

## Boys' own adventure

March 27, 2010

**At a sophisticated wilderness lodge on the North Island, Max Anderson discovers there's also room for his offspring.**



Family friendly ... above the sprawling Poronui lodge.

Ask to book six-year-old boys into one of New Zealand's luxury lodges and you will be regarded as though you've asked to drive a mob of long-horn though a museum of fine china. Your fellow guests, mostly executives and aristocrats from the northern hemisphere, have paid for the babble of trout streams and the pop of champagne corks. The crash and clatter of small Australians will have them reaching for their engraved shotguns.

It's a little-known fact that most of New Zealand's famous luxury lodges don't welcome children under 13. But I'm pleased to report there are ways you can get your little ones into a champion wilderness retreat without having their heads mounted above the hearth.

Poronui, a lodge near Lake Taupo, on the North Island, is set in 6500 hectares of forested valleys with 45 kilometres of watercourse. World-renowned for its fishing, it has a finely tailored main lodge hung with reels, rods and stuffed trout and caters to a maximum of just 14 guests. If you offer some personal guarantees of their good behaviour, this number can include your rugrats.

The lodge is well-suited to young guests. For a start it has a dog - a thing that, to your children's eyes, has the same appeal as a good bottle of Hawkes Bay pinot might have to you. Dogs can be used as distractions ("go outside and play with the dog") and inducements ("if you're good, you can go outside and play with the dog"). Dogs can also be blamed for mess and smells.

Secondly, the timber-clad cabins are built overlooking the frothy Taharua River and oriented to face crowning valleys where the sika deer roam free (at least until they get shot) - a sublime and private place in which to bollock your children for throwing rocks upstream of wealthy Americans trying to hook spooky trout.

And thirdly, nothing surprises the manager, Eve Reilly, a savvy Irishwoman whose previous life was spent teaching children at a Montessori school. So it wasn't long before she asked the two

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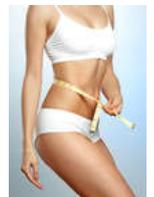
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WATERLOO SCHOOL. SO IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE SHE ASKED THE TWO QUESTIONS MY FAMILY DEARLY WANTED TO HEAR.

"Would you like me to take the boys out for the afternoon while you go fly-fishing?"

To Harry and Jack: "Would you like to see some snow?"

As the offspring are led away into the high and silent slopes, we look on with deep parental concern - lest they do something appalling and get us evicted.

It remains for guide Ben to load us into his four-wheel-drive and plunge us into a beatific valley wilderness, where guided "sight-fishing" turns out to be a princely and adrenalin-charged business, as much hunting as throwing lines. We wade and stalk and drink beer and watch the dying sun splash light through pine tops. And not once does anyone ask, "When are we going home?" or, "What's for tea?"

On our return to the lodge we're greeted with fine wine from the 10,000-bottle cellar, a chef who promises venison for dinner and our two boys who are as ruddy as the log fire and crackling with excitement.

"We went tobogganing and we made snowmen and we threw snowballs at Toby!"

"Who's Toby?"

"He works here and he's awesome. He stood there and said we could pelt him with as many snowballs as we liked!"

"Well, that's beyond the call of duty ..."

On a four-wheel-drive tour of Poronui, Reilly similarly keeps everyone engaged. After looking over the million-dollar stables, the kids feed milk to Sooty the calf. In the forests, we see deer and stop to inspect a layer of charcoal in the exposed banks of pumice - a relic of the Taupo eruption in 186, an explosion so fearsome that the ash turned skies red as far away as Rome. At the lodge's safari camp - a remote tented retreat for warmer nights when guests enjoy gourmet campfire fare - the boys are told to go their hardest chucking rocks in the river, only to find that pumice stones float.

Guests can indulge in more challenging excursions such as day hikes, horse rides into the high country and helicopter trips out to the Hawkes Bay wineries. But Reilly says the town of Rotorua would satisfy the boys in all sorts of weird and wonderful ways.

She's right. During the 90-minute drive, their capacity to be amused by towns with the word "poo" in them never once wavers and when the farting pong of NZ's geothermal capital hit them, their cups runneth over. At Hell's Gate, a Maori-owned park based on a steaming, belching moonscape, we turn "stay out of the mud" on its head and let them sink up to their necks in a tank of reeking grey ooze. Will it get better for them? Probably not. But it goes to prove you don't need the finer or the most expensive things in life to keep the small ones happy.

Although they help. My most satisfying morning at Poronui is a victory for non-political correctness that will possibly see me disinherited by my parents. The shooting range is the country's finest, located at the foot of a steep valley clad in old beech trees. Hidden within all sorts of obscure crevices are 20 traps capable of flinging clay pigeons in 80 permutations.

There are few things in life that will consistently hold the attention of six-year-olds but the spectacle of seeing mum and dad noisily blasting fluoro-pink discs out of a blue sky is one of them.

More surprising, the inevitable question, "Dad, can I have a go," is met with approval by our guide, Ben. He produces a small air rifle and a series of tin targets shaped like rabbits and ducks. With his help, the boys "plink" gamely for an hour, shrieking when

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they nail another tin incarnation of God's gentle creatures - all before posing for holiday photos the grandparents will never see.

After two days of this sort of indulgence, you might (rightly) be concerned the offspring are turning into grotesque Fauntleroyes. Time, then, to put them in the hands of a Maori elder, Tom Loughlin.

A no-nonsense mountain man who is also part of local search and rescue, Loughlin has a rudimentary shack high in the Kaweka Ranges, 40 kilometres from Poronui. He's slowly fortifying it with sharpened stakes and terrifying carved heads of the Maori ancestors that look out over gloaming slopes clad in native pine and skirling cloud.

"Ooooh," say the boys.

"Hmmm," says Loughlin, eyeing the little fellas. Centuries ago his forebears may have snacked on them but Loughlin is content to teach them some good old-fashioned cultural respect.

They have to repeat words in Maori until they know them. They have to shut up and listen when he performs his karakia, the prayer to the ancestors. They even have to hike through two kilometres of steep ravines to reach the Ripia River and inspect an eel trap.

"Why do we need to look in an eel trap?" they ask beside the freezing flushing waters.

"Dinner," Loughlin says. "Food is everything. No McDonald's up here."

No eels, either but I'm pleased to see the boys are quite at home in the toughness of Loughlin's mountain environment - they like the rude shack and, indeed, the rugged Loughlin. They find small staffs and become diminutive Gandalfs, carefully picking their way through the gnarled flax, monowai and tussock grass. Back at the shack, they even help make dinner.

After digging snow out of the hangi pit, we light a fire to heat rocks and lower a wire basket of traditional foods before covering it in damp sacking and earth. By dark, the boys watch, fascinated, as the steaming soil is dug away and plates are loaded with pre-European Maori fare.

Which, I confess, I thought might have been a wilderness experience too far: it's one thing to ask, "How would you boys like some vanilla ice-cream with fresh berry sauce?" a la Poronui but it's quite another to ask, "Who's for anchovy-tasting mutton bird, peppery fern tips, cabbage and traditional kumera root vegetable?"

They swallow it with nary a complaint. But then they aren't given the luxury of saying otherwise.

*Max Anderson travelled courtesy of Ahipara Luxury Travel.*

## **FAST FACTS**

### **Getting there**

Air New Zealand flies to Auckland (3hr) and then to Taupo (45min) for about \$670 from Melbourne and Sydney, including tax. For about \$500, Sydney passengers can fly nonstop to Rotorua (3hr 15min). Fare is return and available all year, including tax.

### **Staying there**

Ahipara is a New Zealand tour operator, run by Jean-Michel Jefferson, which designs specialist luxury itineraries around budgets from \$NZ5000 (\$3864) a couple, a week. See [ahipara.com](http://ahipara.com) for things you've probably never dreamed of doing in NZ.

Poronui costs from \$NZ550 a person a night, including all meals,

open bar facilities and same-day laundry service and camp-outs. A fishing guide costs \$NZ330 a person, a day. See [poronui.co.nz](http://poronui.co.nz).

### Other lodges for families

- Wharekauhau Lodge sits between stunning mountains and savage coastline, close to the famous Martinborough wine district. Key ingredients are a large goofy dog, separate cabins and heated indoor pool that — importantly for other guests — is separate from the outdoor spa. From \$NZ610 a person or \$NZ475 a child, twin share; see [wharekauhau.co.nz](http://wharekauhau.co.nz).

- Some people get their offspring into lodges by simply taking over the entire property. Corporate CEOs, Russian oligarchs and Hollywood elite have overrun the likes of the Queenstown grand dame Blanket Bay (NZ\$20,000 a night), grandee mansion Otahuna (near Christchurch, from NZ\$9000 a night) and the Myer-owned retreat, Whare Kea (near Wanaka, NZ\$8500 a night).

- The Boathouse is a stunning retreat on the sandy shores of the Bay of Islands. For \$NZ6900 a night (maximum four guests) you get the run of the designer property (plus toys), the attention of chef Tobias Wilkinson and a \$250,000 fishing boat (with local skipper Ashley to do your bidding). See [ahipara.com](http://ahipara.com).

- Cheaper still is the truly wonderful but little-known lodge retreat called Manawa Ridge in the Coromandel Valley. The 101-hectare farm looks out to the Pacific on one side and Kaimai Ranges to the other. It caters to just three couples for \$NZ800 a couple, a night; see [manawaridge.co.nz](http://manawaridge.co.nz).

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