

Kiwi quintessence

Kauri Cliffs, Tara Iti and Cape Kidnappers make a long flight to New Zealand more than worthwhile | By Adam Schupak NEW ZEALAND.

I call them brag tags. Usually they are plastic, not much bigger than a credit card, but sometimes they are metal and weigh my bag down like a brick. We all know a golfer who collects them from courses that can't help themselves but to tie one on to your bag without your permission. It's pretentiousness personified, and that's saying a lot for a sport known for putting the pomp in pompous.

In short, I'm not a fan of the bag tag, but I've made an exception for Tara Iti in New Zealand and won't be removing the Cape Kidnappers tag attached to my luggage. That is how special golf on the North Island felt during my first trip there.

Every time I see that little aerial image of Cape Kidnappers circling the baggage

carousel, it not only confirms my luggage has made it, but I'm transported back to those fairways, a smile washes across my face and I pinch myself that I've enjoyed a bucket-list trip. I also begin plotting my return when events in our world allow it.

All told, New Zealand comprises two large islands and a few small ones in the South Pacific Ocean about 1,100 miles southeast of Australia, and its seasons are the opposite of those in the United States. It has almost 400 golf courses spread evenly from one end of the country to the other, and the second-highest number of courses per capita in the world. The thin coastal topography coupled with its hilly interior has produced a rich legacy of varied courses from classical seaside links to the more traditional parkland tracks

farther inland and up to the dramatic alpine courses.

Over the past 20 years, its golfing landscape has been greatly enhanced by the work of architects such as Tom Doak, Robert Trent Jones Jr., Jack Nicklaus and David Harman, who have designed at least 12 courses (complete with five-star accommodations and cuisine) with at least two more on the way (see page 59).

"Imagine taking the entire west coast of the U.S., from San Diego up to the Olympic Peninsula, flipping it over [because the colder weather and mountains are in the south], splitting it into two islands, and limiting access to the population of Seattle [plus 20 million sheep]. Paradise!" wrote Doak in his *The Confidential Guide to Golf Courses*. »

PICTURED: No. 12 at Cape Kidnappers

Getting to paradise ... well, that is a multi-flight journey seemingly to the end of the world, with two stops after that. Fortunately, my wife, Kristen, and I were only a hop, skip and a jump away having already ventured to Melbourne, Australia, for the Presidents Cup in December. The Oz-Kiwi combo is a wise decision as long as you don't short-change the New Zealand leg, which is worthy of its own trip.

But having already spent two weeks in Australia and wanting to celebrate the holidays and New Year at home with loved ones, we were forced to make a difficult decision: North or South Island. We chose the former, and I'm told there's no right answer. South Island has so much to offer, especially in Queenstown, the "Adventure Capital of the World," where bungee jumping and jet boating were born. Queenstown has sought-after wineries, access to glaciers and fjords by day trip or short helicopter flight, and a golf itinerary that should include Jack's Point, Millbrook, Arrowtown and The Hills all within about 20 minutes of the bustling city.

We nearly flipped a coin, but the North Island won out because of its unmatched Big Three: Kauri Cliffs, Tara Iti and Cape Kidnappers. God forbid we never get back to this remote corner of the world, I convinced Kristen we ought to see these layouts for ourselves. I mapped out our itinerary like an old-school travel agent

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only to have best-laid plans blown up when peak travel time ahead of Christmas meant we couldn't play Tara Iti first and drop a rental car at the Kerikeri airport just a 30-minute drive from Kauri Cliffs, then fly to the southern part of the north island to round out the trip with Cape Kidnappers. Fortunately, there proved to be more than one way to skin this cat, and after rejiggering the trip's batting order, it turned out for the best.

We flew to Auckland, New Zealand's largest city and international gateway, and rented a car for Kauri Cliffs (pronounced "KAW-ree"), our first destination, located about three hours north of Auckland in the area called Northland. Driving on the left-hand side of the road was an experience, and I lost count of how many times I turned on the windshield wipers instead of the turn signal. The final jaunt down a long gravel driveway took us past farmland, rolling hills and then boom – the ocean. What a sight for tired eyes. There is another option besides driving – we heard so many helicopters land at the course's helipad that I wondered to Kristen, "Are we the only guests that drove here?" Hey, if you can afford it, why not?

Julian Robertson Jr., an American billionaire who founded what at one time was the world's largest hedge fund in the 1990s, certainly could. He financed Kauri Cliffs, which opened in 2000, as a pet

project. Some 40 years ago, he took a year-long sabbatical from his Wall Street job to live in New Zealand and write the great American novel. Turns out he couldn't write as well as he could pick investments, but he fell hard for the rugged New Zealand landscape.

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"It was like buying Pebble Beach for the price of a modest New York apartment," Robertson once said.

He hired Harman, an Orlando-based architect who died in 2005 of tongue cancer. Speaking during a Shell's Wonderful World of Golf broadcast in March 2003, Harman said, "A designer can always make a golf course too hard. He can add more bunkers, more walls, whatever he dreams up. The true test is whether or not he can use what Mother Nature gave him and turn it into something like what you see here."

"Dave did just that," Robertson said. "He took a great piece of land and made an even greater golf course. He made 46 trips from his home in Florida to make this golf course what it is."

Those words are remembered on a plaque attached to a 50,000-year-old Kauri stump, a vestige of the forests that once blanketed the North Island and a tribute to Harman's grandest layout.

Water is visible from 15 of the 18 holes, six of which edge oceanside cliffs and offer postcard views of Cavalli Islands, »



COURTESY OF TARAITI/JOANN DOST

PICTURED: The original Tara Iti layout

Tara Iti has new plans with giant expectations

By Adam Schupak

Having already built Tara Iti into one of the world's best courses, founder Ric Kayne is doubling down with the creation of Te Arai Links, a 36-hole facility that will be open to the public, unlike Tara Iti.

"Think of Tara Iti as our version of Cypress Point. It's for a private membership. Now we're building our Pebble Beach and Spyglass along 17-Mile Drive with a hotel and the various amenities for the public to enjoy," said Jim Rohrstaff, managing partner of Te Arai Links.

Rohrstaff's analogy is a bold one, but it might have merit given that one of the courses will have more oceanfront holes than Pebble Beach. As for the second course?

"It's not fair to compare it to Spyglass; it's more like Pine Valley," he said.

Consider our attention grabbed, and given how great Tara Iti turned out, we will wait and see with bated breath.

Ground was broken on the South Course in September, but not before some serious discussion due to the global pandemic. New Zealand's leadership acted swiftly and instituted a Level 4 lockdown in late March, just as the project received its various approvals.

"The world stopped here for seven to eight weeks and we asked ourselves, 'Are we out of our minds to build a tourist destination? What if the borders never open again?' We ran all sorts of scenarios and decided we think the world will be open in a couple of years. So, we're off to the races, but it's a distinct possibility we might be the biggest idiots in the world."

Tom Doak, architect of Tara Iti (2015), was rewarded the job of designing the North Course, and the team of Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw was hired to do the South.

"We think that 80 to 100 years from now when we're all gone, people will talk about them in the same breath as Alister MacKenzie and A.W. Tillinghast and Seth Raynor," Rohrstaff said.

Coore-Crenshaw is up first, and that gave them first pick of the land.

"They were exceptionally greedy," Rohrstaff said, "which Tom has brought up only 400-500 times. Bill gave back a little sliver of coastline to Doak, but he's more excited about the land for the nine looking away from the water."

The South Course is scheduled to open in 2022 and the North Course in 2023.



COURTESY OF KAURI CLIFFS/JACOB SIMAN

PICTURED: Kauri Cliffs

Takou Bay and, to the south, the outer reaches of the Bay of Islands. The remaining holes work their way through farmland, often played alongside sheep and cattle grazing in the nearby paddocks and are some of the best holes.

Before we even hit a shot, Kristen looked out at the first few holes spread across this old sheep ranch and pronounced it the prettiest course she'd ever laid eyes on. When we got to the tee box at the par-3 seventh, which clings to the cliffs and plays across a deep gorge to a green with the Cavalli Islands beyond, she smiled and, giddy with anticipation to see what the next hole would present, said, "Hold my hand, I think I'm floating."

Every bit as memorable as the course is the lodge itself, a stylish mix of a Southern plantation house and an East Hampton summer cottage featuring a white-columned veranda with rocking chairs and wraps around the pale-gray façade, which has floor-to-ceiling French doors and bay windows and accentuates the sublime setting. Meals, which include breakfast, evening cocktails, canapés and a dinner, were gourmet. The only complaint I can muster is that our stay there was too short. We didn't get to hike to Pink Beach, a cove composed of pink shells and surrounded by pohutukawa trees, or Hikurua Waterfall, which provides a picturesque setting for a picnic.

It was about a two-hour drive south to Tara Iti in Mangawhai, a small beach town only an hour from downtown Auckland that very much feels off the beaten path.

These 3,400 acres of densely forested dunescape are raw and wild, but to Doak there were holes just sitting there, waiting to be built. Another successful American businessman, Ric Kayne, gave Doak a simple mandate: "If you don't find property for a top-50 golf course, don't bother."

Not a problem, as this parcel has been described as "the perfect collision of sand and sea and soil." Located on the Te Arai Coast, which according to local folklore is the place where the veil is lifted between earth and heaven, Tara Iti was built upon restored sand dunes that for more than four decades were hidden by a commercial pine forest of non-native trees. Here one feels as blissfully far from the troubles that beset much of the world as one can be.



DAVID CANNON/GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Cape Kidnappers

RIGHT: A guest room at Cape Kidnappers

Well, until I tried to drive the green at No. 7, which may rank as one of the best risk-reward short par 4s I've played. It features the smallest green Doak has ever built and a severe false front that makes hitting the green no picnic even with a wedge in your hand.

Tara Iti is not your typical out and back seaside layout. Holes 1-5 play in all four compass-point directions; likewise, Nos. 6-9, all par 4s, play in different directions. The back nine is bigger and broader, with two splendid par 3s at Nos. 15 and 17, a short oceanside hole dubbed Pucker Up. These are two very different nines, and it's hard to pick which one is stronger.

Tara Iti accepts limited outside play and requires all guests to stay on-site. We weren't the only ones who had the bright idea to trek over from Australia after the Presidents Cup. So did U.S. Golf Association CEO Mike Davis and his wife, Cece. They started from the opposite direction at Cape Kidnappers and were headed to Kauri Cliffs, and we happened to meet in the middle at Tara Iti, where he joined our foursome.

Taking a page out of the Pine Valley playbook, there are no formal bunkers at Tara Iti, where the local rule allows grounding the club in all dunes and sand. When told of this option, Davis politely declined, but he did take one look at



COURTESY OF CAPE KIDNAPPERS

my lie in a sandy dune and declared that while the USGA no longer used the term "hazard," my predicament looked hazardous to my scorecard.

Tara Iti lived up to the hype. It shares many of the best attributes of Cypress Point and Pine Valley, and if in my lifetime I can say, "Beam me up, Scotty," Star Trek-style, my first destination would be Tara Iti's first tee.

Pressed for time once again – a recurring theme on this adventure – we grabbed lunch to go and hightailed it to Auckland for a short flight to Napier and Cape Kidnappers on the eastern side of New Zealand's North Island. The 30-minute drive from the airport to The Farm, another luxury Robertson Lodges property, is 15 minutes to the understated entrance sign and another 15 minutes to the front

door. On the way, we drove by Black Bridge Estate Vineyards and Elephant Hill, one of the area's leading wineries, and our Uber driver was stopped for a breathalyzer. Hawke's Bay, once the domain of gentleman farmers, has bloomed into a haven for oenophiles.

About 30 years ago this region was the country's first to begin producing sauvignon blancs, chardonnays and other whites that rivaled the best from California and even gave the French a run for their money. (The Mediterranean climate of Hawke's Bay is most conducive for Syrah and chardonnay.) Those superb whites are even better today, and the Kiwi vineyards now produce marvelous cabernet sauvignons, merlots and pinot noirs that are among the best in the world.

"Everyone knows about our sauvignon blancs, but our secret is that New Zealand reds have become every bit as good," said the sommelier at The Farms, who oversees a wine cellar that holds 10,000 bottles.

We toasted our arrival at The Lover's Bench, with a stunning view looking down on the coast, inland plains and swaths of beach; gentle, rolling landscape; abundant orchards; and broad, meandering rivers known for trout fishing. The Farm, a bucket-list destination set on a 6,000-acre sheep and cattle farm and opened in 2007, includes 22 suites and rooms and a four-bedroom cottage, all of which have porches

with views of the Pacific Ocean.

The center of the resort is the lodge, which has two dining rooms – I would be remiss if I didn't tell you that the Pacific Rim-inspired dishes at dinner were delish – a living room, a library, a fitness center and spa, and a wine-tasting area. Nongolfers can help shepherd the flock at what remains a working farm, see one of the world's largest gannet colonies (September-April), tour vineyards and the art deco sites of nearby Napier, or go hiking, fly-fishing, horseback riding or kayaking. But we'd come all this way for Cape Kidnappers, and it didn't disappoint.

The front nine lacks the eye candy of Kauri Cliffs, but the back nine, especially the holes running along the promontory of cliffs, is truly spectacular. The 15th hole, a 590-yard par 5 named Pirate's Plank, is unforgettable – and not just because I got back to all square in my match with Kristen. When Doak first saw the land, he hesitated to put a hole there, he said, because the playable area was only 40 yards wide with hazards to both sides. I tugged my tee shot dangerously close to a fence and sign that read "Danger Cliffs," and Kristen's approach sailed long just beyond a back bunker, where if she took one or two baby steps back I'd likely be a widower. Yet again, we left grudgingly without a chance to jog along Trigg Road with its views of Ocean Beach

and Bare Island or walk to a nearby historic Maori village.

Our final stop was a return to Auckland and one last round at Royal Auckland, which had merged with neighboring Grange Golf Club and in October 2017 commenced on the redevelopment of its courses and clubhouse. The \$66-million project converted 36 holes into a new 27-hole layout from Nicklaus Design as well as a new contemporary clubhouse, driving range and short-game practice area.

The course was still growing in during our visit, but the consensus is they have created something better than before and the club will be stronger as one. The first 18 holes is now open, with the final nine holes and practice facilities to be ready in early 2021. The club has aspirations of hosting the Presidents Club some day, and a cosmopolitan city such as Auckland makes a lot of sense.

It also would serve as a good excuse for a return visit to New Zealand and chance to explore the South Island. I can hardly wait. **Gwk**



COURTESY OF KAURI CLIFFS/JACOB SJOMAN

PICTURED: Kauri Cliffs