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LET'S ALL JUST MOVE TO NEW ZEALAND.

It's FAR, FAR AWAY, and suddenly everyone you know is heading there. Is it something in the water?

By Khara Glinnanehso
The stories I hear time and again in New Zealand are all about remoteness, arrival, and desire. About how this land was separated from the supercontinent of Gondwanaland some 60 million years ago. About how it evolved into a sort ofRegarding a name populated by flightless birds, flowers, and two species of bat found nowhere else. The human narrative doesn’t begin until around 1350, when the Polynesian ancestors of the Maori arrived, making New Zealand the last landmass of significance to be settled. Next came the European explorers (the Dutchman Abel Tasman in 1646, the Englishman James Cook in 1769, and the Frenchman Jean-François de Galaup in 1772), followed by missionaries, whalers, sealers, loggers, gold prospectors. “All those people coming down over the generations” are one local story it is for me, “just looking for their right to exist in this little bit of paradise.”

The latest wave—today’s gold rush—is the travelers and home-abroad buyers flocking to this Colorado-size country of just 4.5 million people in the middle of the South Pacific, to nowhere. “New Zealand is about many of the things we obsess about now,” is how Michael Verner, a Maori cultural guide, puts it. “Nature, beauty, clean air and water, physical activity, health and wellness. Forest bathing.”

And the reachedness? “The idea of feeling like a problem,” says Alex Robertson, whose father’s financier Julian Robertson, has for years owned three of the country’s premier lodges and is among the largest American landlords here. “Kiaa calls it the tyranny of distance. But now it’s an asset. New Zealand is the best place to be in the WDC, worst case scenario. Who wants to be close to everything that’s happening in the world these days?” Robertson, who is managing director of the Tiger Fund, founded by his father, adds that “over time, technology will make the trip here feel easier and easier.” And talking investments—they’re not teaching any more of this land.

The largest class of big property owners in New Zealand is a deep-pocketed who’s who of international celebrities and tycoons, including James Cameron, Peter Thiel, Shanna Swati, Matt Lauer, Bill Foley, Ben Harper, and Anthony Malnati. In Auckland, the country’s largest and most diverse city, 22 percent of the houses are now foreign-owned, the demand driven mostly by Chinese buyers. “As a country, we are a luxury brand for them, like Gucci,” Robertson tells me. “They want everything New Zealand houses, but also baby formula, moraia honey, the art of New Zealand, stages to use in traditional medicine.”

On a recent trip behind the scenes, and some sort of cosmic wellness in New Zealand—not to mention a safe place to park their dollars. In the week after Donald Trump’s 2016 election, 820,000 U.S. citizens—8,000 in just the first 24 hours—registered to receive information about New Zealand’s residency requirements, 13 times as many as in the previous year.

“We have 38 different suppliers,” says Paul Faggart, the executive chef, adding that “there is a lot of culinary competition in New Zealand.” But what makes it stand out to diners, says Robertson, who is managing director of the Tiger Fund, founded by his father, is “could you get enough to score a reservation—more than 21 dining venues for less than 150 seats for two and a half hours. I am booked for dinner on the 4th of July, with Marc Anthony and the president.”

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Many of our clients leave with PROPERTY BROCHURES. Whether they will or they won’t, they want to BUY INTO THE DREAM. That is.
in August prohibiting purchases of existing homes and residential land by most foreigners. But all is not lost. The law doesn’t apply to new condos. Also, buyers can apply for exemptions from the Overseas Investment Office if they can demonstrate that their ownership of what’s called “sensitive forestry land” will bring sufficient benefits, creating jobs, enhancing agriculture, or conserving the environment. As one local entrepreneur explains, “With a population under 5 million, we don’t have enough core wealth. We need foreign sponsorship to drive development.”

Julian Robertson, for one, is regarded as something of a local hero for his contributions to the economy. His Farm at Cape Kidnappers, on the North Island’s Hawke’s Bay, where he lived next, was a 150-year-old spread taken on hard times when he bought it in 2002 for what was described as “the price of a New York apartment.” Robertson plans to open 6,000 acres of undulating pastureland and forested steep slopes to the public, one of which is home to the world’s largest mainland colony of gannets. It’s trophyle re-creation on steroids.

He used part of the property to build a state-of-the-art 22-suite lodge and a world-renowned four-dol golf course. (“We have Chinese clients who fly down by private jet from Hong Kong, about nine hours, just for four nights,” the golf pro tells me.) But Robertson also revived the farm, with black Angus cattle and breeding ewes roaming the well-tended pastures. In addition he was instrumental in creating the 6,177-acre Cape Sanctuary to restore and protect endangered native flora and fauna. A 6.6 mile predator-proof wall that extends six feet above ground and nearly five feet below traverses the cape from coast to coast, keeping out rats, rabbits, cats, stoats, weasels, and opossum—invader species that arrived with human migrations. “We lost the battle, but they all die,” the game says of the sinkhole, which strips the bush from trees. “We walk through a protected forest of pines and ferns, the ground soft with needles, we see gannets—a whole colony of the birds that travel to Europe for breeding age 85 percent outside, 8 percent inside,” he says.

By day’s end I’m once again on the Shearwater’s site. It has Hawke’s Bay’s only vineyard, its own winery, and its own vineyard. Nearby Napier is a “much-photographed Arts Deco gem.” And Hawke’s North, next door, is “one of the most desirable places to live,” with historic homes and tree-lined streets.

queenstown, on the south island, is the outdoor adventure capital of New Zealand, with a host of activities for adventurers, including American tech entrepreneur and venture capitalist Peter Thiel, who bought one of his two New Zealand properties here, and is famously rumored to have installed a pizza oven in his house. Which, once you’ve spent time in New Zealand, feels like an overly irrelevant gesture.

The flight here from the North Island requires no ID and no security check (who does that anymore)? On a recent trip, two empty wine glasses seem to symbolically toast an era of innocence, long vanished elsewhere. Security is a big part of New Zealand’s allure, and it is expressed in many forms: a stable democracy, low crime, abundant energy resources, and forward-thinking environmental policies. I can drink from any stream or ocean with impunity. And the typical utility, according to a helicopter pilot, “in 50 miles—we have no pollution.”

The endless views from the terrace of the Panthouse at Richard’s, where we stay in Queenstown, stroke the soul. Below it is a strip of white-sand beach, the intense blue of the 50-mile-long Lake Wakatipu of Lord of the Rings movie fame, and all around and into the distance, a dazzling lake and field—dotted with ski lifts, the jagged mountains—call the Remarkables.

Catching the adrenaline-fueled spirit of this place, we head out cycling with John Thompson, an outdoor guide, around nearby Arrowtown (population 3,000), a village dotted with shops and cafes. The mountain of another boom. “House prices are doubling every three years,” says Thompson, who does real estate on the side. “They went up 25 percent in 2017 and 25 percent the year before. It’s getting as bad as flipping houses in Arrowtown.” And Queenstown? “It’s the most unaffordable place to live in New Zealand,” he says.

Too bad. Not that I’m looking, but Homestead Peaks catches my eye: a dozen-lake lake Wanaka, with the Remarkables as a backdrop. The land is naturally terraced by glaciers,” says Shearwater’s listing, allowing for uninterrupted views from every house. The upside, for some, is they are eligible to buy if they fulfill a residency requirement by living here full-time for six months. The downside: $2,225,000 per lot, before any building costs. (Only five were listed at press time.)

I n average New Zealand real estate dreams at Minaret Station, probably New Zealand’s most unique lodge. It’s not far from the tip of one of the great glaciers valleys in the Southern Alps, the longest range on the South Island, and the only way in and out is by helicopter. I’ve come here for what I hope will be its special brand of high country thrills, and I am fortunate to discover them with one of the area’s most irrepressible authorities, Matt Wallis, the founder, with his brothers, of Minaret, and its gracious host. My bike, he died a few months after my visit. “Everything is here, the world is here,” Wallis tells us as we fly in from Queenstown. He leads us on a hike.

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In Queenstown, the south island’s outdoor adventure capital, that goes for bungee jumping. It does draw foreigners, including American tech entrepreneur and venture capitalist Peter Thiel, who bought one of his two New Zealand properties here and is famously rumored to have installed a pizza oven in his house. Which, once you’ve spent time in New Zealand, feels like an overly irrelevant gesture.

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from Auckland aboard an AgustaWestland AW109S Grand, the Maserati of helicopters. Opened in 2016 as one of the country’s newest swank lodges, Helena Bay belongs to Russian steel billionaire Alexander Abramov, who installed Swarovski crystal chandeliers, antique Persian rugs, heated floors, an arctic plunge pool in the large spa, and a gallery-style display of Eastern European paintings. “The staff-to-guest ratio is 54 to 10,” McFarlane, a former merchant marine captain, tells me. “It’s the superyacht ratio. That was the vision.”

Indeed, Helena Bay’s atmosphere is more shipshape than Kiwi-convivial. (I was asked to sign a nondisclosure agreement protecting the identities of the other guests.) All the same, its 800 acres and four beaches are strikingly beautiful: bright green hills that recall Scotland or Yorkshire; a patch of forest lit with glowworms; and mysterious humlike remnants of old Maori pa sites, fortified lookout facing the Pacific.

Northland, as this area on the North Island’s tip is called, is heavily Maori. It’s where Maori tribes still own the most land (overall it’s just 5 percent of what they once did) and where the Te Kongahu Museum of Waitangi opened three years ago to commemorate the complex history of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi between the British and the Maori chiefs. No sooner was it signed than it was decreed as a land grab. This was followed by declarations of war by the Maori, further land confiscations, Maori marginalization, and, finally, a Maori protest movement that spawned a legal process of claims and settlements, which is expected to be completed by 2020. This nearly two-century “conversation,” as the museum calls it, between the colonizer and the colonized is widely discussed upon.

We ponder all from our penultimate perch: the Landing, 1,000 acres of rolling hills with farmland, a nature reserve, a vineyard, five beaches, and four private, staffed villas. (Ours is called Vineyard Villa, and our “guest service manager,” Laura Moreno, used to be a sort of in-flight concierge for Princess Diana and her boys.) The Bay of Islands, which it overlooks, is both a water sports heaven—100 square miles of inlets, peninsulas, and 144 islands—and a rich repository for the early histories of both the Maori (the Landing has 43 registered Maori archaeological sites) and Europeans, as the first British missionaries, led by Samuel Marsden, landed and settled here in 1814.

“I fell in love. It’s a folly,” says Peter Cooper, the Landing’s owner, a California-based, part-Maori billionaire who made his fortune in private equity and real estate after emigrating to the U.S. in 1989. He spotted the neglected and environmentally damaged property from a helicopter and knew he wanted to revive it.

During a tour Cooper gives me of his five-bedroom stone-and-wood, Maori-art-filled house overlooking the bay (it too is available for rent), I sense that as much as he wants to make the Landing a commercial success—he applied for 44 title deeds to build and sell more villas—he also has an emotional investment in it. He stops in front of a photograph of his family from the 1920s: “Look, my forebears,” he says. “My grandfather on this side was English. His wife, right here, my grandmother, was Maori. This is my other grandfather, who was Danish. My uncle, who played on New Zealand’s national rugby team, the All Blacks, was in the Maori Battalion in World War II.” He pauses. “That right there is the key thing to understand about New Zealand. We are all very much a mixed race, Maori and Pakeha [as people of European descent are called]. Our ‘conversation’ has at times been more of a struggle. But it is unique, and it is important that it continue.”

I spend my final day in New Zealand with Michael Venner, the enlightening guest relations manager at Kauri Cliffs, another Robertson lodge. On a tour of the 6,000-acre farm and golfing property—which includes protected land—he points out beaches with traces of kaingas, or Maori fishing villages; plants used in traditional medicine; forest paths where silver ferns grow; and, shooting up into the sky, giant kauri trees, which are among the most ancient (Jurassic period) and longest-lived (2,000 years) in the world.

“The old, learned Maori people had a very interesting conversation with the world above—the stars, other realms,” Venner says. “It was an invisible world, but they were able to articulate it very beautifully, in their art, poetry, and songs. And they counseled others from that kind of eternal place, which was bigger than who they were.”

And the land? I think of all the people who want a piece of it.

“In Maori culture do we not own the land,” Venner says. “Our responsibility is to the generations to come. We are just the kaitiaki, guardians.”

TO BOOK My trip was brilliantly organized by New Zealand specialist (and native) Sarah Farag of Southern Crossings. SARAH@SOUTHERNCROSSINGS.COM. K.G.