



Clockwise from top left: Dawn, Treetops estate; the Great Room; the lodge amid its namesakes; the cosy library; arriving in style.



# ROAD TEST TO ROTORUA

TOM HYDE SPENDS LESS THAN \$50 ON A LONG, HILLY JAUNT IN THE NEW 4007 HDI – THEN CHECKS INTO A LUXURY LODGE.

Before heading south from Auckland I noted down the mileage on the digital monitor of the 2.2-litre 4WD 4007 HDi – Peugeot’s first SUV – with the aim of making a performance calculation at the end of the trip.

But the only number that stayed with me after the round-trip drive from Auckland – via Rotorua, up to Tauranga and over to the Coromandel via Waihi and Whangamata – was 48. As in NZ\$48, the total cost of fuel for the entire return journey.

Do I know how that consumption compares with other SUVs? Not exactly. But I do know that the fuel bill was less than it would have been in my girlfriend’s Japanese hybrid – and the 4007 is a lot bigger (seats up to seven people) and more powerful than that.

The 4007 sits high, but thanks to Peugeot’s Electronic Stability Control it held the road exceptionally well, especially on State Highway 25 from Waihi to Whangamata, a windy road that makes San Francisco’s famed Lombard St look tame.

Being “on the road” has its demands, of course, but we found the 4007 HDi to be an exceptionally comfortable ride. Only after the fact did I learn more about that from Dave Moore, who wrote in the *Dominion Post*: “The 4007’s interior retains the Mitsubishi’s basic design traits, as it should, because the Japanese SUV has always been regarded as among the best ergonomically.”

The PSA Group, which own Peugeot (and Citroen), teamed up with Mitsubishi in the design of the 4007. The ergonomics of the 4007 are based on those of the Mitsubishi Outlander, if you know that car. Back home again, I went straight to the

Peugeot NZ website and now there’s a second number that I can’t shake: 60,000, as in NZ\$60,000.

The 4007 HDi sells for under NZ\$60,000 – which surprised us because the car’s styling, the leather interior, the cool sound system, the 4WD/2WD option and the sophistication of the Peugeot’s diesel engines, with their unique particle filter system, among other innovations, had us thinking NZ\$75,000-plus.

A weekend at Treetops also costs less than NZ\$60,000. Treetops is a secluded lodge about 20 minutes from Rotorua off State Highway 30. The lodge is the vision of Auckland businessman John Sax. It’s a 1,000-hectare fishing and hunting estate; although for anyone (like me) who does not fish or hunt, simply walking for an hour or two along any of the estate’s 70km of quiet trails through native forest and bush, with a stop at the magnificent Bridal Veil Falls, is adventure enough.

John Sax writes: “As a boy, one of my greatest passions in life was to fish. I dreamt that one day I might even be lucky enough to have a stream or build a pond on a property that carried those ever-challenging trout. I dreamt that one day, just maybe, I could turn the clock back and restore some of those magnificent trees and habitat that was not only my playground but the playground of native and game birds alike [and] some 30 years later, Treetops was born.”

Today, Treetops is a collection of villas and suites with a main lodge whose centrepiece is a massive open fireplace. There’s a library and games room, a conference room and two dining rooms, one for breakfast the other for dinner, next to an open kitchen where you can watch – preferably with a



Clockwise from top left: Chef Eru Tutaki; some 3,000 pheasant were released last year; lodge entrance and 4007 HDi; food is a major part of the Treetops experience.



glass of wine in hand – chefs Todd Tregoweth and Eru Tutaki prepare the finest of New Zealand cuisine.

Chef Tregoweth has cooked for the All Blacks, while Eru Tutaki leads Treetops' Maori Indigenous Food Trail, taking guests into the bush to learn about traditional Maori recipes using herbs and plants found there and hand-picked by the chef: piko piko, mamaku fern, supplejack, horopito, kawakawa leaf (for tea) and, at certain times of the year, wild mushrooms, are all used in a specially prepared meal back in the kitchen. "In February and March we go crazy with mushrooms," Eru said. There were no mushrooms in this instance but we did watch as Eru prepared an ingenious hangi of smoked chicken breast and a piko piko and supplejack salad at the kitchen counter. Cool.

There are five species of wild deer (rusa, red, fallow, samba and sika), pigs and pheasant (about 3,000 were released last year) on the Treetops estate, but the largest animals by far are the Indian water buffalo – one of only three herds in New Zealand. I was especially interested to see them because Treetops is a free-range estate, so no one knows for sure where they might be grazing from one day to the next. The best way to find them is on horseback, which meant calling in the estate's resident horseman and guide, Albert "Diddy" Rice, who's able to make even raw beginners feel confident in the saddle.

We rode to the back of the property, past fishponds stocked with rainbow trout, sighting deer – including one magnificent red buck with a regal set of antlers – along the way. We didn't come across the buffalo until we were on a trail back to the lodge. There they were, hiding inside a grove of ti trees. "They go there," Diddy explained, "because they don't like wind."

Treetops has a Wild Food Cooking School, but each evening we were happy enough watching the chefs work in the kitchen while we enjoyed a pre-

dinner glass of wine. That gave us a chance to meet the other guests – a banker from New York and his daughter and another travel writer and his photographer wife from Tokyo who'd read about Treetops in the Small Luxury Hotels of the World book.

Breakfast is served whenever guests wake up and make their way to the lodge. Dinner, on the other hand, follows drinks at 7pm and is a four-course affair with a sorbet refresher between entree and main. The first night the main was a choice of South Island salmon fillet or eye fillet of beef; the second night pan-seared snapper or roasted rack of lamb. Desserts included a Kaffir lime and coconut pannacotta with raspberry coulis and a blueberry and cherry frangipani crumble with vanilla ice cream.

Treetops calls itself an eco-retreat, and rightfully so. As assistant manager Kris Shepherd made clear, the lodge has established a comprehensive sustainability programme governing all operations, from the use of natural resources and recycling to smart lighting.

Fly fishing on the property or in backcountry wilderness – commonly reached by the Treetops helicopter – is a central activity here and by all accounts the fishing is spectacular. But for non-anglers like us Treetops turned out to be the perfect place for a quiet weekend away from Auckland. We could be as social or as private as we wanted to be. Each villa has a patio with views over the – well, treetops, actually – and, as we sat there one evening sipping a nightcap under a starry sky, with an open fire roaring away inside (there's a fireplace in every villa), we felt we'd found the best of all worlds.

The next morning we were back on the road, rested after a solid night's sleep and happy in the knowledge that we were driving the safest, most comfortable and, as it turned out, economical SUV we could imagine on a road trip that was altogether as much fun as it was stress-free.