

A river runs through it

Adam Dudding discovers a bit of luxury in the middle of nowhere.



WEEKENDER

THE SETTING

Bang in the middle of a working farm, Takou River is a 60ha organic farm with a couple of dozen Hereford cattle, huge gardens, big chunks of native bush and a tidal river that leads down to the surf beach at Takou Bay. Owners Anna and Ian Sizer, Brits who used to work in oil and gas exploration as environmental scientist and engineer respectively, have built themselves an amazing off-the-grid seven-bedroom mansion at the top of a hill. Around the farm, they have scattered a handful of places for visitors to stay: a lodge, some cottages, and a “glamping” site – on which you get to experience the flapping of canvas and the occasional zip, but also a recycled timber floor, a vast double bed and other non-camping luxuries. We weren’t glamping though – we were staying at “Magic Cottage”.

THE SPACE

The cottage is really a high-spec luxury bedsit: huge double bed with expensive-looking bedding; an efficient little kitchenette with fridge, gas hob and oven, a teeny dining table, a big bay window with comfy window seat, and a decent shower and loo. Thankfully given the time of year there’s a stonkingly effective gas heater. What really makes it special, though, is that the cottage is perched right on the edge of a bend in the Takou River, and the deck is cantilevered so you’re sitting directly over water. Whichever way you look, there’s babbling water, open sky, tree boughs dipping gracefully and, beyond the opposite riverbank, rolling green hills. And there’s a bath out on the deck, where you can sit and watch nature doing its thing while you keep topping up the bath with hot water until your fingers look like prunes.

COMFORT FACTOR

The bed was wide, the towels soft, the pillows squishy, the toiletries eco-righteous, the dressing gowns nickable. The very posh two-night package we were trying out included a massage each, one evening meal and a nocturnal adventure I’ll detail below, but this place is about escaping from the world, so by and large you’re left utterly alone. There’s no one to peel your grapes, bring you cocktails or whip up a latte. It’s you, nature, and whatever books, booze, and chocolate you remembered to bring with you to pass the time. Perfect.

FOOD

Essentially it’s BYO, but on the first night, a Saturday, there was a freshly cooked three-course meal sitting waiting for us in the fridge. At first I fretted that microwaving an already-plated Angus eye fillet on mash or a pan-fried fish fillet might make it less restauranty, but I was wrong. The meals were superb, right down to the pot of toffee sauce for the sticky date puddings, which I reheated on the hob. When we cooked our own meal the next night everything worked, and the cooking kit felt nicely heavy and expensive. The shops aren’t at all close though, so make sure you’ve not forgotten some vital ingredient.

WHILE YOU ARE THERE

Perhaps we should have grabbed the kayaks from the nearby boatshed and paddled down to Takou Bay, but frankly we couldn’t be bothered. We did take a 90-minute tromp through the farm and bush though, climbing gates, minding our step for cow dung and mud, listening to the quiet and the river and the birds, and ducking when a wood pigeon swooped noisily above our heads. But mostly we did nothing – lounged about, read books, topped up the bath, watched four episodes of True Detective back to

back on my laptop (there is, I’m glad to report, no TV in the cottage) and ate chocolate. On Sunday afternoon, though, there was a knock on the door and in came masseuse Gabriella Fischer, who set up a massage table and spent the next hour and a half pummelling first one, then the other of us, into a state of extreme relaxation. Fischer has her own massage studio nearby, but makes house calls for Takou River guests. After that, Ian Sizer turned up in his 4WD and drove us across farm fields down to where the river winds through the bush. There, in



Run a bath, lie back and commune with nature at Takou River Magic Cottages.

the middle of nowhere, was a hot tub connected to a Heath-Robinsonian gas heating system. Nearby was a champagne bucket with a bottle of bubbly, a box full of towels and dressing gowns and there were candles flickering romantically all over the place. Ian beat a retreat, then we got in the tub and watched the sky shade from blue to black. Apparently one couple got engaged in this very hot-tub, though they apparently polished off several bottles the same night, then did a bit of falling in the river and suchlike, so god knows how

the relationship fared in the longer term. But anyway, after we’d finished our single bottle and our fingers were wrinkly once more, we put on the dressing gowns and like Hansel and Gretel in the woods, followed the solar-powered fairy lights, strategically placed on farm fenceposts, leading us back to our little picture-book cottage. It was pretty cool.

WORTH STEPPING OUT FOR

No doubt there are marvellous things to do in nearby Kerikeri, and it’s just over half an hour’s

drive to Paihia and Waitangi, but on a two-night break, and with a long drive in each direction, we could see no reason whatsoever to be adventurous. Ian told us we were missing out by skipping the kayaks and the beach – perhaps next time.

THE VERDICT

Bloody marvellous. The accommodation was excellent, the quiet and calm of the river and bush felt miraculous, and Ian and Anna Sizer were great hosts – warmly hospitable as we arrived and left, and utterly absent the

Magic Cottage on the edge of Takou River.

Photos: NICK UNKOVICH/FAIRFAX NZ
rest of the time unless we needed them. They also made us flat whites on their espresso machine just before we left, even though the machine’s outrageously high wattage plays havoc with their carefully managed solar-generated-electricity consumption.

GETTING THERE

Find a car, point the headlights in the rough direction of Cape Reinga and start driving. Hurtle through poor old Whangarei without stopping. Shoot through Kawakawa (unless you need a wee, in which case you may want to check out the decorative yet mildly pungent Hundertwasser public loos) and bypass Kerikeri. Keep driving till the roads get windy and unsealed and you can smell the sea. More practically, dial up “Takou Bay” on Google Maps – it’ll take you about three and a half hours from Auckland not including architectural toilet breaks. If you’re fancy you could fly to the airport in Kerikeri and drive the last 20 minutes.

ESSENTIALS

Apart from “Magic Cottage”, there are three other cottages at Takou River of varying sizes, a lodge that sleeps up to eight, and the glamping site. This all-in weekend deal with meal, massage, hot tub and bubbles costs \$1200, but other winter special packages start at \$230/night based on two people. Don’t forget to bring with you all the food and drink and chocolate you’re going to need for the self-catering bits.

MORE INFORMATION

See takouriver.com; email takouriver@xtra.co.nz; or call 09 407 8065 or 0275 457 633.

■ The writer was a guest of Takou River Lodge.