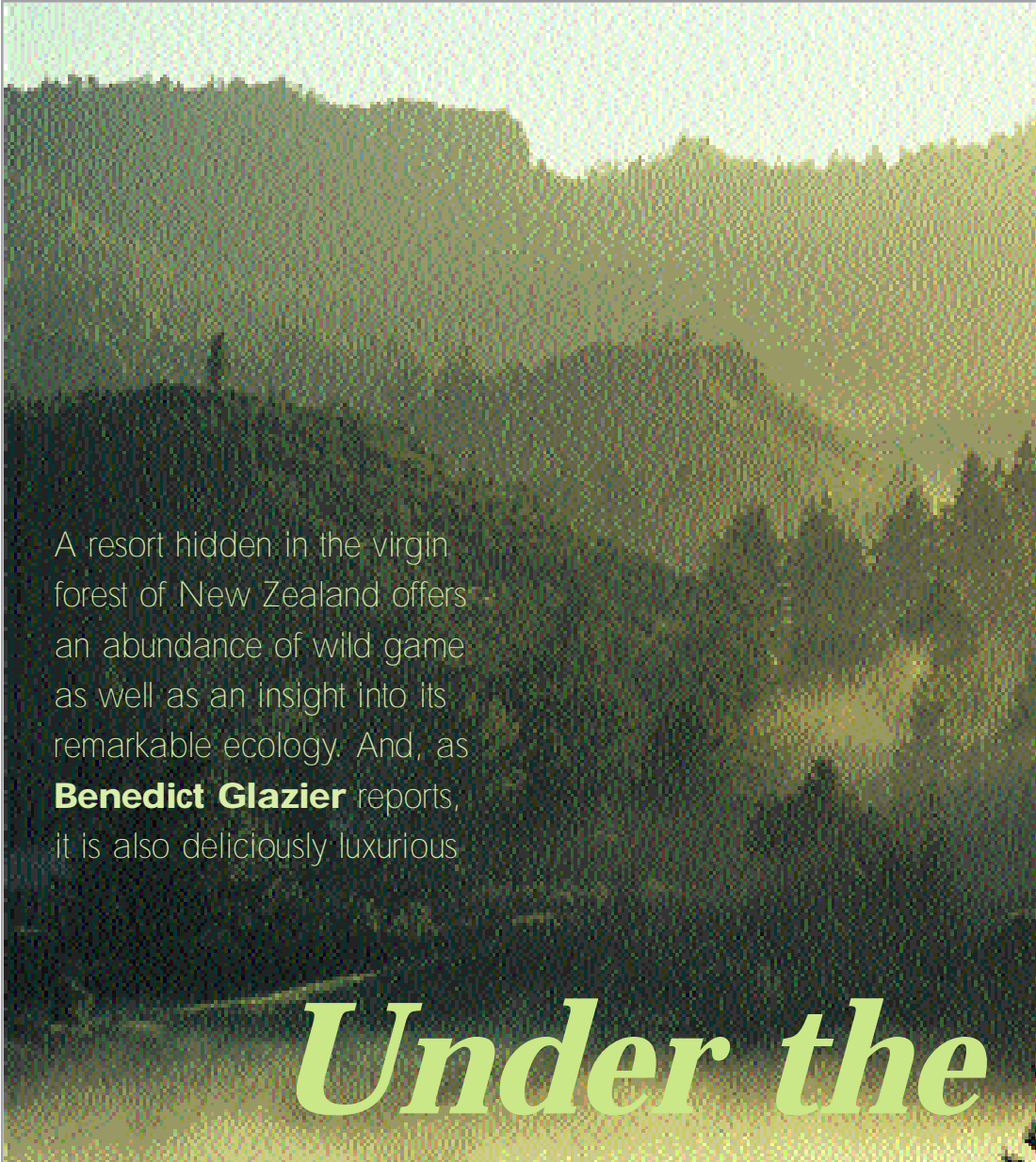


**B**Y THE TIME we arrived at Treetops we already had a sense of the stunning natural beauty of New Zealand. The country's volcanic origins created a lush and fertile land that, following recent exposure in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, has received worldwide attention. New Zealand is also a gentle country, far removed from the troubles of the world; it has no dangerous animals or tropical diseases and has a familiarity – for the British, at least – that makes one feel truly at home.

Having made our way up into the Horohoro Bluffs above Rotorua, we left the main road and (wishing we were in a four-wheel drive) took the 3km track through forest up to the Treetops resort. We were welcomed with a wave from the staff and managers, who have the friendly informality typical of Kiwis.

Treetops was created by the New Zealand businessman John Sax, who has a passion for his country, its wildlife and landscape. John grew up in a farming family and spent his younger days fishing, hunting and learning the ways of the land. Thirty years later, his love of this way of life became embodied in Treetops, which consists of twelve luxurious villas and suites in 2,500 acres of forest and game reserve, with lakes and spring-fed trout streams. Treetops offers world-class accommodation that has justly received many awards in the short time since it opened.

Our private villa lay under the canopy of the giant hardwoods. Treetops is high on the side of a deep valley; outside our villa, the cliffs dropped away, bringing the closer of



A resort hidden in the virgin forest of New Zealand offers an abundance of wild game as well as an insight into its remarkable ecology. And, as **Benedict Glazier** reports, it is also deliciously luxurious

## *Under the*

the giant tree ferns to eye level. After our long drive from Auckland, it was sheer pleasure to take in the view across the deep valley to the volcano and hills opposite.

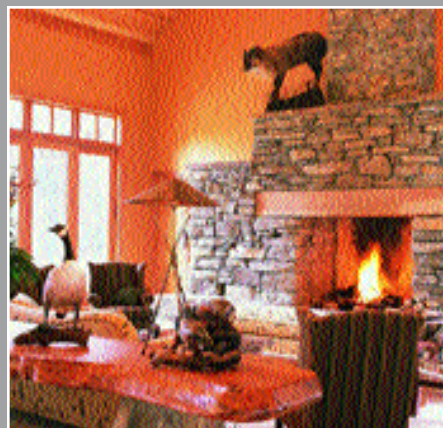
Each evening, we joined the other guests in the Great Room for cocktails under the giant roof trusses, carved by chainsaw from 800-year-old rimu trees. Guests usually eat together. Much of the food comes from the estate. We had excellent venison, wild boar and trout, but, if you want to influence what is on the table, bring home a suitable catch from a day's fishing or shooting and the chef, Ian Day, will happily cook it for dinner. To accompany it, you should definitely try the fine boutique New Zealand wines.

Our comfortable forest villa was warm and welcoming. With a masculine feel to the decor, it was built using natural materials from the surrounding land, the doors, joinery and window frames were all made from timber that fell in the forest many years ago. The mantelpiece was carved from a single piece of rata, a strangling vine that over hundreds of years surrounded and killed its host tree. The feel was of an opulent hunting lodge.

Seventeen hundred acres of the estate are ancient virgin forest of rimu, tawa and rata, interspersed with giant tree ferns and the famous silver fern. We spent many hours walking through the forest, encountering stunning waterfalls and lookout



*Clockwise from top left* Treetops at dawn; the Lodge at night; the Great Room; Waterfall Forest; the Lake View villa bedroom



points and spotting the native birds.

Treetops was designed by Sax to be a restorative for both the body and the senses. The activities on offer reflect both his passion for his life on the land and the natural habitat that supports a wealth of wildlife and sporting game. Sax sees Treetops as an ecologically sound resort. Wildlife thrives, so as well as hunting and fishing, you can enjoy bird-watching, riding, walking and hiking, swimming in the lakes, or just relaxing by the water. Roaming the forest and pasture are wild boar, hundreds of deer, wild chamois and elk, and game birds including pheasants. The lakes are stocked with trout and in

nearby streams and rivers (some so secluded that they are accessible only by four-wheel drive or foot) there is some of the best fishing in the world. We also spent an afternoon clay-pigeon shooting from a hillside overlooking a lake.

While it offers seclusion, peace and comfort, there is as much activity at Treetops as you wish. Treetops is young and the estate is still evolving, but it is set in such an ancient landscape that it gave us a true sense of distance from our London life. It offers the great combination of escape and enjoyment, so it should not be a surprise that the bag of gifts presented to every winner at this year's Oscars included a week at Treetops. ■

**HOW TO GET THERE**

Rotorua has a small airport only a short helicopter flight from Auckland. The drive from Auckland takes about four hours. Treetops can arrange transfers. Visit [www.treetops.co.nz](http://www.treetops.co.nz). A member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World.

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