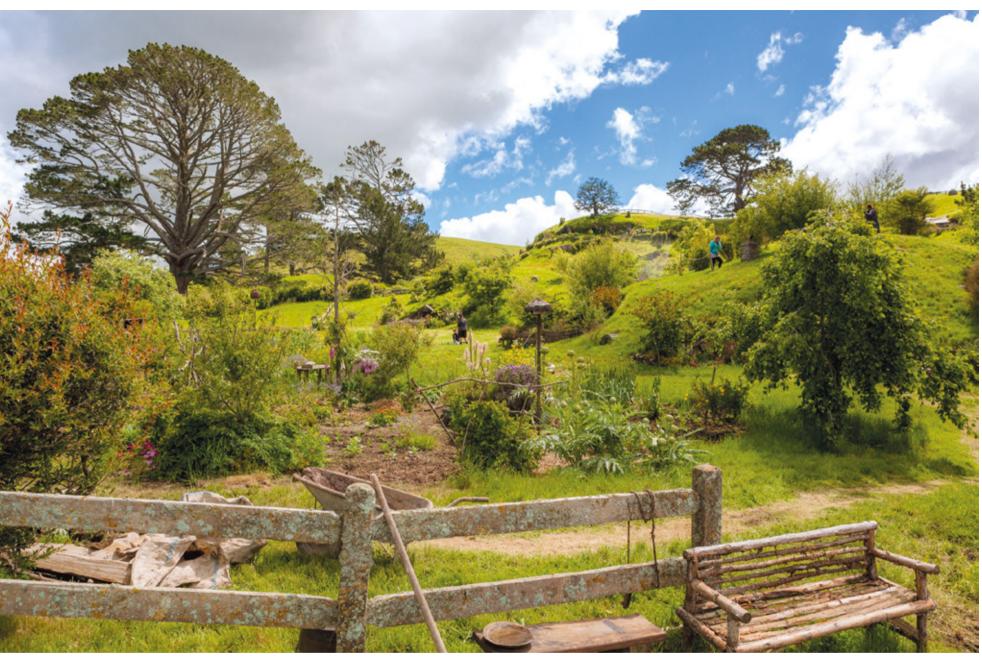
Its fresh produce and culinary excellence but other restaurants in Auckland make Auckland an excellent gateway to our beckoned. Such as quintessential North Island adventure, and one good reason to fine dining destination The French sample a key restaurant or two.

Our accommodation in Auckland was St beautiful modern New Zealand Marys Residence, a luxury lodge in a quiet gastronomy in its bright and suburb with terrace views of the harbour charming space.

designer Anna Desbonnets to

We'd have stayed in for every meal, Café, which serves fresh, light and

New Zealand's North Island, with its picturesque wilds, lavish hospitality and authentic cuisine, leaves ELAINE KIM charmed



The Sugar Club, a restaurant atop the iconic Sky Tower, is where celebrity chef Peter Gordon whips up his accoladed cuisine that fuses Asian and European culinary styles. The glass-enclosed dining room offers fabulous views of the harbour and sea beyond.

Among our more memorable and unique dining experiences was the tiny Pasture restaurant in suburban

wines and house-fermented juice cocktails.

Auckland gave us a first glimpse of the gourmet gastronomy we were about to experience as we traversed North Island. We set off southwards in the direction of Lake Taupo. The scenic drive was flanked by wide open fields, lush green hills and the occasional flock of concoctions. sheep — as I had pictured!

Two hours after leaving Auckland, we stopped Hobbiton, we arrived at Lake at Hobbiton and entered the entirely separate universe that is Middle Earth. Here we were led Parnell. Here, Chef of the Year Ed to The Shire in The Lord of the Rings, where Verner prepares a degustation hobbit holes are carved into the hillside with menu over open wood fires, paired hobbit-sized laundry hanging outside the round the sky with dark ash all the way with biodynamic New Zealand windows. Time your visit for dinner at The to Asia. For centuries past, the

Green Dragon Inn, and you'll be treated to a magical banquet in the thatch-roofed, lantern-lit tavern. feasting on plum puddings and stews, and drinking Southfarthing Sackville ciders and Middle Earth

southwards Taupo. This vast body of water (the largest in Australasia) is a volcanic lake birthed from a fiery eruption that would have clouded



myths and legends. Today, it draws visitors from the globe over, and a lakeside town has developed to accommodate tourists seeking adventure and outdoor pursuits such as trout fishing to jet-boating.

Running from the lake is the rushing Waikato River, and on its bank sits the Huka Lodge. This fabled destination is one of New Zealand's original luxury lodges, and may well have defined the entire genre, inspiring similarly across Kiwiland.

In its 80 years of existence, Huka Lodge has played host to royalty and celebrities, as testified by framed photos of guests that line the oakwood consoles of its welcoming lounge. It is still the epitome of elegant, understated luxury in Kiwi hospitality.

Huka's rooms, suites and cottages dot the river bank. Whitewashed cabins with high

lake has inspired countless Maori a fishing rod from reception and go fly-fishing outside your room's patio. Since it was raining, however, all we cared for was to stay ensconced in our lodge, tucked under a tartan wool throw or soaking in the enormous bathtub with its own white panelled window that looks out to the thick

However indolent the lodge made us feel, we knew dinner was worth getting out of bed for. Huka turned dining into an experience, with no less than 20 quirky locations across the property designated as dining spots. There was a vaulted underground wine cellar that glowed with the light from dozens of pillar candles; a wooden jetty spectacular lodges that sprouted up pavilion perched right on the very edge of the river bank; an outdoor "green room" with walls of clipped hedge and views of the waters, as well as garden dining under the stars. For our little family, the lodge set a table in front of the fire in the library, a cosy, private books-lined sanctuary, to take you flightseeing (or to your with a small patio overlooking the Waikato.

Huka Lodge's commitment to dining excellence has created a legacy and reputation that executive chef Paul Froggatt now continues. He takes his experience from some of the finest kitchens in Europe and Asia, including Bernard Loiseau's three-Michelin-starred wood-beamed ceilings and white Burgundy restaurant. Every night he prepares shuttered glass panels open straight a new five-course degustation menu featuring to the river bank, so you can pick up the freshest seasonal ingredients (sometimes

personally foraged by his team), cooked to perfection and plated beautifully. One meal may be a poached lobster in saffron, another a kingfish tataki in a buttermilk and strawberry bouillon, or a Te Pohue rabbit with kumquat chutney. All reflect Froggatt's refined culinary skills and international influence.

Huka Lodge is a most wonderful base for the myriad of adventures in the region. On the property are tennis, pétanque, swimming and fishing, while further afield on the lake there's jet-boating, waterskiing and whitewater rafting. If you need a rush of adrenaline, ask about bungee jump or skydive. Helicopters land in the front lawn next destination).

We decided to go gliding at the Taupo Gliding Club. In what was the

> CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STRAIGHT OUT OF THE LORD OF THE RINGS IS HOBBITON: MAORI ARTWORKS ON LAKE TAUPO

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THE FARM AT CAPE KIDNAPPERS IS A CAPE COD-STYLE HIDEAWAY SET IN 6,000 ACRES OF STUNNING PASTURE LAND: OPPOSITE PAGE: HAWKE'S BAY IS KNOWN FOR ITS BEACHES AND WINERIES

> closest to flying a plane without a pilot licence, we were popped into the front seat of a glider. which was hooked up by a rope to a propeller plane that pulled us up thousands of feet into the air and let us go. And we soared, gently down, down,

mountain, lake and sea below. It was exhilarating and enthralling all and the ocean. at once.

It was hard to imagine that North Island would have more to offer after that but we were happily proven wrong as we ventured southward to Hawke's Bay. As we drove down the highway, we

over the spectacular landscape of watched in joy as rolling green hills with their grazing sheep gave way to vineyards, sea cliffs

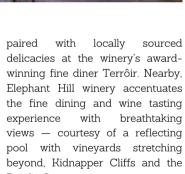
> Zealand is never complete without the wineries of Hawke's Bay, which produce almost all of the country's finest reds. Makers of wine tend to be lovers of food, so some of the best wineries come with the best restaurants.

The well-known Craggy Range wines are Pacific Ocean.

winning fine diner Terrôir. Nearby, For oenophiles and epicures, a trip to New Elephant Hill winery accentuates

> The majestic Kidnapper Cliffs are part of a 6,000-hectare peninsula of farmland, nature reserve and ocean cliffs. Captain Cook landed there once, and had one of his Tahitian ship-boys almost kidnapped by a Hawke's Bay Maori, hence the name. The nature here is wild and breathtaking, and probably unchanged since the 1700s, with the exception of The Farm at Cape Kidnappers, a luxury lodge perched on top of the headlands.

The place was so secluded we almost could not find it. When the road we were on ended at Clifton Beach, we were left puzzled for



materialised.

entrance to the 2,400-hectare private-owned property thereafter it was a good half-hour's drive up a winding road before the pretty white facade of the lodge

a while. Fortunately we noticed

the gate and sign that marked the

Breathtaking. That was the word that came to mind when we arrived at Cape Kidnappers. Owned by an American hedge fund billionaire, this unassuming Cape Cod-style farmhouse is a glorious hideaway brimming with every pampering nicety. Our suite in the main house, with its white wood-panelled walls

fireplace. When we swung open the glass doors to the private balcony, we were immediately greeted by a gorgeous view of the valley and ocean beyond.

The nature here is wild and breathtaking, and

probably unchanged since the 1700s

The affable Matt from the farm next door brings guests on safari-like tours, either in a 4WD or the Can-Am, an open-top off-road vehicle that can navigate the wildest of terrains. Cape Kidnappers is a working farm, so cows are grazing in the fields, and in the evening sheep get rounded up by energetic sheepdogs. It's also a nature preserve with its own kiwi bird conservation project. We visited its gannet colony, where hundreds of these endangered creatures lay nesting by the edge of the cliff.

With a setting like this, dining at the Farm was an extraordinary experience. Dinner was a fiveand rustic-chic furnishings, had a course degustation event, imbued with formality delightful little bay window to curl due to a dinner jacket policy. The Relais & up by, and a reading chaise by the Châteaux kitchen sent out dishes prepared with

local produce, mostly harvested from the lodge's farm and garden. The food was paired with our favourite Hawke's Bay wine discovered during the pre-dinner wine tasting-and-canapés session.

In the morning, my favourite spot for breakfast was on the loggia, a beautiful light-filled glass-covered balcony that overlooked the ocean. I saw rolling green hills against a blue sky, and the occasional black and white sheep atop the hill. I peered further, and made out the rugged, open sea cliffs and whitewaved Pacific Ocean stretching into the horizon, beautiful beyond my imagination. Indeed, New Zealand was just as I'd imagined, and so



