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Kiwi Cliffhangers

New Zealand is boldly making a name for itself as a wonder of world golf

From [January - February 2006](#)

by Nigel Wall

About 650 years ago, the first Maori ventured from Polynesia to claim the two vast, primordial islands that now comprise New Zealand. Today, golfers are exploring the country's newest wonders: the most spectacular courses built anywhere in recent years. Perched on serrated cliffs in the north and woven into stark mountainscapes in the south, these courses call to mind the impossible imagery of M.C. Escher drawings or the scenery in the Lord of the Rings trilogy, which was shot here and needed little computer enhancing. The conical volcanoes and gnarly forests, the rocky gorges and jagged fjordland—all of it is real.

Scenery aside, golf in New Zealand is played with a passion: The country ranks second only to Scotland in courses per capita. And thanks to a favorable exchange rate between the U.S. and New Zealand dollars, many of the best courses can be played for a relative pittance. Yes, the people talk funny, but trust us, it's time to say "*Kia ora!*" (the Kiwi equivalent of "Aloha!") to these enchanted isles.

Where to Play

Cape Kidnappers *****

This Tom Doak masterpiece gallops across one of the most astounding pieces of land ever used for golf: massive fingers of rock and earth high above Hawke's Bay. A head turner? Cape Kidnappers Golf Club, the second New Zealand gem (after Kauri Cliffs) developed by New York hedge-fund magnate Julian Robertson, is more like a head shaker. You'll marvel at the audacity and the vision of laying out holes atop craggy, nearly 500-foot-high cliffs. At the par-five fifteenth ("Pirate's Plank"), you may have to aim your second or third shot out over the ocean depending on the wind. But it's the seventeenth, an uphill par four with a double fairway and a phalanx of bunkers guarding the left side of the green, that may be the biggest thrill of all. If all this sounds overwhelming, don't despair: Behind the imposing veneer lies a fair course that, remarkably, offers a safe route on nearly every hole.

448 Clifton Road, Te Awanga, Hawke's Bay, North Island; 011-64/6875-1900, capekidnappers.com. Yardage: 7,147. Par: 71. Slope: 141. Architect: Tom Doak, 2004. Greens Fees: \$209□\$280.

Kauri Cliffs ****1/2

Florida architect David Harman sensibly let nature run its course through these 800 otherworldly acres of fern forest, marshland and clifftops in the Bay of Islands region. The result is, along with Cape Kidnappers, the most picturesque routing in all of New Zealand, a brilliant green buffer between blue ocean and mottled mountain gorges. With its forced carries and sheer drop-offs,

Kauri Cliffs Golf Course may look like a monster, but wide landing areas and huge greens with generous short-grass surrounds ease the intimidation factor. Resident Tour pro and reigning U.S. Open champion Michael Campbell rates the reachable, slightly downhill par-five fourth, its green wedged between bunkers and a ravine, as one of the best three-shot holes in the game. *Matauri Bay Road, Matauri Bay, North Island; 011-64/9407-0060, kauricliffs.com. Yardage: 7,119. Par: 72. Slope: 144. Architect: David Harman, 2001. Greens Fees: \$209–\$280.*

Paraparaumu Beach ***1/2**

A world's top-100 course designed by Alister MacKenzie protégé Alex Russell, Paraparaumu Beach Golf Club is a short, hilly links straight out of Scotland. Pronounced "para-para-OO-moo," it's the home course of Steve Williams, Tiger Woods's caddie. The fairway widths and first cuts of rough are ample, but beyond that it gets nasty. Just ask Tiger, who four-putted the second green in the final round of the 2002 New Zealand Open. The highlight of the course comes at the 450-yard thirteenth, where the fairway seems to rise and shift before your eyes en route to a green shaved into the top of a hill.

376 Kapiti Road, Paraparaumu Beach, North Island; 011-64/4902-8200, paraparaumubeachgolfclub.co.nz. Yardage: 6,461. Par: 71. Slope: 132. Architect: Alex Russell, 1949. Greens Fee: \$62.

Wairakei International ****

Bordered by dense pine forest, Wairakei International Golf Course is a charming parkland layout that demands target-golf skills more than improvisation. Strategic bunkering forces you to plot your way precisely, while the large plateau greens are fast but generally flat. A more relaxing round you'll never find. The experience of walking the intimate back nine, where each hole is framed by trees to provide a silent passage of play, is medicine for the golfer's soul. Of course, those trees serve as hazards too, as at the par-five fourteenth, where a 150-foot-tall pine hinders the second shot.

State Highway One, Taupo, North Island; 011-64/7374-8152, wairakeigolfcourse.co.nz. Yardage: 7,031. Par: 72. Slope: 133. Architects: Michael Wolveridge, Peter Thomson and Commander John Harris, 1970. Greens Fee: \$87.

Clearwater *1/2**

Clearwater Golf Club is a highland-meets-parkland kind of place. A Nationwide Tour stop, it's essentially a flat layout, defined by rough and a series of man-made lakes and streams. Uplifting holes include the 518-yard par-five fourteenth, where a solid drive leaves you in prime go-zone. If you haven't seen enough water, chance your luck casting for trout. For \$30 an hour for a group, a guide will equip and tutor you on how to land one of the many beauties lurking by the clubhouse's Sprig Bar. Hook one, and they'll cook it up for you.

Clearwater Avenue, Christchurch, South Island; 011-64/3360-1103, clearwaternz.com. Yardage: 7,137. Par: 72. Slope: 137. Architects: John Darby and Sir Bob Charles, 2002. Greens Fee: \$87.

Millbrook Resort ***

The towering mountain range known as "The Remarkables" and the ski slopes of Coronet Peak ring this quaint estate with a feel of Middle Earth—it's as if Frodo Baggins might wander up to sell you some balls. The undulating front nine at Millbrook Resort is superb, with elevated tees and surprises like the hidden waterfall behind the seventh green. Although the course loses steam on the back, a renovation by the rising New Zealand architect and pro Greg Turner is in the works.

Malaghans Road, Arrowtown, South Island; 011-64/3441-7000, millbrook.co.nz. Yardage: 7,022. Par: 72. Slope: 136. Architect: Sir Bob Charles, 1992. Greens Fee: \$87.

Best of the Rest

On the North Island, the closing stretch of cliff-top holes at **Gulf Harbour Country Club** (011-64/9428-1380) near Auckland would be deemed iconic if Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers hadn't come along. Alister MacKenzie's **Titirangi Golf Club** (011-64/9827-5749) is a shortish par seventy with his trademark risk-reward offerings. On the South Island, don't miss the delicate beauty of **Arrowtown Golf Club** (011-64/3442-1719), a sub-6,000-yarder with zero bunkers, fairways split by rocky outcrops and greens mown simply where nature intended—all for \$25. **Southland Golf Club**, also known as **Oreti Sands** (011-64/3213-0208), at Invercargill, is the southernmost eighteen-hole course in the world. This true links, although tatty and struggling for funds, is a remarkable example of how great land will always deliver great golf (and for just ten bucks). In January you can tee off after dinner and still finish before dark.

Where to Stay

Greenhill the Lodge

A luxurious country house with five guest rooms (all with private baths), plus a paneled billiards room, a fireplace and a library. Thirty minutes from Cape Kidnappers.

Greenhill Road, Hastings, North Island; 011-64/6879-9944, greenhill.co.nz. Rooms: from \$408 per person.

Greenmantle Estate

Sleep where Tiger slept at this boutique inn near Paraparaumu Beach, hosted by the effervescent couple Bev and Snow Pratt. You'll enjoy preprandial drinks, chef-prepared dinners (the rack of lamb is to die for), country-style breakfasts and a superior wine list.

214 Main North Road, Kapiti Coast, North Island, Wellington; 011-64/4298-5555, greenmantle.co.nz. Rooms: from \$635.

Huka Lodge

A favorite of Jack Nicklaus, this secluded lodge consists of twenty suites outfitted in total splendor (and without the mundane distractions of TV or telephone). Wooden ceiling beams blend with metallic finishes to lend a rustic-meets-modern feel. The four-bedroom Owner's Cottage, elevated over river falls, may be the ultimate retreat.

Huka Falls Road, Taupo, North Island; 011-64/7378-5791, hukalodge.com. Rooms: from \$760 per person.

The Lodge at Kauri Cliffs

Board-and-batten guest cottages set on the edge of a native forest offer 180-degree ocean views, while private verandas, fireplaces, wooden floors and framed linocuts create a lulling serenity.

There are also two private health-spa suites.

Matauri Bay Road, Matauri Bay, North Island; 011-64/9407-0010, kauricliffs.com. Rooms: \$415-685 per person.

Millbrook Resort

With its simple French provincial furnishings, this country cottage on a former wheat farm carries an air of understated elegance. Many of the rooms have balconies that overlook the mountainous golf course.

Malaghans Road, Arrowtown, South Island; 011-64/3441-7000, millbrook.co.nz. Rooms: from \$271.

Outrigger at Clearwater Resort

The boathouse-style cottages here sit right on the lakes of Clearwater Golf Club. Downtown Christchurch, New Zealand's oldest city, established by royal charter in 1856 and renowned for its public gardens, is located just minutes away.

Clearwater Avenue, Christchurch, South Island; 011-64/3360-1000, outrigger.com. Rooms: from \$108 per person, including a round of golf.

Where to Eat

Pacific Rim cuisine combines lamb, pork, duck and seafood, plus *kumara* (sweet potato) in European, Asian and Polynesian accents. A Maori *hangi* is a must—it's a traditional feast in which assorted meats and vegetables are wrapped in leaves or foil and placed in a hole in the ground, where they're cooked with hot stones. At vineyards across New Zealand, you'll find excellent Syrah, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Riesling, while the local Steinlager is as crisp as beer gets.

Huka Lodge After a round at Wairakei International, head to this lakeside lodge, where dinner consists of five courses in your choice of location. Will it be the wine cellar, the riverbank, the garden, the library or the trophy room? At breakfast, don't miss the bacon smoked with manuka, a popular dark New Zealand honey.

(Eclectic) Huka Falls Road, Taupo, North Island; 011-64/7378-5791, hukalodge.com. \$\$\$

The Lakes Restaurant The team of chefs at the Lakes, the flagship eatery of the Outrigger at Clearwater Resort, recently won national recognition for their inspired use of local seasonal

produce. Try the duo of lamb: a shank confit coupled with a baby rack. You'll know you're in New Zealand.

(Regional) Clearwater Avenue, Christchurch, South Island; 011-64/3360-1002, outrigger.com. \$\$\$\$

The Lodge at Kauri Cliffs Fuel up at breakfast on delectable ricotta pancakes with fried bananas and syrup—it's all the carbs you'll need for a full day on the course. For dinner, replenish yourself with the outstanding local kingfish.

(Eclectic) Matauri Bay Road, Matauri Bay, North Island; 011-64/9407-0010. \$\$\$

Marsden Estate Lunch on antipasto platters of local olives and cheeses at this scenic winery near Kauri Cliffs and wash it down with an award-winning glass of crisp Pinot Gris.

(Regional) Wiroa Road, Kerikeri, North Island; 011-64/9407-9398. \$

The Postmaster's House This cozy period cottage with a modern vibe whips up local fare with a fresh Asian twist. Order the Belgian chocolate cake for dessert—it just might be the highlight of your entire trip.

(Pacific Rim) Buckingham Street, Arrowtown, South Island; 011-64/3442-0992, postmastershouse.com. \$\$

Sala Sala The seafood of the South Pacific is on proud display at this award-winning Japanese sushi house, one of five restaurants at Millbrook Resort.

(Sushi) Malaghan's Road, Arrowtown, South Island; 011-64/3441-7000, millbrook.co.nz. \$\$

Terroir This rustic restaurant at Craggy Range Winery, near Cape Kidnappers, specializes in wood-fired rotisserie cooking. Acclaimed chef Stephen Tindall conjures magic with the likes of paua (abalone) sausage, crab cakes with lavender, lemon and capers, and a velvet-like fennel-crusting pork belly.

(French country) 253 Waimarama Road, Havelock North, North Island; 011-64/6873-7126, craggyrange.com. \$\$\$

ORIENTATION

Travel Tips

A tour of New Zealand's North and South Islands generally takes at least fourteen days. The most popular route for golfers is from north to south, beginning at Kauri Cliffs in Matauri Bay (a short flight from Auckland International Airport) and ending at Clearwater Golf Club in Christchurch (where you can hop a flight back to Auckland). By and large, the country's great golf courses are spread far apart, in many cases requiring flights between them. Plan on driving at least two legs of your journey, though—such as from Wairakei International to Cape Kidnappers and from Cape Kidnappers to Paraparaumu Beach—to get a taste of the New Zealand countryside.

Climate

Golf is played year-round, but the best time to go is from early October through the end of April. New Zealand is known as the "Land of the Long White Cloud," meaning rain and sudden changes in temperature are always possible. The climate ranges from subtropical in the north to positively polar in the south. Pack everything from short-sleeve shirts and light pullovers to heavy sweaters, winter hats and good rain gear.

Tour Operators

For help with booking your golf and lodging, contact New Zealand Golf Tourism Cluster (bestofgolfnewzealand.com) or a U.S.-based tour operator such as Golf Wine Travel (golfwinenewzealand.com) or Wide World of Golf (wideworldofgolf.com).

Local Rules

Yardages

Meters are the preferred unit of measurement on New Zealand golf courses. To convert distances to yards, add 10 percent. Helpfully, most fairways are marked with colored disks at 90 meters

(red), 135 meters (white) and 180 meters (blue), roughly corresponding to 100, 150 and 200 yards.

Etiquette

There are no gimmies in New Zealand. Locals expect you to putt out on every hole, just as their Scottish forebears intended the game to be played. Major champ Michael Campbell's U.S. Open victory over Tiger Woods last year at Pinehurst was the second major championship won by a New Zealander. In 1963, Bob Charles triumphed at the British Open at Royal Lytham & St. Annes in a thirty-six-hole playoff.

Kidnapped

The name Cape Kidnappers refers to an incident during British Captain James Cook's first voyage to New Zealand. His interpreter, a Tahitian servant, was captured by a group of Maori; he managed to escape by jumping into the sea.

NZ Plus

North Island

Visit the Waitangi Treaty Grounds (waitangi.net.nz) in Paihia, Bay of Islands, where Maori chiefs signed a pact in 1840 establishing British sovereignty over New Zealand.

Take a guided architectural tour of the famous art deco town of Napier, which was rebuilt in the 1930s after a massive earthquake (artdeconapier.com).

While staying at Huka Lodge, go on a guided fly fishing trip on the Tongariro River, a rich source of brown and rainbow trout (hukalodge.com).

To soothe your muscles after several rounds of golf, soak in a thermal bath and experience what Maori warriors considered to be the healing powers of a steaming mud pool at Hell's Gate Wai Ora Spa (hellsgate.co.nz) in Rotorua, near Lake Taupo.

South Island

Tour the rugged peaks and narrow inlets of Fiordland National Park on a helicopter ride through Milford Sound (helicopter.co.nz). Some consider it the eighth wonder of the world.

Now is the time to fulfill your dream of skiing and playing golf in the same day. Ski Queenstown's Coronet Peak or the Remarkables—before or after golf (nzski.com).

The information in this story was accurate at the time it was published in January 2006 but we suggest you confirm all details and prices directly with any establishments mentioned. The quality of offerings and services tends to change over time.

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