

mountain high

He's headed to New Zealand's Central Otago and settled into the luxurious Matakauri Lodge but Rob Ingram has a problem: he never wants to leave.

Photography Kieran Scott

Panorama-rama
Breathtaking vistas
from Matakauri
Lodge to the
mountain ranges
across Lake
Wakatipu.





the prospects of adding the property to their portfolio of New Zealand lodges. Father and son sat opposite each other in the lounge, and when the beautiful old steamer *TSS Earnslaw* (launched in the same year as the *Titanic* but yet to hit an iceberg) steamed into view, Jay was speechless and could only point. His father turned, turned back, they both nodded and the deal was done.

The name Matakauri was not conjured up by the Robertsons to create a convenient link with Kauri Cliffs. It comes from a Maori legend about the creation of Lake Wakatipu. A beautiful (naturally) princess named Manata loved a handsome (naturally) warrior named Matakauri, but her father had arranged her marriage to a chief from another village. However, when a terrible giant stole her away, her distraught father offered her hand in marriage for whoever could save her. To cut a long legend short, Matakauri found the terrible giant sleeping, placed dry bracken around him and set fire to it. The giant's body burned a hole in the ground and melted the snow on the surrounding peaks. Sure enough, Lake Wakatipu resembles the shape of a sleeping giant and the lake's water level rises and falls 11cm every 11 minutes because – as the legend says – his heart still beats below the surface.

In many properties of this calibre, the first mission on arrival is to work out the routine. At Matakauri, you get to establish your own. No expectations; no time frame. Just an extensive catalogue of options, suggestions and recommendations. You choose, the staff makes it happen. And while there's nothing lukewarm about the appeal of Matakauri Lodge, the staff captures that priceless blend of cool professionalism and warm, natural friendliness.

Built in 2000 and billed as an organic spa, the lodge and its eight surrounding suites displayed the hallmarks of contemporary New Zealand architecture – simple shapes and bold natural materials such as the schist stone and the vertical timber of its location. In the past 12 months it has undergone extensive refurbishment at the hands of architect Lawrence Sumich and interior designer Virginia Fisher, the talent behind Kauri Cliffs, Huka Lodge, Wharekauhau and Eichardt's Private Hotel.

Queenstown's environmental elements – water, forest, mountain – are powerful. Strong, simple forms and natural materials and textures were required to blend the structures into the landscape. Peaked roofing echoes the commanding peaks across the lake; wooden shingles merge into the woodland tree line.

Everywhere the proportions are perfect and the human scale of the place adds to its intimacy and charm. Queenstown is a boutique town with intimacy and charm. Matakauri is very much at home here. The architectural element of sense of place certainly wasn't a challenge, and nor was natural light which floods the property and brings the view in with it.

As dramatic as the alpine landscape is, it often wears the muted brown and green of the invalid's dressing gown. To counter this and the fresh crispness of lake and peak that dominates the view, Fisher has frisbeed a mad scatter of cushions and throws around the



The first thing to know about Matakauri Lodge is

not to ask for a room with a view. No one likes to feel foolish. The view here is so epic, so wall-to-wall, so Panavision, so Cinerama, it freeze-frames you to the spot on arrival.

Matakauri Lodge, precisely seven minutes from New Zealand's adventure capital Queenstown on the shoreline of Lake Wakatipu, has recently joined Kauri Cliffs and The Farm at Cape Kidnappers in a group of luxury lodges operated by the Robertson family of Wall Street hedge fund fame.

The Robertsons tend to do things rather well. This is acknowledged in the US where patriarch Julian Robertson became something of a folk hero last year by winning a \$28 million tax case instigated by the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Robertson successfully argued that he wasn't a New York city resident for the year 2000 and therefore didn't owe city taxes. In New Zealand there's no doubting the Robertsons do things rather well if you've stayed at one of their exclusive lodges.

Few properties in this world have such a sense of place and sense of arrival as Matakauri Lodge. Drive in through a forested headland that protrudes into the alpine lake, and on entering the lodge you'll be stopped dead in your tracks by the towering presence of Cecil Peak and Walter Peak filling the floor-to-ceiling picture window between the lounge and dining rooms.

Julian Robertson and his son Jay (Julian H Robertson III, but Jay to avoid confusion) came here curious about

Earth, water, fire Matakauri's human scale in an epic landscape contributes to its charm. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Northburn Station's impressive cellar door restaurant; Matakauri's upper lounge; peaks upon peaks; simple sophistication in the bedroom.



A **STRONG LANDSCAPE** demands strong ideas and a strong palette of colours. You'll find them here **AT MATAKAURI**.



upper and lower lounge levels, spicing up these spaces with warm gingers, saffrons, cinnamons and mustards. And the adventure of colour and texture is even bolder in the sheets of rust-coloured metal that provide towering smokestacks for the open fires while adding to the vivid mix of decorative genius. A strong landscape demands strong ideas and a strong palette of colours. You'll find them here, at Matakauri.

A potential pitfall at the top end of luxury lodge lifestyle is the demarcation between public and private spaces. Privacy is often high on the agenda of people paying \$1000 a night for holiday accommodation, and lodge operators are faced with the challenge of juggling bright, cheerful public spaces and total seclusion for accommodation suites. Here, the public and the private are linked by a continuous amalgamation of distinct spaces: lawns, terraces, patios, paths, gardens and eventually a magical bushland of native trees and grasses.

Matakauri offers two lodge suites, one lodge room and eight outlying suites. Each has a private balcony, a generous bedroom and sitting area and fireplace, walk-in wardrobe and spacious bathroom with twin vanities and oversized tub. The bath with panoramic window of the lake and mountains is a fine emblem of decadence, but where does one stand the damned bottle of Veuve Clicquot? Gadgetry in the suites includes high-speed wireless internet, flat-screen television, DVD player, CD player with iPod connection and an extensively stocked mini-bar. Nothing ensures a good night's sleep like the gentle hum of an extensively stocked mini-bar.

Shutters are a signature element of Virginia Fisher's lodge décor, the most imaginative use being concertina shutters that can be closed to ensure privacy between bedroom and living space, or opened to allow spectacular lake and mountain views on waking. Suites are decorated in relaxing and elegant neutrals but are rich in textural and tactile elements. The occasional vibrant cushion adds structure and grandeur; a patch of forest floor-coloured carpet brings the outside inside; a snug woollen blanket folded over a sofa raises the room temperature several degrees by just being there. Design without ambience can never create luxury. But the organic integrity and rustic character inherent in Fisher's design ensures ambient charm as well as sophistication and luxury.

The minor concern about this sort of haven of indulgence is the serious lack of motivation to venture outside its boundaries. A walk down to the jetty on the lake, reading on the terrace with an attentive waitperson to remind you of the importance of keeping up fluids, a massage, a hot tub, cocktails and canapés and scandalously indiscreet conversation can be an addictive agenda. And then there are those superbly conceived menus produced by Matakauri's kitchen.

British-born chef Dale Gartland rattles the pans here assisted by sous chef Luc Witters and pastry chef Stephanie Vastel. This is no accidental collision of talent, it's a carefully coordinated culinary hit squad with a mission. Jay Robertson has decided (so it will



probably happen) that Matakauri Lodge will become the first Relais Gourmand property in New Zealand – a Relais & Châteaux category promising rare culinary excellence.

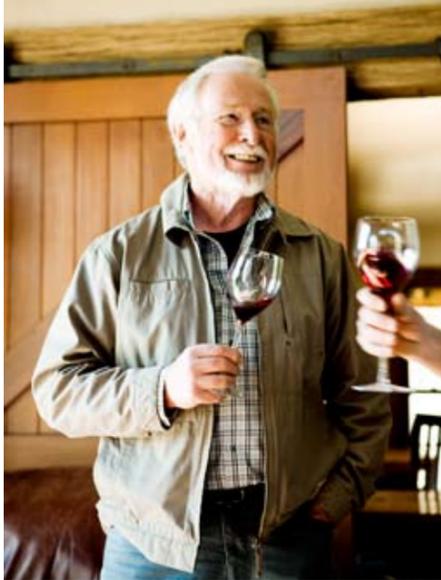
Their chances are looking good because Gartland's vibrant dishes tie together all the produce, seasons and moods of the destination. His stated aim is to let the ingredients speak for themselves to give guests an honest taste of New Zealand. But he's not shy about putting local ingredients in a global context. Aoraki salmon sashimi with a tart Japanese ponzu dressing; a tortellini of crayfish and scallops with a saffron sauce; cumin-spiced snapper, potatoes with marinated olives and fennel, avocado oil and pomegranate molasses. His ideas are sound, his instincts unerring and his cooking exemplary. Who needs the view? There's a three-course à la carte menu served each evening, featuring two choices of starter, main and dessert and a cheese course.

Another dimension of the great flexibility of Matakauri is the ability to nominate a private dining venue. There's the designated dining room, the upper or lower lounges, the patio, the library which is Jay Robertson's favourite space in the entire property, or the private suites themselves. Wherever, from the greeting and seating to the service and wine list, Matakauri ticks all the boxes of genuine hospitality. When restaurant manager Stephanie Shapiro recommends a Mount>



Lake setting

Above: bathing almost in the lake itself; chef Dale Gartland. Opposite: Guests may choose to dine in any number of locations around the lodge, including alfresco on the patio.



Alpine high
Alan Brady at his Mount Edward winery with the flagship pinot noir in hand (top right). A tasting of Aoraki salmon (above left) by Matakauri's chef Dale Gartland. Opposite: the lodge's private suites as seen from Lake Wakatipu.

wine legend began. High above Queenstown, pilot Steve Combe is so impressed by the snow conditions that we just have to put down on the 1943-metre summit to trudge about in the glistening snow and look out over Lake Wakatipu and the Southern Alps. Below us, like vanilla specks in a vast bowl of brûlée, skiers traverse 220 hectares of skiable slopes.

At Duncan Forsyth's Mount Edward winery in Gibbston we encounter Alan Brady, the godfather of Central Otago pinot noir who founded this winery and Gibbston Valley before that. It was he who first explored the possibility of producing wine in what has become the southernmost wine region in the world. The advice was unanimously negative, but Brady proceeded anyway. Today, most educated palates believe Central Otago has become the benchmark worldwide for this most fashionable of varieties. "In Central Otago, pinot noir reflects its environment more than anywhere else," says Brady. "And Gibbston pinot contains more mystery."

Carrick winery at Bannockburn is in one of the hotter Central Otago sub-regions. Look for the spice-driven 2007 pinot noir from this label, plus a great 2009 riesling. The restaurant and cellar door facilities here are also impressive.

Next we drop in on Northburn Station on the westerly slopes of the Dunstan Mountain range. Tom and Jan Pinckney have established a 23-hectare vineyard here, again predominantly pinot noir and riesling. A unique sheltered location and organic/biodynamic management has resulted in strong domestic and export demand for Northburn's wines. I ask Tom Pinckney if there's room to expand the vineyard and he says yes. It turns out his property covers 12,000 hectares. There's intimacy here too, however, with hosted food and wine tastings and an excellent farmgate shop.

The heli-wine tasting experience, then, is highly recommended, but where will Queenstown's host of heli-experiences end? Wonder aloud and Louisa "Choppy" Patterson, who founded Over The Top 25 years ago, will tell you about her new heli-art excursion. Pick up an acclaimed local artist, fly to a drop-dead scenic location, and while you picnic, the artist paints. Your keepsake from the outing will be a portfolio of photographs, sketches and maybe even a completed painting.

Matakauri can also use the magic of its name to get you a round of golf at the acclaimed Jack's Point or The Hills course and there are jet boat and 4WD wilderness safaris that include easy walks, a photography safari, hot-air ballooning, whitewater rafting, a visit to the studios of a local art community, and the lake steamer cruise that sold Matakauri to the Robertsons.

Queenstown itself, tucked discreetly around the corner from Matakauri's lake and mountain views, is rated New Zealand's hottest or coolest destination, depending on your image. Its action adventure reputation gives it a young, energetic vibe, and the resort nature of the place makes it a genuine seven-day, open-all-hours town with extensive eating options and lively bars. It may even be worth leaving Matakauri Lodge briefly to take a look.*

Edward pinot noir, a Waimea Estates Spinyback pinot gris or a Kidnapper Cliffs Ariki red, be assured that a celestial food and wine match is imminent. Canapés, pre-dinner drinks, dinner and full breakfast, by the way, are all included in the accommodation rates.

Other attractions that may keep guests on-site are the pool, gym and spa. The spa is apparently highly rated by those experienced in the sensual vices. I like this one for its literary panache. I like the name Glacial Facial. I like the sound of the Cocoon Bliss with "a mild indigenous exfoliating polish" and the Snowflake Massage with "a delicate crystal massage to calm the senses and restore harmony". In my next life I'm going to write spa menus.

But, look, even here in this sanctuary of all things sybaritic, Queenstown's spirit of adventure beckons. Recommended activities seem to share the prefix "heli". There's heli-skiing, heli-fly fishing, and heli-hiking. Helicopters allow you to picnic on a peak or graze on a glacier. You can helicopter to the World Heritage fiords of Milford Sound and Doubtful Sound, beachcomb the wild West Coast or marvel at virgin rainforests.

We go heli-wine tasting with helicopter excursion company Over The Top, off over the iconic Remarkables mountain range to Gibbston where the Central Otago



THE FINE PRINT

Getting there

Air New Zealand flies year-round from Sydney to Queenstown. For the peak July and August periods, there are six return services per week from Sydney and three per week from Melbourne and Brisbane. Air New Zealand offers a range of seat options including Seat, Seat+Bag, The Works and Works Deluxe. airnewzealand.com.au

Transfers can be arranged with Matakauri Lodge. They will meet your flight on request.

Stay

Matakauri Lodge has rooms from \$520 per person per night (includes canapés, pre-dinner drinks, dinner and full breakfast). 569 Glenorchy Rd, Queenstown, New Zealand, +64 3 441 1008, matakaurilodge.com

Eat

Matakauri Lodge welcomes dining room bookings. +64 3 441 1008, matakaurilodge.com

Botswana Butchery offers fine cuts of carefully sourced and aged meats plus excellent seafood dishes. 17 Marine Pde, Queenstown, +64 3 442 6994

Amisfield Bistro serves modern, stylish bistro food in an attractive vineyard setting at Lake Hayes, 10 minutes drive from historic Arrowtown. 10 Lake Hayes Rd, RD1, Queenstown, +64 3 442 0556, amisfield.co.nz

Saffron is seasonal, regional and memorable. A great menu that pays homage to the local pinot noirs. 18 Buckingham St, Arrowtown, +64 3 442 0131, saffronrestaurant.co.nz

Drink

Botswana Butchery invites you to try the signature Botswana Old Fashioned which enjoys top billing in an extensive cocktail list. Hip and happening venue. 17 Marine Pde, Queenstown, +64 3 442 6994

The Bunker features a clandestine cocktail bar above its restaurant with great rustic food. Late-

night venue with cool music and ambience. Cow La, Queenstown, +64 3 441 8030, thebunker.co.nz

Wine Tastes allows visitors to taste more than 80 New Zealand wines, and to buy wines and have them shipped around the world. 14 Beach St, Queenstown, +64 3 409 2226, winetastes.co.nz

Barmuda is a ritzy space with an open fire in the outdoor courtyard. Searle La, Queenstown, +64 3 442 7300

Do

Over The Top heli-scenic adventures add dimension to the destination. +64 3 442 2233, flynz.co.nz

TSS Earnslaw offers cruises on Lake Wakatipu. Enjoy the alpine scenery from the vintage steamer, and take a walking tour of Walter Peak High Country Farm with morning or afternoon tea at the homestead. +64 3 249 7416, realjourneys.co.nz

Arrowtown, once an unpretentious old mining village, is now a totally

pretentious old mining village full of chic shops, glamorous galleries and historic pubs and cafés. Twenty minutes from Queenstown and pretty as a picture.

Nomad Safaris will take you on a half-day scenic tour of *The Lord of the Rings* film locations. Middle Earth beckons. +64 3 442 6699, nomadsafaris.co.nz

The Hills golf course Rapid 164 McDonnell Rd, Arrowtown, +64 3 409 8290, thehills.co.nz

Jack's Point golf course McAdams Dr, Jack's Point, Queenstown, +64 3 450 2050, jackspoint.com

Mount Edward winery 34 Coalpit Rd, Gibbston, +64 3 442 6113, mountedward.com

Carrick Wines 247 Cairnmuir Rd, Bannockburn, +64 3 445 3480, carrick.co.nz

Northburn Station 45 Northburn Station Rd, Lake Dunstan, +64 3 445 1743, northburn.co.nz