


Kiwi's BIG ADVENTURES

A 500-foot drop to the sea? Giant punga ferns? Geysers? On New Zealand's golf courses, there's always something unexpected around the bend. GARY FISKETJON tees up in the land of big surprises.



NEW ZEALAND IS A LONG WAYS FROM anywhere (Australia's nearly a thousand miles west), and the Europeans took their time finding it. Abel Tasman, a Dutchman, sailed past it in 1642 but was kept offshore by Maori warriors, descendants of Polynesians who had canoed south at least five centuries earlier. The islands they claimed in the interim were surely worth protecting—with endless beaches, vast forests, deep lakes, grand mountains, astonishingly clear rivers, glaciers, and geysers. They remain so today: After a 13-hour flight from California, a visitor is now welcomed with open arms instead of a menacing haka dance and worse.

The Maori, of course, lost out. James Cook showed up in 1769, trailed by whalers, sealers, traders, missionaries, and settlers, who by 1840 were all living in a British colony. Though they were abused in the colonial fashion, the Maori suffered a far less barbaric fate than

The 15th and 16th holes at Cape Kidnappers jut out into Hawke's Bay.

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Wairakei Golf Course (above and far right), near the Craters of the Moon volcanic park (center)



There's drama galore at Cape Kidnappers—just be sure to check the wind when you get out of your car because, well, they don't call these the roaring forties for nothing.



The greens at Cape Kidnappers (left) are perched on steep cliffs.

the Aborigines across the Tasman Sea, and their culture is now more embraced than repulsed. Certainly places with Maori names—many changed back from Anglo alternatives—will give any outsider poring over maps a tutorial in tongue twisters.

Golf's seeds were planted on the South Island; an 1871 photograph shows Australasia's first clubhouse in Dunedin. By the new century, the game was flourishing and spreading onto the North Island, where in 1926 Alister MacKenzie redesigned an existing course, Titirangi, west of Auckland.

Meanwhile, more humble layouts were built and played on by locals. Of tremendous value and often great fun, they can now be found in virtually any town. (A prime example is Arrowtown, a delightful little track in a beautiful mountain setting, near the tourist mecca of Queenstown, and a bargain at

\$26.) In fact, this country is second only to Scotland in the number of courses per capita, with 400 for a population of four million.

New Zealand left-hander Bob Charles first put the country on the international radar by winning the British Open in 1963. Michael Campbell added a Maori touch in 2005 by taking first place at the U.S. Open in a thrilling duel with Tiger Woods (Woods's caddie, Steve Williams, had previously been referred to as the nation's leading sportsman). Kiwi stock also surged precipitously upward in 2000, when the American hedge-fund maestro Julian Robertson unveiled Kauri Cliffs on the North Island, bringing it immediate worldwide acclaim. A year later Robertson, not one to rest on his laurels, bought 6,000 acres of a vast sheep station south of the Art Deco-rich Napier, hired architect Tom

Doak (after playing his Pacific Dunes in Oregon), and rang in the New Year of 2004 with Cape Kidnappers, instantly considered New Zealand's finest.

CAPE KIDNAPPERS

Cook named the cape in 1769, after his translator was briefly abducted here. The Maori name, however, means "Maui's hook," and legend has it that he used these striking white cliffs as a hook to pull the North Island out of the ocean. What Doak has pulled out of it is almost surreally magnificent, with holes stitched along ridges that hang some 500 feet above Hawke's Bay. From a discreet entry gate, the 15-minute drive starts at sea level and rises sharply along creeks and through forests and pastures, ending at a clubhouse that invokes a sheep-shearing shed, your

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portal to this singular adventure. When stepping out of the car, check the wind because, well, they don't call these latitudes the roaring forties for nothing.

The front nine meanders mostly inland, though the par-five fourth and par-four fifth direct you to the water. Anything left of the green on the par-three sixth—a brutish 225 uphill yards from the back tees—will be lost on a steep grassy slope plunging down toward it. Still, there's drama galore in the bunkering and the undulating fairways bordered by punishing fescue, gullies, and ravines; since many holes ride plateaus, any wild misses become

lost balls, so play from the appropriate tees (from 5,182 to 7,147 yards). Four holes play downwind, and the par-five second is the only easy birdie out here. The back nine then dials everything up, with tees and greens suspended dizzyingly above the Pacific horizon, making Pebble Beach or Bandon Dunes or Whistling Straits seem practically suburban. Though there's not a weak-sister hole on the course, this side is particularly relentless as well as various. The 14th is one of Doak's trademark short par-fours at 348 yards, its greens sandwiched between a fiendish pot bunker and a dangerous fall-off behind. Pirate's Plank,

the 650-yard 15th, is aptly named, with a deathly ravine along the right and a suicide cliff to the left; it is the number one handicap hole and my favorite, having provided a birdie I'll never forget. You climb up and *out* to the next tee—also a par five but shorter and broader—for a hyperventilating view of coastline cliffs, the wide ocean, the Black Reef below. Then gather your wits for the two home holes, long par fours (463 and 480 yards) that are exquisitely demanding.

Cape Kidnappers is a perfect 10 on any scale of excellence and the end-of-the-world beauty is beyond reckoning—proof, as Doak claimed, that “a great piece of land makes an architect look like a genius.” The course is one even he and Julian Robertson would be hard-pressed to top.



The Southern Alps provide the backdrop for Terrace Downs.

WAIRAKEI INTERNATIONAL

This country, however, offers endless varieties of natural beauty. Less than 100 miles from Kidnappers, the Lake Taupo region features pine forests, volcanic cones, hot springs, fabled fly-fishing rivers—and Wairakei International. Funded by the government to attract overseas players, it opened in 1970 with a collaborative design by a peripatetic Englishman, the late commander John Harris; the grossly underappreciated Australian Peter Thomson, a five-time British Open champion; and Michael Wolveridge, who directed a significant overhaul in 1997. Think of a classic Pacific Northwest parkland course on steroids, with unique characteristics.

The bunkers are strategically placed and greensides are steeply faced with the trunks of *punga* fern—aesthetically delightful but a hideous obstacle when the ball rests near them. Many elevated tees offer clear views of lovely holes, while the occasional raised green makes for an imposing sight and approach; you get both on the 325-yard 12th, which thus seems even more drivable—though a creek will collect anything not hit well. Water also complicates a few others, notably the signature eighth: a dogleg right that forms a semicircle from tee to green, defined by a pond on the inside arc.

But above all are the trees, which not only refine fairways but also shape tee shots and approaches by coming directly into play—as at the justly famous 602-yard 14th. A massive pine stands astride the fairway like a mythological creature, ready to swat down ill-conceived second shots, and the gigantic scimitar-shaped hillside green can lay you low as well. From here, as the locals

LOCAL HEROES: 3 OTHERS NEARBY

From full-service resorts to quiet local tracks, New Zealand has an abundance of great golf.

CLEARWATER RESORT On the outskirts of Christchurch, Clearwater has played host to the New Zealand PGA Championship and a U.S. Nationwide Tour event. It is a challenging course rife with tussock and marram grasses as well as water hazards. Other attractions at Clearwater: full resort services, comfortable pondside villas, a fantastic kitchen, and the guide services of the inimitable resident fisherman, Jonathan Pasley. *Greens fee, \$82; 64-3/360-1103*

LAKES RESORT Off the beaten track on the Coromandel Peninsula, this course, opened in 2004, is just hitting its stride. Holes meander through beautiful natural wetlands, and one boardwalk stretch serves as homage to the Maori. There's comfortable lodging and a spectacular coastline to explore. *Greens fee, \$65; 64-07/864-9999*

MILLBROOK RESORT The South Island alternative to Terrace Downs, Millbrook will feel familiar to pampered

American golfers but for the awesome mountain backdrop of the Remarkables Range. It has a solid Bob Charles course and very good accommodations and restaurants. Do not, however, miss dinner at the extraordinary Postmaster's House (\$80; 64-3/442-0991) in nearby Arrowtown. *Greens fee, \$82; 64-3/441-7000*

For more information on these courses and numerous other New Zealand tracks, visit www.bestofgolfnewzealand.com.

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say, it's all downhill: The closing four start from elevated tees and end in a strong finish with a birdie promised at the reachable par-five 18th. That, and indeed the entire round, will leave you with a smile on your face.

TERRACE DOWNS

The South Island, naturally, has many alternatives of its own, but none is more rewarding than Terrace Downs. This hour-long drive from Christchurch leads through the Canterbury Plains and the prettiest family farms I've seen, their fields sheltered by tall trimmed-tree hedges, the Southern Alps looming in the west all the while. This high-country resort is set among stations and wilderness, hard by Mount Hutt and perched above the Rakaia Gorge.

The course, designed by David Cox and Canada's Puddicombe group, is "terraced" and begins with an easily reachable par five, unless the wind's howling from the north. It was when I played and after a flushed drive, my one iron fell short. Again, the roaring forties can dictate play, so the 177-yard sixth this day played at least three clubs longer. Wrong-sided approaches can leave impossible ups and downs. Ponds are another factor, even before the par-five seventh drops down to the next terrace with water on the right.

The two par fours before the turn are 460 and 479 yards from the back, but in this gale they played, respectively, blissfully short and simply beyond reach. The panoramic par-three tenth takes you downward, where the real fun begins. Sandwiched by ponds, the next fairway doglegs left, and a long second can end up in a gorge that might otherwise, just yet, go unnoticed. An islanded pond separates the following par fours—the second tantalizingly drivable—but the penny really drops on the 16th tee: 400-odd feet below it, the glacier-fed, shale-bottomed Rakaia River is Caribbean-lagoon blue. On terraces only slightly above the water, tiny livestock graze in pastures so verdant, they're *not* overwhelmed by the mountains beyond, on which some can ski while those in this spot play golf.

At 143 yards max, this is the shortest par three on the course, so don't spoil it by gorging out on the right or falling short into ravines that drain into the same river. Just avoid the pot bunker, take another look, and move down the 17th and up another terrace on the arduous par-five home hole. Then pour a deep glass of the best South Island Pinot Noir on the list and toast whatever gods invented this game and this country. ■

WHERE TO STAY IN NEW ZEALAND



Owner's Cottage at Huka Lodge

NEAR CAPE KIDNAPPERS Like Kauri Cliffs, Cape Kidnappers (both properties are owned by U.S. businessman Julian Robertson) will eventually offer accommodations; for now one can luxuriate in the nearby **Black Barn Retreats** (\$190-\$450; Black Barn Rd., Havelock North, Hawke's Bay; 64-6/877-7985; www.blackbarn.com). My wife and I certainly did at Riverside Lodge 6, a superbly designed and decorated, spacious three-bedroom overlooking the Tuki Tuki River and overlooked by the mesmerizingly jagged Te Mata Peak. Or you might choose the homestead at **Summerlee Station** (from \$780; Cape Kidnappers,

Hawke's Bay; 64-6/877-7985; www.blackbarn.com), which can hold 12 and is adjacent to the golf course. As elsewhere in New Zealand, excellent local markets and vineyards provide everything you need to dine extremely well "at home," as we eagerly did.

NEAR WAIRAKEI Just minutes from Wairakei International, **Huka Lodge** (\$1,430-\$1,600; Huka Falls Rd., Taupo; 64-7/378-5791; www.hukalodge.com) has long been considered the country's best. Queen Elizabeth II and Bill Gates stayed here, and if it's Jack Nicklaus's haunt, what more needs to be said? Every desire is catered to impeccably, with a smorgasbord of surprises and delights. The recently opened Owner's Cottage, which has four expansive suites and staff housing, is luxurious and itself the highlight of any trip. And since this is virtually the cradle of Kiwi fly-fishing—the lodge's purpose when it opened in the twenties—let them arrange a guide to take you to catch legendary trout or on another one of the many outlandish activities.

AT TERRACE DOWNS The range of rooms at this resort tops out with **Fairway Chalets**, gracious houses along the front nine (from \$450; Coleridge Rd., Rakaia Gorge, Darfield; 64-3/318-6943; www.terrace-downs.co.nz). The restaurant is excellent; much of the fare comes from local suppliers.

Getting there: Air New Zealand now offers a business-premier class from Los Angeles featuring seats that convert to fully flat beds, 800-262-1234.



Huka's main lodge on the Waikato River