

SOPHISTICATED LIVING

{Louisville's Finest}




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May/June 2019

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Sunrise view from the hills above Helena Bay Lodge in New Zealand.
Photo by Bridget Williams



Helena Bay Lodge offers luxury villa accommodations for a maximum of five couples at a time.

IN PERFECT HARMONY

A well-orchestrated experience awaits at Helena Bay Lodge

Written by Bridget Williams

If we're lucky, our lives are sprinkled with "pinch me" moments, those blissful instances when life almost seems too good to be true. During my five divine days at Helena Bay Lodge in New Zealand, these enchanted occasions occurred in symphonic succession; the cadence of each day an undulating arc of crescendos interluded with moments of quiet contemplation.

Arriving via the resort's own Westland AW109S Grand helicopter was an overture to our adventure; the 40-minute flight from Auckland allowed us to ogle the North Island's spindly spines of verdant peaks that settle into rolling farmland before dissolving into white-sand beaches.

We were greeted at the landing pad by a bevy of staff members, among them affable general manager and Scotsman Neil McFarlane. Prior to assuming the top spot at Helena Bay, McFarlane spent more than a decade working as a yacht captain for

Helena Bay's owner. Other staff members were also plucked from the world of luxury yachting, so service is always shipshape.

Boasting two miles of pristine coastline as part of its 800 acres, Helena Bay opened in November 2016, following six years of construction. Devised to host no more than five couples (or a private group) in spacious villa suites, the property is operated like a private residence. The architecture doesn't try to fit within a prescribed theme, although inspiration was culled locally from early 19th century buildings, such as Pompallier House in Russell and The Treaty House in Waitangi.

From the moment of arrival, you are aware that this is a highly personal endeavor, and nothing is a result of happenstance. For instance, a walkway leading to the pier appears to be carved into the craggy coastline; it wasn't until someone pointed out that it is molded and colored concrete made to the owner's specifications, that I was able to discern the doppelgänger.



The property around the resort is a mix of forest and farmland.



The 800-acre property boasts four private beaches.



A pair of monumental works by Joan Miró bookend the fireplace in the main house's gathering room.

Public spaces in the main house highlight Blue Chip artworks from the owner's personal collection. Some are instantly recognizable, like a pair of monumental works by Joan Miró bookending the fireplace in the gathering room, while others that weren't created by household names are equally beguiling. Per the owner's directive, you won't find identifiers near any of the artworks to prevent a sterile gallery aura from permeating the haute-homey environs.

Counted among the communal areas for guests within the main house is a single massage room, and a compact and very well-equipped gym overlooking the heated pool. An exquisite mosaic-tiled sauna and steam room with a cold plunge pool is quite an elaborate amenity for a property of this size. It took one year to painstakingly place the 1.2-million mosaic tiles.

A library, formal and informal dining areas and covered terraces in the main house provide plenty of room for guests to lounge in privacy. Taking a moment to study the level of detail inherent in each space underscores both sumptuous and subtle details, such as the replication of the property's logo in the hefty ceiling molding. While the overarching aesthetic is eclectic, discernable touches of sparkle are sprinkled throughout, from the silver metallic threads in the plush Feiler chenille bath towels in

guest villas, to crystal sconces and chandeliers in the main house. Mother Nature is even in on the act, as the calm waters of the bay shimmer in the sunlight.

In spite of the upscale accoutrements, this is not a place that takes itself too seriously. Waiting to be discovered throughout the grounds are a pair of larger-than-life-sized sculptures of bulldogs donning sweaters, a 15-foot-tall bronze King Kong tucked into the trees, oversized anthropomorphic vases, and a splatter-painted cow sculpture placed alongside a hiking trail, among other whimsical creations.

Guest villas with oceanfront terraces are clustered to follow the gently curving contours of the Helena Bay beach. In-room backpacks stored in the walk-in closet are pre-filled with essentials for a day on the trails, including a water bottle, a property map with a guide to local flora and fauna, and a pair of Leica binoculars. Waiting outside the entrance of each villa are pairs of wellies sized for each guest, so that inclement weather won't scuttle any planned exploring. Each villa's super-sized bathroom incorporates mid-century-inspired accent tiles, and a complete suite of Alton Brown products, including room fragrance and a jasmine face wash. A well-stocked minibar features a complimentary selection of New Zealand colas, juices and snacks.



There are miles of well-groomed hiking and mountain biking trails on property.



Marsden Winery



Visiting Tantalus Estate Winery via helicopter



Miles of well-marked and groomed hiking and mountain biking trails fan out from the resort. I spent several hours each day exploring the varied landscape. There are steep windswept hillsides that boast a “ruffled” appearance from afar, thanks to the repetitive plod of Angus cattle who seem to defy gravity as they graze on the slopes; the mingling of guttural moos with seabird sirens creates a unique soundtrack. The naked hills transition into dense forest so enchanting you fully expect a unicorn to peek out from its hiding place behind a giant fern. Four private beaches, some easier to reach than others, are dotted with Seussical-like Pohutakawa trees. There are five PA sites (former fortifications made by the native Maori people) on the estate. If you aren’t feeling fleet of foot, there are several electric 4wd Polaris Rangers at the ready for exploring.

Other on-property amenities include a sporting clay range; performance-oriented mountain and electric bikes; a lighted turf tennis court; kayaks and paddleboards; fishing from the dock; and farm tours, where you can visit with laughable llamas, adorable miniature pigs, chickens, goats, donkeys, and Blue and Patch, the property’s energetic and friendly farm dogs.

Venture into the reef waters of Helena Bay on the property’s own pontoon boat to fish for snapper, hāpuka, and kingfish. For

those wanting to voyage further offshore, the resort can arrange deep-sea charters to fish for marlin, tuna and swordfish. You can bring “keepers” back to the resort for dinner, or follow our lead and enjoy your catch sashimi-style while still on the boat. At press time, the finishing touches were being put on the resort’s new private yacht—a Dickey Boats Semifly 45—which guests will be able to charter for everything from a romantic cruise to deep sea diving.

As wonderful as all of these accoutrements are, the real star of the show, in my opinion, is the farm and culinary program. Dining at Helena Bay Lodge is a 5-star experience that only guests are privy to. Executive Chef Michele Martino, a native of Puglia, hails from Italy’s celebrated Michelin-starred Ristorante Don Alfonso 1890.

Chef Martino goes to the garden each morning to inform the menu, which follows principles of the Mediterranean diet; in season, 80 percent of what appears on the menu is sourced on property. “As a chef, our passion starts in the soil. It is the beautiful part of my job, and a dream to be able to decide the menu based on what’s ready,” he said. He added that even a simple salad can be special when it’s made with the right ingredients. Foodie-focused guests are invited to join the chef on his morning garden expeditions.



A heated swimming pool is one of the
spa amenities in the main house.



Ingredients that aren't grown onsite are regularly flown in from Italy, making them unique to both New Zealand and Australia. Chef also collaborates with farm staff to grow Italian varieties of certain vegetables, which often requires mitigating soil and climate differences between the continents. "You get a true taste of Italy because of the ingredients," Martino explained.

After taking part in a garden expedition, we returned back to the resort's living room, where Chef Martino demonstrated how he prepared Spaghetti alla Nerano, a classic Italian pasta dish with fried zucchini. Bite after bite had me pondering how a dish with so few ingredients could be so beautiful and tasty. A master of simplicity who approaches his craft with friendly ease, Chef Martino pointed out that cooking with fewer ingredients is more difficult because you can't hide bad technique beneath overwrought sauces or seasonings.

For an extra-special treat outside of dinner, request a picnic lunch at the private Mohei Pavilion on Mohei Bay. The brave of heart can reach the secluded beach by kayaking, which challenges you to avoid ocean swells by maneuvering around jagged rock outcroppings.

Unique excursions that can be arranged include winery hopping via helicopter, and a Middle Earth, Fly + Dine Experience, a day-long tour that includes finding thousands of luminescent glow worms in caves at Waitomo, followed by a private tour and lunch at Hobbiton to see the remnants of the *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* movie sets. It is one of many other-worldly experiences made possible by an out-of-this-world resort.

Rates at Helena Bay Lodge begin at \$1,835/night for double occupancy. All accommodations include breakfast, happy hour drinks and dinner. For more information and reservations visit helenabay.com. 