Justin Trudeau

THE EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:
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In the land of the long white cloud, Vivian Vassos chases a passion and discovers more

**LITTLE WING**

The first time I went to New Zealand, it was a fantasy. It was Middle Earth. But it was so much more. It was the cool cafe culture of Wellington. It was the wonder of the film director Peter Jackson and the Weta Workshop that changed the way we watched movies. And it was way down under.

I’d been invited to the world premiere of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, which would take place in Jackson’s hometown, Wellington. Being a bit of a fantasy/sci-fi geek, it was a dream come true. The tourism folks doubled the invite and encouraged journalists to spend time travelling around Middle Earth before the movie’s launch. That was 15 years ago.

During that time, I was introduced to another dreamy concept: the super lodge. There’s no “middle” anything about these spectacular lodges. One of the things so remarkable about the Kiwis is how apparent their deep connection is to the sea and the land. And these lodges exemplify that connection. Think the great cabins of the Pacific Northwest and then crank it up, oh, about five notches. But in New Zealand, these places have no blueprint, no uniformity, in the way the cabins’ architecture does. A lodge’s form here takes on the character of the land – a sustainable, respectful part-of-the-environment swagger that has been built into the DNA of Kiwi hospitality.

Back then, I only had time to visit one and just for an afternoon. But the experience of staying in a place so influenced by its environment left a mark on my memory. From the non-GMO food (yes, it was even a thing back then) and the daily recreation, to the view, right down to the wood and stone used in the building to marry it to its dramatic surroundings, made me promise myself I’d return.

The second time I went to New Zealand, I was enthralled by the Maori people. I had had just a taste of it the first time but now I was more interested in the spiritual than in the fantastic. Again, I marvelled at the deep connection this culture had with the land and the sea. The Maori are not indigenous to New Zealand and, in fact, only arrived in their long boats a few hundred years before the English navigator Capt. James Cook made land from Europe in 1769. Said to be of Polynesian with a hint of Taiwanese descent, the Maori have made New Zealand their home for the better part of 1,000 years. Perhaps this realization of neither culture actually being “from” there is what has given way to a great respect for those who came first. I’m not sugarcoating it here, though. There have been conflicts but, in the present, these guys just all seem to get along; they know each other’s history, the legends, even the language. “Kia ora,” Maori for hello, is pretty much the way most people greet you in New Zealand.

The Maori named the set of islands Aotearoa, or Land of the Long White Cloud. The country is made up of the North Island, where Wellington is the capital and Auckland the centre of commerce, and the South Island, where dramatic glaciers and fiords and some of the backdrops for *The Lord of the Rings* can be found, and a few tiny satellite islands. To put it into perspective, the North Island is just a tad bigger than Newfoundland with a population slightly less than that of Toronto. But my promise to myself to visit a super lodge eluded me again, so spellbound was I by the nature of the Maori, who shared their music, their traditions and their language with me. That was beguiling enough.

And nature it was that called me back a third time. For an avid birdwatcher or for someone who...
just likes any aspect of indigen- ous wildlife, New Zealand is one of earth’s greatest treasures. At one time, the moa, the planet’s largest bird, thrived there, but it has gone the way of the dodo. Because there is no native wild game on the is- land, such as deer, birds became the main source of food, along with fish. Sheep and cattle came later, as more European immigrants ar- rived. There are no natural preda- tors there, so many birds are perma- nent residents, flightless, having lost their need for wings. But those with wings also nest there in num- bers so great their colonies blanket the ground during breeding season.

One bird in particular, the gan- net, makes its home on prime real estate on a rocky outcrop over the turquoise blue of Hawke’s Bay and the Pacific Ocean beyond: Cape Kidnappers – named for a fate that, as legend has it, befell one of Capt. Cook’s cabin boys at the hands of Maori warriors from the ship anchored just offshore. The Farm at Cape Kidnappers sits here, too, on a swath of land hugging the sea that also features an award- winning golf course with cliffside tees overlooking the surf from dizzying heights. It’s surrounded by a working farm of emerald green fields dotted with grazing sheep and cattle – and a super lodge at which to lay my head. I finally had my chance.

W H E N  I C H E C K  I N, I start to get it. These lodg- es are destina- tions in them- selves, “each distinct and authentic to the region they inhabit,” say the minds behind the Robertson Lodges portfolio, which includes The Farm and also The Lodge at Kauri Cliffs in the northland and Matakuari Lodge on the South Island. Yes, authentic. That’s the word and experience I had been looking for. If the land has sheep, you learn how to shepherd; if there’s an orchard or a vineyard, you learn how to cook or to taste wine; if there’s a bird sanctuary, you learn how to protect them. You become a part of the life.

The gannet colony here is the larg- est in the world accessible by main- land – which pretty much means you can walk among them after a hearty hike, a mountain bike ride or a four- wheel drive from the lodge. Though a part of the booby family, their feet are not the bright blue one might associate with the breed (think the blue-footed booby). Gannets sport their colour on their heads. And although their eyes appear to be ringed with a bluish liner, it’s their golden yellow crowns against stark white bodies and their wing tips dipped in black that make them stand out against the blue of the sky and the sea.

It was early June and late in the season, and many had already flown north for the winter. We were in the Southern Hemisphere after all, and it’s winter there. I could still see the small group that was left, the bob- bing of their yellow heads, and hear- ing their calls, while they waited for their little hatchlings to take wing so they, too, could fly northward. The guide tells me when the colony is in full force, there’s barely space to move about, carpeting the cliff- side in white and gold and black. The birds have no fear of humans and do approach, so the experience is up- close-and-personal. To walk among them unimpeded while taking in the ocean blue of Hawke’s Bay is reason enough to make the trek.

What’s also not crowded is Cape Kidnappers. The lodge, even at cap- city, remains true to this unique style of lodging, with room numbers akin to a boutique hotel or even few- er. Rustic chic great rooms and tur- ret-shaped intimate spots in which to relax and stretch out – roaring fireplaces, solariums facing the fields and the sea; it gives a feeling of owning the place, even though there are 40 of you in residence.

I was a little sad that the gannet congregation had thinned out. But I wasn’t disappointed for long. The Farm also has guided kiwi bird walks, where guests can participate in an- other adventure. A chance to assist a naturalist at The Farm’s Sanctuary in monitoring endangered kiwi birds, with the cost of the experience going to the cause. The preservation of this flightless bird has been a mis- sion at The Farm, and the owners are committed to bringing back this na- tive from endangered status.

The naturalist explains in detail what we’re about to do before we step into the tall grass in which the birds are partial to making their burrows. Kiwis are nocturnal, so we may find one asleep, meaning grumpy once we wake it. We’re only looking for little ones because kiwi parents are, well, for the lack of a better word, deadbeats. Once the chick is up and running, it’s _hasta la vista_, baby, you’re on your own. And with pred- ators, most likely stowaways from the ships of early settlers, on the rise, like birds of prey and possums and rabbits, these little guys are now fair game.

There’s a native Kiwi – a human one, that is – also on this excursion, and he tells me he has never seen a kiwi outside of a zoo, they’re so rare in the wild. The great grin on his face tells me he’s as excited as I am. A crackle and hum comes over our guide’s radio tracker, a sign that there is a wee one not far off. She points toward what look like holes in the slope ahead of us. There’s a kiwi baby dozing down there! Slowly, she reaches in. Her hand grips its feet, and she draws it out even more slow- ly. It appears to be a feathery ball, sans wings, eyes tightly shut and beak held even more tightly to its chest. But then, the bird awakes! The needle-like beak juts, beady black eyes fly open, feet start to pull against the gentle grip. “If I let
go, she’ll be gone,” says the guide. Apparently, once a kiwi bird hits its stride, it can outrun a human. When I get the chance to touch her, I’m nervous at first. Her needle-sharp beak is almost as long as she is, her dark claws perhaps even sharper and, even though she’s a lightweight, there’s something slightly intimidating about her. She feels light as a feather and she’s even softer than what I imagine a cloud might feel like: long, silky charcoal grey feathers that billow slightly at my touch. To lessen her distress, she’s gently placed in a soft bag, keeping out the light and mimicking the feeling of her burrow’s cocooning effect. Once the bird settles, we clip the scale to the bag and proceed with the weigh-in. This baby is well on her way to adulthood and has gained a few grams since her last encounter with the naturalist – she clocks in at 900 grams. When she reaches a kilo, the tracking tag will be removed and she, as a young adult, really will be on her own and hopefully fend for herself.

I glance at the human Kiwi taking his turn touching her, and his grin is even greater than before. A grub is offered and gladly taken, and then she’s gently popped back into her burrow. We also tour the Sanctuary’s aviary and spot a few other rare birds. And something lizard-like called a tuatara, a relic of the Cretaceous period, with a head shaped like a beak – you can almost see its raptor ancestors in its profile. It’s tiny in comparison though and extremely shy. “Cool, mate!” Once again my human Kiwi friend shows his excitement, his grin now a full-blown, ear-to-ear smile, over having seen one up close.

Back at the lodge during the daily cocktail hour, we meet again and talk about the day. What is it about these super lodges? What makes them so hard to define? “It’s not based on any tradition, Maori or European,” he says. “It’s more this idea of remoteness, of both New Zealand and where so many of these lodges are situated. There’s a hidden beauty that can only be experienced once you’re here, beyond the masses.” If I didn’t know better, I’d say this Kiwi was trying to keep all this beauty to himself. But good luck with that. This place is a revelation – one that’s so tiny yet has such a powerful pull – over nature and over me.

I had travelled half way around the world for the experience; he had travelled deeper into his own backyard. Yet, for both of us, it was a shared moment of wonder. Magic, it seems, doesn’t have to be workshops or CGI’d in Middle Earth. The spell of discovery cast by New Zealand is a lasting one, conjuring wanderlust in me that tells me I’ll be back again.

IF YOU GO
www.robertsonlodges.com/the-lodges/cape-kidnappers

A note on preservation:
Fences have been erected at The Sanctuary to discourage predators, and it seems to be working, with numbers holding. The Sanctuary at The Farm at Cape Kidnappers tags as many juvenile kiwis as possible to keep tabs on them. Each bird is named, usually a Maori word, and weight and appearance are recorded.

And for the culinary traveller, we have recipes from The Farm’s topnotch kitchen. Go to www.everythingzoomer.com/cape-kidnappers-recipes.