

Top Notch

A New Zealand retreat offers the highest level of recreation and respite.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO REMAIN FOCUSED when staying at New Zealand's Treetops Lodge and Estate. As much as I wanted to catch trout, distractions such as a helicopter ride to White Island, an active volcano only 50 minutes by chopper from the Treetops helipad, were constantly competing for my time. A horseback journey through the property, which is inhabited by herds of stags, water buffalo, and fallow deer, is yet another way to lose your concentration. This is the kind of wonder therapy that draws visitors to this five-star getaway located at least 12 hours by commercial flight from the continental United States.

area's forests and wetlands. For Sax, the estate represents the culmination of a lifelong dream to heal some of the degradation that he saw his father's generation inflict on the land.

My dreams included introducing myself to a few of New Zealand's world-famous trout, the kind of wild, rod-bending brutes that have fly-fishing enthusiasts from the Battenkill to the Bighorn hankering for an introduction to Kiwi waters. The average weight of the football-size rainbows and browns found in the waters near Treetops runs near 5 pounds. While my arrival did not coincide with the prime fishing season of December through March, I still



Perched atop the emerald hills of North Island, the estate is a 2,500-acre antidote to the industrial age. The lodge itself exemplifies the Frank Lloyd Wright architectural tenet of making the structure suitable for the land, not the land suitable for the structure. Indeed, its glass-wall and stone-floor design seems to extend the lush exterior setting indoors. The tree-size ferns and myriad other unique plants—80 percent of New Zealand's flora can be found only on the island nation—throughout the grounds add to the surreal ambience of the retreat. A brook meanders around the lodge, serving as a trout-laden moat, complete with matching waterfalls on either side of the wooden bridge that leads to the lodge's entrance.

Treetops was the vision of owner John Sax, a successful businessman who has parlayed his love of the land and its bounty into a stewardship role to reclaim and preserve the

managed to catch a few under the artful tutelage of Treetops guides John Hamill and Mike Dowden, a pair of 40-something anglers who have been plying New Zealand waters since they were old enough to hold a fly rod.

The natural beauty of New Zealand has long lured visitors from around the world. Given today's tenuous international travel climate, the country, with its reputation as one of the world's safest and most inviting places, has become an even more appealing destination. Recall that New Zealand serves as the mystical Middle-Earth for the films in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. At Treetops, you will surely fall under the region's spell, one that will entice you to return whenever you require a refuge in a fabled land far from the travails of modern life. —CHRIS DORSEY

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Treetops Lodge sits in the hills of North Island, a half-hour drive from the city of Rotorua.