

Escape to the country

(and what a country it is!)

A rural retreat needn't mean wellies and a drafty room, as proven by New Zealand's raft of luxury lodgings.

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Relaxing at the Aro Hā spa (top) and one of the ecologically designed pavilions (left).

NICKY RYAN

Some are the days when a 'country escape' meant a lonesome cottage adorned in doilies and tartan, and a rickety bed far past its expiry date. Across the ditch in New Zealand's South Island is an uprising of stylish retreats tucked away in blissfully secluded corners of the countryside, quietly offering guests a gamut of luxury-holiday criteria. From inspiring to invigorating and all totally indulgent, here are three of the best at what they do (without a doily in sight).

HEALTH & WELLNESS

ARO HĀ WELLNESS RETREAT
CLOSEST CITY: A 40-MINUTE DRIVE TO QUEENSTOWN
Four nights from \$3833; aro-ha.com

Some might say it's a cruel twist of fate that in a country renowned for its world-class wine, lamb and cheese, a vegan health retreat should open and veto guests from such indulgences. Others, however, might say that such an establishment would be out of place anywhere else in the world. "We were drawn to the world-class nature, the hiking and the grandiose mountains here," says Damian Chaparro, the Californian yoga guru who together with billionaire US hedge fund founder Chris Madison, has created New Zealand's premier health escape, Aro Hā Wellness Retreat.

Tucked away on a sub-alpine terrace near Glenorchy (just northwest of ski mecca Queenstown), Aro Hā is surrounded by 8.5 hectares of verdant pasture overlooking Lake Wakatipu. Having spent the morning a hurried mess, darting between peak-hour Sydney traffic and email

replies, I arrive at Aro Hā in time to see the Sun begin its disappearing act behind the Humboldt mountain range beyond the lake, now a rippled sheet of mauve silk. Traffic lights and electronic screens already seem far away; the silence is only interrupted by the occasional bleating of sheep in a neighbouring paddock.

Though secluded, there is a growing curiosity in the outside world about this Zen-inspired hideaway. Having only opened in January 2014, Aro Hā has already been awarded a host of accolades such as being ranked eighth in the world's top 100 hotels and resorts in *Condé Nast Traveller's* 2014 Readers' Choice Awards, raising the bar for health retreats the world over. It doesn't take long to appreciate the appeal.

As my cheeks adjust from crisp evening air outside to log-fire ambience inside the guest lounge, the distinct perfume of western red cedar, which clads each of Aro Hā's eco-designed buildings, engulfs us. Of course, this won't be the only adjustment during my stay.

As pure as the air is the paleo-vegan menu. That's no alcohol, no caffeine, no meat nor fish, no dairy, no refined sugar and no gluten. This becomes all the more perplexing when dinner is served and Rani, the Brazilian chef in his Vietnamese fisherman pants, announces, "spaghetti meatballs". How on Earth does a raw vegan chef do a hearty Italian classic? Hand-on-heart, deliciously, that's how.

Delicate threads of spiralised zucchini substitute pasta, while tasty mushroom and walnut bundles replace traditional meatballs, doused in a spicy tomato-based purée. Surely only witchcraft could be capable of pulverising, fermenting and whisking raw plant material into a taste sensation like this? >>

However, it's a quality-over-quantity approach to food here – the single-course menu amounts to a daily intake of just 1600 calories (most of us usually consume well over 2000 per day). "About 35 per cent of what we serve is now coming from our organic gardens too," beams Rani, pointing out the window to a herb garden. This percentage will continue to grow as the plants do.

With the night sky now speckled in stars brighter than Sydney's CBD, travel-weary guests are shown to their rooms. There are eight timber-and-glass guest pavilions that dot the property, comprising 20 rooms. Ranging from monastic single rooms to private eco suites, all feature recycled timbers, organic cotton linen and a never-ending herbal tea supply. In true Aro Hā fashion, they're not identified with anything as regimented as room numbers either, but simple illustrations of native flora and fauna.

Similarly, the daily itinerary of yoga, hikes, cooking classes and therapeutic massages isn't defined with fixed times. "We'll let you know when you should be somewhere," assures Damian when I enquire what time we should be ready in the morning. "It's an adjustment, I know. We get a lot of A-type personalities and ex-CEOs who struggle with not living by a watch at first, but it's all part of de-stressing and learning how to relax."

Sure enough, just before dawn a Chinese gong rings over the in-room loudspeaker before a voice-over: "good morning, your presence is required at the yoga studio in 10 minutes". Yoga is the cornerstone of Aro Hā's cleansing experience. Every morning guests are invited to a sunrise yoga class in the custom-built studio – bookended by a large glass window that overlooks the lake – to breathe and bend their way into the day.

"Breath, that's what it all comes down to," says Damian, stretching out his already long, limber body at the front of the class, before instructing us through a series of half-moon-cobra-downward-facing-dog poses. Revealing that Aro Hā translates to 'in the presence of divine breath', he explains how breath is the foundation of our wellbeing. "If we have short erratic breath, we create a short erratic life." The classes aren't necessarily for experienced yogis. In our class students range from an intermediate 30-something woman to a grey-haired novice.

"While guests can rest and skip activities if they wish, we do encourage you to follow the entire program," Damian carefully advises over our breakfast of raw chia coconut pudding, pointing out that guests can only stay for a fixed period of time. It's one of Aro Hā's more tightly reined facets. Ranging from four to six nights, hosted 'retreats' (which are usually capped at an intimate 16 participants) are scheduled throughout each month and necessitate everyone arriving and departing at the same time.

But it's not just our health that Aro Hā aims to heal and protect in the process; it's also the environment. On a guided morning hike around the perimeter of Aro Hā, past its organic greenhouse, tangles of wild blackberry bush and native beech forest, we encounter its micro hydro electric system. Over 90 per cent of the electricity the property uses is created on site, from either solar energy or hydro power. Aside from the occasional diesel-fuel vehicle, it's largely a fossil-fuel-free operation here.



This minimal carbon footprint seems even more remarkable when you consider the energy required to not only cook and clean for upwards of 20 people, but also Aro Hā's state-of-the-art spa pavilion. Inside its minimalist timber exterior is a sequence of massage rooms, bathrooms, dry Finnish sauna, infrared sauna, outdoor hot tub and ice-cold plunge pool. After being kneaded and pummelled in a post-hike, deep-tissue massage, I spend the afternoon soaking in the bubbling spa.

Looking out to the snow-capped mountains, the morning mist has lifted to reveal the lake is a glistening jade hue. There's not another soul in sight bar the distant ivory specks of grazing sheep and the occasional native pigeon fluttering past. No traffic, no alarms, no distractions. Damian was right – a retreat like this befits no other place.

ADVENTURE

MINARET STATION
CLOSEST CITY: A 15-MINUTE HELICOPTER FLIGHT TO WANAKA
Chalet from \$1807 a night (exc. transfer); minaretstation.com

As a travel journalist, in a profession where you are routinely shown the best of a destination, it takes a special assignment to be lauded one of the best days of my career. This, however, is one of those days.

It begins like any other; in a bed. Well, more like a king-sized cloud with a possum fur throw strewn across it. I'm in one of four guest chalets on Minaret Station – a 20,000-hectare helicopter-only-accessible property set at the head of a glacial valley on the western shores of Lake Wanaka. Stunning to look at but tough to farm, many failed



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Aro Ha Lake II Choppers outside the Alpine Lodge at Minaret Station II Heli-skiing – one of Minaret's many activities II The tallest waterfall in the southern hemisphere as seen from helicopter.



to domesticate this rugged alpine backcountry until aviation entrepreneur Sir Tim Wallis took on the challenge in the 1960s, shaping it into the family owned and run sheep-deer-and-cattle farm it is today.

A more recent addition to the business, however, is its corrugated-iron chalets, positioned in the heart of the station. But with no road access, every single timber plank, pipe and pillow had to be choppered in. Quite the feat when you consider the details, from heated towel rails and cosy woollen rugs to an outdoor hot tub to soak up the mountain views.

Leaving my chalet for a breakfast of poached eggs and hot coffee in the nearby Alpine Lodge, our host Anna explains how Sir Wallis's four sons now run the multifaceted family business: one brother manages the station's farming and trading, two brothers run helicopter services, while third-in-line Matt Wallis is Minaret's tourism manager, overseeing everything from the accommodation to the various heli tours available.

Yes, heli tours. It seems a family chopper or two prove not only handy for farming, but for showing travellers world-

class heli-skiing, fishing and hunting locations that'd be otherwise unreachable in the Southern Alps. Today, however, we're opting for the soft adventure option, the scenic Fiordland Heli Traverse.

As Matt lifts heavy eskies into our helicopter's storage compartment, he reminisces about growing up in New Zealand's high country. "Jumping in a heli was like a city kid getting on a train – it was a part of day-to-day life," he says, squeezing in the last backpack. "As a kid from about nine years old, Dad would drop me off somewhere on the property in the morning, then pick me up from the same spot in the evening. I'd spend the day on my own swimming, hunting and exploring – it's an extraordinary upbringing that rural kids get in New Zealand."

Once packed, our party of six, including Matt and his best friend (and our pilot) Dougal, piles into the helicopter. This will be our sole mode of transport for the day. Seated, belted and tuned into the aircraft's intercom, our heli propels upwards, veering slowly over the chalets, before boosting down the valley and over Minaret Peaks. Early morning light streams across the mountains, casting a shadow of the chopper on grassy slopes below. The further we fly across Mount Aspiring National Park, the thicker patches of snow become until all peaks are iced in a smooth blanket of white, like a freshly-opened tub of ice-cream.

"See how the snow looks quite dirty on the slope over to the right?" Matt asks through the headset, pointing to a bluff. "The dark lines are ash that has settled on the snow, caused by Australian bushfires or volcanic eruptions in South America, blown across to here."

As we cross the Barrier Range, the spine of the Southern Alps, we enter into the northern reaches of Fiordland National Park. Navigating around jagged cliff faces and through patchy fog, Dougal delicately settles the helicopter on a flat surface atop Tutoko Glacier. There are over 3000 glaciers that glisten across New Zealand, most of which have formed around the tail-end of the South Island. Once the heli doors open, a gusty and blindingly white countryside awaits. Aside from Mount Tutuko peaking up in the background, this otherworldly landscape resembles more photostudio backdrop than »

New Zealand wilderness. Further down as the glacier steepens, deep crevasses can be seen dissecting the icy crust. But with today's unusually thick fog blocking the rest of the view, we swiftly depart south for our next pitstop. And it's a beauty.

Going by the name of Lake Erskine, the peacock-blue centrepiece is merely freshly melted snow that has trickled down Mount Tutriko. Surrounded by craggy mountain faces, it's here that we encounter the only other helicopter (piloted by Matt's brother Nick), let alone travellers, that we see all day. "By showing people this region's most exclusive places, we want guests to not have to see another tourist during their stay, so it feels like you have it all to yourself," says Matt, soaking up the sun as we lounge on bankside boulders. "That way, you get a real sense of just how remote and secluded we are."

Secluded indeed. Though Matt remains tight-lipped about names, there have been a number of well-known personalities from around the world who have lapped up the privacy and isolation that Minaret offers. So much so that when one particular A-lister visited Minaret, New Zealand gossip magazines complained that the star must not have arrived in the country after all.

En route to the next stop we circle around Sutherland Waterfall – the tallest waterfall in the southern hemisphere at 843 metres, pass through deep green valleys of *Lord of the Rings* magnitude and fly over a seal sanctuary off Yates Point where chubby pups frolic in the protected shallows. Once landed on a desolate beach 24 kilometres north of the South Island's famed Milford Sound, Matt performs a quick costume change before launching into the choppy Tasman to catch our seafood lunch. Meanwhile, the rest of us recline on the sedimentary rocks that litter the beach, sipping wine and eating cheese.

"What's the name of this beach?" I ask Dougal, pen poised. "Jeez, I reckon it doesn't have one," he says, adjusting his cap branded Alpine Helicopters (the aviation sister business to Minaret Station). Given over half of New Zealand's South Island is protected national park, Dougal explains there's countless locations along the Fjordland coastline without an official title. "This area hasn't changed much since European settlement, besides the damage done by possums that were introduced," he adds.

A bottle and a half of sauvignon blanc later, Matt emerges with six crayfish and a butterfish. By now we're due for a scenery change. Back in the chopper we propel up the Pyke River Valley, passing over rocky crests stacked together like a neighbourhood of peak-roofed cottages. Then, nestled among the eastern slopes of the Barrier Range, a patch of glimmering blue appears that we settle beside: Lake Lochnagar.

Overlooking a grassy ridge, the lake is lined by glistening slivers of schist rock, which make for perfect skimming stones. While we polish off what wine remains in the eskies, Matt and Dougal whip out bowls of fruit, fresh salads and frying pans to cook the just-caught sea fare, as though Mary Poppins left her bag of tricks in the helicopter.

So just how much does one of the best days of my career cost? Almost \$9000 for the customised private charter, which, as Matt stresses, is tailored to daily conditions and every group's interests. Seriously, I'll take two!



Guests can elect for a chef to personally cook in the villa, three meals a day.

The Seascape retreat at Annandale makes the most of its Pacific views, while the Homestead (top right) offers a more historic setting. And why not have a chef pop by to prepare all of your meals for you?



nooks and crannies along Annandale's 10 kilometres of coastline are four other high-end stays, each with a distinct character and appeal.

At the most affordable end of the spectrum is the cute-as-a-button Shepherd's Cottage, set on a hill overlooking the Pacific. Its timber interior has been renovated to create a snug hideaway for two, complete with open fireplace, cosy sheepskin rugs and an outdoor bathtub (rest assured only livestock can see you). If the homestead is unavailable, Annandale's newest family friendly lodging goes by the name of Scrubby Bay. Accommodating up to 14 people, this cedar-clad beach house is set within its own private bay and comes with an expansive deck, outdoor pool and spa, as well as a chef's kitchen should you opt for a fully catered stay. But the pièce-de-résistance is the designer Seascape retreat, largely crafted out of stone and glass to take advantage of the beachfront setting – a stone's throw from breaking waves. Within the über-modern design you'll find both an indoor and outdoor fireplace and outdoor spa.

Regardless of which lodging you choose, guests can elect for a chef to personally cook in the villa, three meals a day, or soak up the privacy with a pantry pre-stocked with 'we create, you serve' meals. Both options promise farm-reared and local seasonal produce.

Complementing such boutique accommodation is a smorgasbord of boutique activities. From farm tours to art classes, motorbike tours, fishing charters and nature cruises, for a closer look at the Hector's dolphins and seals often spotted in the surrounding waters. And what would a foodie escape be without a cooking class? Annandale's own award-winning chef, Paul Jobin, also hosts private classes for guests with a locavore twist.

It's going to be tough returning to the urban world. Better pour another cuppa and savour this a little longer. ➔

FOOD AND WINE

ANNANDALE
CLOSEST CITY: A ONE HOUR
DRIVE TO CHRISTCHURCH
Homestead villa from \$2239 a night;
annandale.com

Freshly-brewed coffee catches the sea breeze; lashings of peppered butter melt into a crunchy wedge of homemade toast, while warm tangerine oozes from the centre of my poached free-range egg, swirling in with a delicate horseradish mayonnaise. This magnificent breakfast, complete with potato pancakes, smoked salmon and a tableful of farm-grown-and-made jams and muffins, takes my three companions and I less than 10 minutes to prepare (and not much longer to devour).

The term 'prepare', however, could be more accurately described as 'heat' than 'cook from scratch'. This ready-made (but no less gourmet) breakfast is the product of Annandale's 'we create, you serve' food option. That is, pre-prepared meals designed to give guests in any of Annandale's five luxury villas the opportunity to experience the rural setting of Banks Peninsula in absolute privacy, while sampling an impressive farm-to-table menu crafted by on-site chefs. Short of that, Annandale's skilled chefs will come and cook in your shiny villa kitchen. It's one of the many personalised features of the Annandale experience.

Today, though, we opt for the more interactive option. It's our final morning at the homestead – the historic heart and soul of Annandale's 1600-hectare property – and while the remains of breakfast sprawl across our outdoor dining table, we sink into cane chairs, bellies full and cups of tea in hand, taking it all in.

Manicured English gardens envelop this 131-year-old manor house, overlooking the eastern shore of Pigeon Bay. It was here that Ebenezer Hay and his wife Agnes – Scottish migrants from the Annandale Valley – settled and began a dairy and cattle farm back in the 19th century. The Hays originally built the homestead as a 24-room hotel in 1884. However, when a devastating storm two years later saw the family home washed away, they took up residence in the hotel, which from then on became the Annandale Homestead. In the gardens there are still elaborate timber seats with the monogram of Ebenezer and Agnes. The Hays continued to run Annandale as a working farm for over 150 years until it was eventually put on the market, catching the eye of kiwi born-and-raised Mark Palmer and his Texan wife Jacqui. Since buying the property in 2005, they've invested millions renovating this historic farm stay.

Maintaining its old-worldly charm with shaded verandahs, original weatherboard exterior and timber flooring, new additions like king-sized beds and en suite bathrooms seamlessly blend in, as does the extensive kitchen garden that plays a pivotal role in the creation of every gourmet meal here. There are now four master suites designed for couples splashed with buttery yellows and clotted-cream hues, as well as the 'playful bunk room' for families, which sleeps up to six. And when you rent the house, it's yours exclusively. Of course, there are some decidedly contemporary features here too; a private tennis court for instance, and a view-hogging gymnasium that overlooks your infinity-edge swimming pool.

Beyond the homestead and its sprawling gardens are rolling hills blanketed in tussock grass and native shrub. It's here you'll spot some of Annandale's 7000 grazing sheep or 700 black Angus cattle, which will likely make an appearance on your plate too. Also tucked away in various

DETAILS

AIR NEW ZEALAND operates daily flights to New Zealand from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. airnewzealand.com.au