

TOP FORM

Nestled among native bush, the pursuit of purpose is the driving force behind this secluded luxury lodge, writes Emma Gleason

There's something romantic about isolation. Perhaps it's the cinematic nature of a sweeping landscape, or the feeling you and your paramour could be the only people left on Earth. A cinematic experience is what can be found at luxury lodge Treetops, just outside Rotorua, and an easy three-hour drive from the heart of Tāmaki Makaurau.

The grandiose Horohoro Bluffs are the first breathtaking landmark we spot, our handsome Jaguar E-PACE rolling along the gravel country roads, as we head to our destination — the car's smart navigating system guiding us through the back roads.

We pass a tiny rural school and Kearoa Mare, then drive through the pine plantings of the local timber industry. The barren, felled-log landscape that precedes the lodge gate is deceptive. Once through the grand entrance, flanked by stone stages, native bush suddenly takes off — all lushly green and earthy. There's miro, rimu, tawa and ferns aplenty. It's a 3km drive in, and the road becomes narrow, windy and steep. We're grateful for the exceptional handling and traction of the E-PACE, which navigates the tight corners with ease.

Nestled in all that bush is Treetops. Opened in 2002, it's a remarkable endeavour, the secluded 1012ha estate home to trees, plants and myriad animals. Admirably, when it was established, an additional 70,000 trees were planted on the property to encourage the regeneration of the ecosystem. The forest informs the architecture of the lodge; much of the build was done using deadwood from the property — an impressive undertaking given the landscape — and the logs were milled on site. The huge central beams of the main building's great room — each 11-metre-long truss is from a single log of rimu — were carved by hand with a chainsaw. The bridge to the front door is made from 1000-year-old rātā, and underneath it flows a crystal-clear stream complete with trout.

The great room is where we're greeted when we arrive. Painted a cheery butter yellow, with huge stone fireplaces at each end, it's grand, eclectic and warm, while the adjoining kitchen and breakfast room have a charming home-style quality. A billiards table takes up another lounge, while hunting and fishing inform much of the decor — with stag's heads adorning walls, an antler chandelier, paintings of fish and decorative rods. The result is a genteel, outdoorsy feel, akin to a country manor or an old Ralph Lauren campaign.

All the spaces at Treetops feel cossetting and inviting — there's no stark minimalism here. That same warmth is translated to

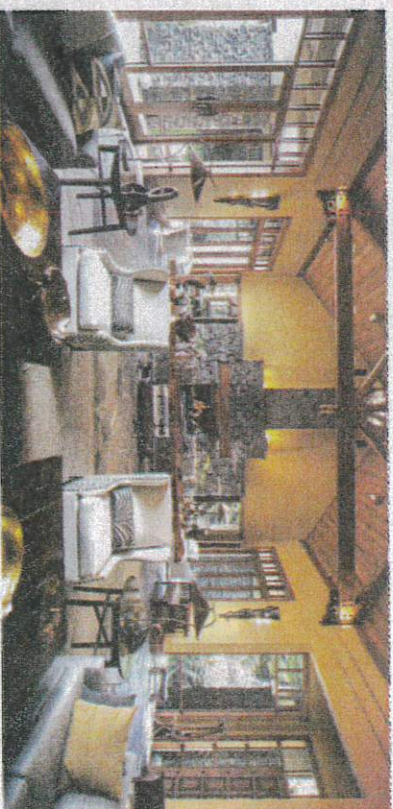


the guest rooms, of which there are 12, in four wings and eight villas. We're staying in one of the tranquil villas, which includes a lounge (complete with a fireplace), an inviting bedroom and a particularly luxurious bathroom that boasts underfloor heating, a huge tub — so you can truly indulge in the lodge's spring-sourced water — and double vanities. The villa's vista reveals the estate, and in the stillness, you can hear native birds and the quiet rumble of the estate's working vehicles, as the staff maintain the property and its wildlife, and guests are ferried to their activities.

There's a multitude of those on offer, including kayaking, archery, mountain biking, fishing and horse riding. With more than 70km of walking tracks, we decide a hike is in order, and head to the picturesque Bridal Veil Falls, before traversing numerous other trails to make our way back to the lodge. Parts of the path reveal deer tracks and rutting from wild pigs, animals that roam the estate and are a draw for guests (hunting and fishing are popular).

After all that activity, a hearty meal is in order. Naturally, the food at Treetops is divine, and the kitchen team take an estate-to-plate approach to the lodge's cuisine, and much of what's on offer is sourced directly from the property. Dinner is a five-course affair — our menu included venison loin, kingfish crudo and orange mousse — and you can enjoy your meal in the wood-panelled library, or the main dining room. Guests are encouraged to dine together, which aligns with Treetops' familial

Estate-to-table cuisine: the handsome main entrance; Bridal Veil Falls; the Great Room. Photos / Supplied



approach to hospitality. Breakfast is equally as good as dinner, with the eggs Benedict a necessary indulgence. Keen gastronomes can even go the extra mile and partake in the lodge's wild food experiences — there's a cooking school, food trail or culinary safari to explore.

Good food and fresh air are invigorating and rejuvenating, but so is relaxation and pampering. The on-site Forest Spa provides the latter in a soothing surrounding of native bush. Ultra-secluded, there you can enjoy restorative massages, facials and body wraps, or enjoy a healing alfresco soak in the wooden hot tub as you look out at the trees and breathe in the tranquillity.

It's the last thing we do during our stay, and a fitting finale. The whole weekend has been a luxurious experience, one matched by our E-PACE, which gently winks us away from the estate as we begin our drive home. Settling into the leather seats, music humming through the cutting-edge sound system, we crunch gently down the gravel road, past the breathtaking bush that inspired everything at Treetops. The lodge is an ode to tradition, and it's a sentiment shared by Jaguar — a company built on heritage and the pursuit of the best. For those seeking out something exceptional, Treetops is a good place to start.

Treetops.co.nz