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LANDING *in* LUXURY

Johanna Thornton spends a weekend at one of New Zealand's premier luxury retreats

Im being served a three-course dinner by The Landing's head chef, Mathew Cook, seated at the table of my private beachside residence, feeling like a guest on a superyacht on *Below Deck Mediterranean*, or a celebrity who helicoptered here rather than someone who drove the four hours from Auckland, pinching themselves at the idea of spending a weekend at this world-renown luxury getaway.

While the reality show *Below Deck* is decidedly low-brow, The Landing is anything but, playing host to high-spend visitors attracted by its unparalleled location

in the Bay of Islands, its architecturally designed residences and its exceptional level of service, which saw it crowned Best Luxury Accommodation at the Lion Hospitality NZ Awards for Excellence in 2023.

The more than 400ha property is home to four privately owned residences designed by Cheshire Architects that double as accommodation, each offering a unique aspect of the surrounding landscape, from the incredible 360-degree outlook of the Cooper Residence on the headland, to the wetland views of the Vineyard Villa, nestled between the vines of The Landing's onsite vineyard.

When I arrive at The Landing on a Friday afternoon, guest services manager Laura Moreno is on hand to meet me. As we wind our way down the immaculate hillside to my accommodation, the ocean glittering in the distance, she explains that the property has been the site of a meticulous replanting and reforestation project. Once a coastal farm, 162ha are now reserved for covenanted native bush and wetlands with pristine walking trails and bike paths that crisscross the peninsula, all accessible to guests.

The views are so spectacular it's hard to take it all in: there are lush grassy slopes so perfectly manicured I'm told there are several gardeners dedicated to mowing it. Orderly rows of grapevines bask in the afternoon sun, and nearer sea level, a wetland area is bordered with flax, native plants and trees, with a wooden bridge I'll later traverse on one of the property's bikes.

It's the passion project of The Landing's owner Peter Cooper (Te Aupūri, Ngāti Kuri, Te Rarawa), founder of private investment company Cooper and Company, who grew up in Northland and now splits his time between the US and New Zealand, spending summers at The Landing with family. Since he purchased the property in 1999, more than 1.5 million trees have been planted and a nursery onsite produces more than 100,000 plants a year. It's seen the return of endangered native birds, with the property now home to a large number of kiwi. The result is truly breathtaking.

A place with significant cultural history and wairua, Rangihoua Bay was the first settlement in New Zealand where Māori and Pākehā lived together. Historical and cultural sites dot the peninsula and it's a privilege for visitors to The Landing to be able to see these locations up close. Guests' stays include "touchstone experiences" such as a heritage tour that takes in Rangihoua Heritage Park and the Marsden Cross

memorial, and a marine cruise tours the surrounding islands with Iti Rangi skipper and guide Brett Michalick pointing out areas of significance.

Peter Cooper's presence looms large at the property, especially in the Cooper Residence, his home away from home, which houses an impressive collection of Māori taonga, historical artefacts and contemporary New Zealand art. I linger too long at a wall of framed black and white photos of early Māori chiefs and almost miss seeing the "secret sixth room" that's played host to a famous rock star. Big names like Obama have also signed the Cooper Residence guest book.

Grand in scale, it boasts five bedrooms and a stone observation tower housing a bedroom, bathroom and roof terrace, plus a wine cellar and tasting room downstairs. Keen eyes will recognise the glass chandelier from Kingi restaurant at Hotel Britomart, which is also owned by Cooper and Company, and features five luxury suites named after bays at The Landing.

My accommodation for the weekend is The Boathouse, the more modest of the four properties with just two bedrooms. With its own private beach, Wairoa Bay (there are six private bays at The Landing), and relatively small size The Boathouse is like a luxurious version of a classic Kiwi summer holiday at the bach. If that holiday came with staff.

The open-plan, timber-lined living, dining and kitchen area has an airy cathedral ceiling and sliding barn doors that open up to a generous covered outdoor area for cooking and relaxing. Everything about it, from the bed linen to the Sans Ceuticals products in the bathroom to the New Zealand artwork lining the walls, and the sweet smell of macrocarpa, is just right.

Guest service manager Muriel Rodriguez is setting the table for dinner. She whisks



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Opposite: The Boathouse kitchen. Above: The interior of the Gabriel Residence, and right, the Cooper Residence, both designed by Cheshire Architects. Right: The Landing has an award-winning winery and Tasting Room, open to visitors. Left: The Boathouse with the private jetty in the background. Below: The table is set for lunch at the Tasting Room.



in and out of the dining area getting things ready, as head chef Mathew unloads neat containers of pre-prepared mise en place in the kitchen. I linger awkwardly, not used to having people whose sole job it is to cook just for me, but The Landing is a place where guest comfort comes first, and I'm welcomed to relax while dinner is prepared.

Mathew, who's been at The Landing since 2022 after working in restaurants and lodges in Australia and Malaysia, plates and presents three courses that hero local ingredients and produce from The Landing's garden. There's homemade bread with miso and horopito butter; tomato salad with mozzarella, dates, almonds and fresh flowers; perfectly cooked hāpuku with asparagus, roast yellow beetroot and corn puree, with a side of roasted fingerling potatoes and a crisp green salad.

For dessert, out come three squares of lemon sponge cake and pretty portions of poached rhubarb, citrus and berries. It's the perfect meal and I wouldn't have changed a thing, but guests at The Landing have the option of designing a menu to suit their requirements or cooking for themselves — the residence kitchens come fully equipped.

After dinner, there's time to relax before the next "touchstone experience" — a guided kiwi walk with Sean Harris, who lives on site, and takes care of the gardens when he's not on kiwi duty. He arrives as the sun has sunk low in the sky, and settles into a leather armchair to talk through the experience. Puerua Peninsula is home to around 3000 kiwi and they're a common sight at The Landing, although not every guest is lucky enough to spot one during their stay.

Sean equips me with a special red-light torch and we hop into an all-terrain vehicle to head to the top of the headland in the darkness. As we disembark near the edge of a walking track lined with native bush,

the torches come out and so does my excitement — I haven't had the chance to see kiwi up close since I was a child visiting Kiwi House at Auckland Zoo, and even then I didn't see one.

A shuffling and scratching noise about a metre into the bush gives the first kiwi away. I shine my torch in its direction and despite being within reaching distance, this little guy isn't the least bit bothered at my presence, continuing to nosy around the scrub. It's little wonder they're endangered. It's a thrill to see a kiwi this close up, and it's one of nearly 10 spot that night, many of them in the scrubby sand dunes of Rangihoua Bay.

The next morning after a swim, breakfast



is served outside, beginning with a plate of fresh fruit, yoghurt, housemade cereal, spreads and toast, followed by eggs cooked to order by Mathew. As well as dinner, guests' stays include breakfast cooked and served in your residence.

There isn't too much time to linger because Brett is waiting at The Boathouse's private jetty to take me on a tour by sea in Iti Rangi. As we manoeuvre through the sparkling waters of Wairoa Bay on a perfect summer's day, Brett tells us how the little island opposite The Boathouse is named for Māori chief Te Pahi, whose early interactions with visiting ships lay the

foundations for the relationship between Māori and Pākehā in the area.

Te Pahi was the first Māori leader to visit New South Wales to promote trade and enterprise and later met Samuel Marsden, the missionary commemorated by the Marsden Cross.

It's one of several stories imparted during the boat tour and it's impossible not to feel moved by the immense history of Māori settlement in the area. With the New Zealand Government having announced moves to review the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which was signed just across the harbour from The Landing, it feels even more pertinent.

The Tasting Room and vineyard

For those keen to visit The Landing but without the budget for an overnight stay, its 13ha vineyard and tasting room is open by appointment for wine tastings and lunch. Originally planted in syrah and chardonnay in 2007, The Landing now produces a range of single varieties and blends under The Landing Wines label, which are stocked in residence's fridges for guests.

The Tasting Room, also designed by Cheshire Architects, is elevated on a hillside, offering stunning views of the peninsula and the surrounding vines. For the ultimate food and wine experience, the Cellar Door Long Lunch includes a private boat ride from Russell, Waitangi or Pahiia Wharf, a tour of the vineyard and property, followed by a wine tasting and a two-course lunch.

During my visit, The Landing's winemaker, Ben Byrne, is on hand to talk through the wines and offer tastes of unfinished chardonnay straight from the barrel. We taste the difference between chardonnay grapes grown on different blocks on the property, housed in different barrels, each imparting a unique flavour profile to the wine.

"All our chardonnay is wild-yeast fermented," explains Ben. "We don't add anything at all. The juice comes out of the press and goes into the barrel and starts to ferment by itself just with the yeast that's present in the vineyard and the winery. That's a big part of what we're trying to do — create a wine that is unique to this place. And by using the microbiology that's native to the land here, that goes a long way towards doing that."

The vineyard's coastal location creates a micro-climate similar to Waiheke Island, with a sea breeze, clay soils and sloping land helping the grapes to ripen and impart complexity. "It's an ever-evolving project," says Ben, with some of the younger vines yet to crop.

"Our licence is to try to make the best wine from this place that is also distinctive and tastes from this place too, so people can visit and try it and they can share it with people and talk about this place as well. [The wine] is like an ambassador for this property. The hands-off style of winemaking helps that."

Back down at The Boathouse on the morning I'm due to depart, I toss up how best to spend the final precious moments at The Landing. Do I walk up to the tennis court, gym and steam room, or request a kayak to explore more of the surrounding beaches?

In the end, I dive into the sea one more time and recline on The Boathouse sun loungers, gazing at Te Pahi's island and imagining a time when the Māori chief resided there, keeping a keen eye on incoming ships to the bay. What an unforgettable place.

The Landing offers a three-tiered rate structure: Off-Peak, Shoulder and Peak Season. For shoulder season rates and inclusions email info@thelanding.com.