

NEWZEALAND



The perfectly named
Lost World. Entered on
ropes and not for the
faint of heart.



WAITOMO?

I'LL TELL YOU WHY....

With only a couple of days to spare to get out of Auckland City and experience something different Thomas Jones hired a car and ventured south to see the real New Zealand. He found a land of rolling green hills, native forests, great local food and wine, a bucketful of adrenaline and a healthy dose of good old Kiwi hospitality.

Two and a half hours drive south of Auckland is the King Country, a place of indeterminable beauty, and a slice of New Zealand that you only ever see in postcards. Named after the movement of the Maori warrior Chief “King Tawhiao”, the man who led the resistance against the European settler’s encroachment on their land in the 19th century. After failing to stop the surge, King Tawhiao and his followers sought refuge in the remoter parts of this region and for many years, Europeans ventured into the King Country at considerable risk to life and limb.

There are still risks to be had here in the area of Waitomo, however, and while they may not involve the business end of a Maori *taiaha*

spear, they could still end your life. Waitomo is famous for its deep and sometimes treacherous cave systems as well as its magnificent glow worm caverns. The whole area is made of limestone and undermined by caves, many going deep underground through fast flowing subterranean rivers and tiny squeeze holes offering adventure seekers the thrill of a lifetime.

We were looking for a challenge so we chose to enter the Lost World with Waitomo Adventures, a four hour cave trip that involves abseiling 100m down into a large, deep, and ancient, mist-filled sinkhole and then following the cave system back to the surface. The Lost World was formed when the roof of a giant cavern collapsed thousands of





Left: The interiors of Kamahi Cottage are heavy on natural wood accents and all the comforts of home. Notice the well-stocked wine rack.

Top: The Huhu Cafe's distinctive pyramid landmark.

years ago creating a natural wonder full of ferns and overhanging trees that looks like a set for a dinosaur movie. After donning gumboots, overalls and harnesses we walked through the paddocks to a steel platform jutting out into the void. We looked down and swallowed hard. Our guide did all the requisite equipment checks, and then checked again (safety first!) and we were hooked up and in we dropped.

Suspended in space on a rope makes you think a lot about your own mortality but before long we were really getting into the adrenaline buzz. With the combination of echoing sounds of native birds and the noise and mist from the fast-flowing stream below we were floating in heaven.

The descent took about 20 minutes and soon we were clambering up over rocks and passing stalactites and stalagmites to reach the glow worm cave where we sat in silence for a while contemplating their iridescent beauty. Then the guide told us what carnivorous and cannibalistic nasties they actually are and we sat in silence thinking about that instead. Beauty is pain after all. It was then our mission to climb a 30m vertical

ladder to the upper chambers, pass through some more tunnels and make our way out to the found world. We reached the sunlight completely knackered and very glad we hadn't done the seven hour wet-water caving journey which involves wetsuits and lots of immersion in very cold water and by all accounts, a truly taxing journey. Not all the trips are so risky or exhausting, however, and it is actually the simple boat and walking trips to see the masses of glowworms, suitable for everyone from 2 to 102, that are the most popular in Waitiomo.

Now that that was over, it was time for a bit of five star luxury at Kamahi Cottage, 30 minute's drive away (distance is nothing on country roads). It is New Zealand's only five star farmstay, a concept that has become increasingly popular over the last few years as tourists look for a more authentic holiday experience. The owners of the 450 hectare Kamahi farm, Liz and Evan Cowan, have lived and farmed here since 1981, while the farm has been in the family since the '40s.

The cottage is cozy and comfortable and fully-self contained and sits in the beautifully-kept gardens





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Opposite page.
Clockwise from
top left:

The vertical
30m climb up
this ladder is
daunting but
essential if you
want to see
daylight again.

The descent.

Kamaha Cottage.
High in ecological
responsibility and
five star comfort.

This page: An
Autumn day's
view from
Kamaha farm
looking out over
the King Country
to Mt Pirongia on
the horizon.

of the farmhouse with sweeping views of green valleys and hills. There are two ancient extinct volcanoes off in the distance thrown in for good measure and guests have free reign to explore the gardens, farmlands and forests.

They love to entertain guests and share their surroundings so they opened the cottage in 2001 with a commitment to sustainability that goes way beyond what anyone would expect. They used untreated local timber in the construction, all their produce is local and their meat is ethically farmed. They don't stock bottled water, either. Why would you when you have your own forest stream? It is micro-filtered, just to be sure, and it tastes better than Evian. Man cannot live by water alone, however, so they have a well-stocked mini-bar and loads of superb New Zealand wines. Their orchard provides masses of unsprayed fruit in season and the surplus is turned into conserves or, best of all, Evan's plum schnapps. The taste is superb, but it can be quite dangerous in unsupervised hands.

Tempting as a home-cooked farm meal was, we had heard great things about the Huhu Café in Waitomo so we thought nothing of making the drive back. Named after a large indigenous beetle that inhabits the NZ forests the Huhu Café is a slick but casual and relaxed

operation with great food and wine, smart staff and presentation that is on a par with anything that the big cities can offer. The sincerity is in the open kitchen, the warm welcome and the friendly service. Portions are generous and all the food is locally sourced as much as possible - the olives were Australian- with fresh meats, fish and vegetables, and desserts and pastries to die for.

Back at the farm the next morning we got up at sunrise to watch the land transform with the dawn light before breakfast was served out on the lawn. A huge assortment of fresh pastries, fruits, eggs and bacon from a pig I could just taste had a happy life. The drive back to Auckland later that morning was another experience in itself with a detour out through the countryside to the rugged west coast town of Kawhia and a feast of fish'n'chips and a milkshake to finish this great NZ overnighner. The one regret, if we had one at all, is that one night is never enough. **FRV**

www.huhucafe.co.nz

www.kamaha.co.nz

www.waitomo.co.nz