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SOFT LANDINGS

Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney



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WHERE NEW ZEALAND

SOFT LANDINGS

Julie Miller

visits one of New Zealand's most president-worthy properties.

If accommodation is defined by its most famous guest, then New Zealand's The Landing is a doozy. Forget the famous rock stars and Hollywood actors who have stayed at this retreat in Northland's Bay of Islands – the name it will forever be associated with trumps them all: Barack Obama.

In March 2018, Obama and his entourage booked out the four private residences on this 404-hectare property during a NZ-US Council speaking engagement, dining with NZ icons Peter Jackson and Sam Neill, and strolling through the vineyards at night searching for endangered kiwi.

The choice of The Landing, in a country renowned for its millionaire-luring lodges, was pertinent; for not only is it one of NZ's most luxurious properties, but its isolation on the tip of the verdant Purerua Peninsula makes it one of the most secluded options for a privacy-seeking former president.

The passion project of Auckland's Britomart developer Peter Cooper, The Landing began life in 1999 with a program to enrich existing farmland through the creation of wetlands, re-establishing native bush by planting more than a million trees, and ridding the land of introduced pests to create a wildlife sanctuary where the healthiest and largest population of kiwi now makes its home.

The first structure to be built in 2002 was The Boathouse, a breezy wood and stone two-bedroomed loft inspired by a colonial woolshed, and popular with honeymooners and couples wanting unobstructed views.

Overlooking the vineyards, planted in 2007 and producing fine rosé, syrah and chardonnay, is the three-bedroom Vineyard Villa, a contemporary, low-lying structure with sliding glass walls that open to unrestricted views of the bay. Meanwhile,

the Gabriel Residence, boasting 360-degree views of the water, bush, farmland and wetlands, sleeps eight people and has three self-contained living areas, making it ideal for extended families with a penchant for entertaining.

The jewel in The Landing's crown, however, is the Cooper Residence, a sprawling, six-bedroom modern masterpiece with several pavilions, a stone tower housing a wine cellar and tasting room, and an industrial interior filled with Cooper's collection of art and artefacts.

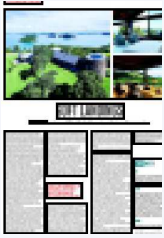
While the luxury factor is high, the profile is low-key; there's no signage at the entrance, for instance, with most guests arriving by helicopter or seaplane rather than making the four-hour drive from Auckland.

My daughter and I arrived by car, however; and after puzzling over whether imposing stone walls indeed mark our destination, we are met by a staff member and escorted through sliding iron gates to our plush overnight digs at The Boathouse.

It's a mirror-calm day in the Bay of Islands, and we're keen to get out on the water to explore. With no other guests on site, we have the services of The Landing's staff to ourselves, as well as all facilities – including Iti Rangi, an 8.8-metre launch.

Skipper Brett Michalick is a passionate and well-versed historian, and pauses in the neighbouring bay before a pretty, deserted beach flanked by rolling green hills. Now part of the Rangihoua Heritage Park, this is where Maori first interacted with European missionaries, who set up camp on the beach in 1814.

Later, we are treated to a tasting of The Landing's wines in the Boathouse kitchen,



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while The Landing's chef, Jacqueline Smith, prepares dinner, armed with freshly caught kingfish and salad greens plucked straight from the garden.

While fine food and wine may define the classic NZ lodge experience, The Landing has one more activity in store that out-Kiwis them all – searching for the national icon, the endearingly goofy, flightless nocturnal bird, the kiwi. With a round body and long beak, the ground-dwelling kiwi is an increasingly rare sight in Aotearoa, vulnerable to attacks by domestic dogs, feral cats, stoats and rats. Of the five species, the most common is the Northland brown – but even their numbers are dwindling, with less than 25,000 left in the wild.

Thanks to a rigid no-pest and pets policy, however, the population living at The Landing is extremely healthy, with a recent survey recording as many as 40 calls an hour. And all it takes is a torch and a bit of stealth to spot them. During our hour-long kiwi “safari” – conducted as darkness descends by The Landing's “lawn guy” Dane (the staff here, it should be noted, all multi-task) – we spy at least five of the surprisingly large birds, scuttling into bushes on our approach, or rustling through undergrowth.

And their calls – a rather delightful, shrill screech – continue all night long, even just outside The Boathouse's door.

Clockwise from main: The Cooper Residence at The Landing in the Bay of Islands; the Gabriel master bedroom has a stunning view; the Vineyard Villa lounge.

THERE'S NO SIGNAGE AT THE ENTRANCE, WITH MOST GUESTS ARRIVING BY HELICOPTER OR SEAPLANE.

TRIP NOTES

FLY

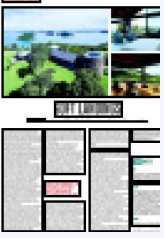
Air NZ has multiple flights daily from Sydney and Melbourne to Auckland, with domestic connections to Kerikeri. See airnewzealand.com.au

STAY

Accommodation at The Landing ranges from \$NZ3500 a night (in The Boathouse) to \$NZ14,500 a night (in the Cooper Residence), inclusive of unlimited wine, sightseeing boat tours, a wine tasting, kiwi tour and complimentary use of paddleboards and bicycles. The personal chef is included in Cooper Residence rate, or as part of special packages. See thelandingnz.com

MORE

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