

By foot and flight, **Belinda Luksic** explores the heart of New Zealand's North Island.

Photography by **Belinda Luksic**

WILD FRONTIER

Tussocky plains cover the Oamaru Trail in the heart of the North Island.

It takes ten minutes to reach wilderness – a spectacular canyon in the Kaimanawa Forest Park near Taupo bounded by huge rocky ramparts and ancient forests. Like much of New Zealand, it is vast and sublime and leaves me feeling as small as our helicopter, now a speck in the big blue sky.

In these parts, helicopters are like taxis: a quick way to get from A to B. In this case, the B stands for backcountry, the kind that, in this instance, is only accessible on foot. The spot where I land with Robin, my guide from Chris Jolly Outdoors, overlooks a ravine the colour of army fatigues. Traversing it would be a two-day hike as opposed to a quick trip by helicopter.

We've arrived at the start of the Oamaru Trail, a challenging one-day trek for experienced hikers that winds through majestic forests and plains, and ends almost six hours later near the perimeter of luxury lodge Poronui, where I'll be spending the next few nights.

Oamaru is one of four trails in the park that loop between public huts (basic fit-out with bunk beds, drop toilets and no artificial lighting) and private huts (with power and hot showers), which are available for rent and popular with hunters and fly-fishing enthusiasts.

While most visitors to Taupo trek the Tongariro Alpine Crossing, a dual World Heritage area with dramatic scenery and active volcanoes (it's considered one of the best one-day hikes in the country), there is something to be said for the North Island's unsung backcountry trails.

The 77,348-hectare Kaimanawa Forest Park is home to deer, wild Kaimanawa horses and trout. The breeze tickles the leaves and moss clings to the trees like topiary. We see fallen trunks as big as houses and feathery ferns like burlesque fans. There are golden prairies so vast and empty it makes the heart ache with happiness.

We set off for the Ngaruroro River down a trail thick with flaxen tussocks. This squiggle of blue is one of two-dozen rivers we'll cross



There are over two dozen river crossings on the Oamaru Trail.

today. It's also the biggest. Measuring 164 kilometres in length, the tributary winds through three mountain ranges before turning east and emptying into Hawke's Bay. It's knee-deep where we cross and the undercurrent is surprisingly strong. Other crossings we traverse are shallow, bridged by fallen logs or dotted with natural stepping stone rocks, and easy by comparison.

We soon trade the immense surrounds of the Ngaruroro Valley for the dark forest canopy, a quiet and cool hinterland alive with birdsong and the burbling of rushing water. Lunch is by the river, a simple meal of sandwiches, cake and hot tea. We hear the high whistle of a deer as it darts off and see the rutted furrow left by a wild pig. It's late afternoon before we see another soul – two anglers casting off, thigh-deep in a river – and even then they're way off in the distance.

It's magic hour by the time we reach Oamaru Hut, the end of the trail where our helicopter will take me to my cabin at Poronui. The sky is streaked with pinks and purples, and the river below, curved like a snake and surrounded by low-lying scrub, is iridescent blue. Far off, the gentle dromedary humps of mountain ranges bathe in the last rays of daylight. It's beautiful, and I pause to take a picture in my mind's eye.

There are three luxury lodges in Taupo but only Poronui wears its hunting and fly-fishing stripes with pride. Nestled in the heart of Taharua Valley, the seven-cabin lodge sits on the doorstep of the Kaimanawa Mountain Ranges and is the cast off point for fly-fishing and hunting trips. Ranked one of the world's top 10 fishing lodges, the property is awash with fishing inspiration. The walls are hung with reels and rods,

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stuffed trout and animal trophies, and the main lodge overlooks the rush of Taharua River – one of two rivers on the property where wild trout lurk.

From October to May, anglers from around the world come to cast their lines in these solitary backwaters, lured in by incredible scenery, private rivers and, of course, the trout that are shaped like torpedoes and as easily spooked as they are to spot in the gin-clear waters. Guests can don waders and set off to stalk and cast in wilderness without ever stepping off the property.

On a four-wheel drive tour of Poronui that ends at Blake House – a private villa on a promontory with panoramic views of virgin beech forest from the back patio, and another of the property's fine lodging options – we see the Taharua River again. It's a brief appearance through dense foliage, and a spot where red deer have also been sighted by those stealthy enough.

To the south of the house, manager Eve Reilly tells me, are the wild manuka forests where Poronui produces their premium-grade manuka honey – a sweet side project packaged as Taku Honey, which fetches up to AU\$165 a kilo at the market. It's low-impact, too: the hives are flown in and out by chopper at the start and end of the flowering season, a brief six-week window where the mountains are blanketed in white blooms. "It's our white Christmas," says Eve.

The honey is extracted in Turangi, a small town on the banks of the Tongariro River. It's also where I spend an adrenaline-charged day mountain biking and white watterrafting what is one of New Zealand's best Class 3 whitewater rapids – a two-hour journey along narrow gorges lumped with volcanic boulders that are relics of the volcano that exploded here 27,000 years ago.



A Poronui heli-fishing trip is guided through private Maori backcountry.



A horse riding tour at Poronui offers a new perspective.



A helicopter accesses some of the world's most spectacular fly-fishing locations.

NEW ZEALAND



Poronui's Safari Camp is roughing it in style.

Back at Poronui, I visit the shooting range at the foot of a green valley dotted with trees. It's a fun two hours spent pinging metal birds, balloons and other targets, and also where I discover two things: I'm a crack shot at clay pigeons and rubbish at throwing an axe. Archery is no better, but I like to think it's the cute 3D animal targets that put me off.

As entertaining as the range is, I'm really only killing time until my horse is saddled up and ready to go on a half-day horse ride. Set on 6500 hectares of forest and grazing land, Poronui is criss-crossed with 45 kilometres of rivers and streams. A ride here is a chance get up close to the local wildlife, including Arapawa sheep, feral goats, deer, wild turkeys and an array of native birdlife.

My guide Skye leads the way, past the equestrian centre where eventing and horse riding lessons are available, and on to Wounded Poacher, a road so-named after a poacher accidentally shot his brother here.

Texas, a handsome black and white pinto and my ride for the day, has an easy gait and sure-footedness on the uneven terrain. He pricks up his ears at the slightest command and changes his gait quickly. Trail horses these are not. Nor is this an ordinary trail ride. In fact, it's been years since I was in the saddle, and having Skye along for the ride means I have the opportunity to finesse my skills during a private lesson.

Birds call out to one another from up high in the virgin beech trees. We see wild sheep grazing by the river and deer, graceful and skittish in equal measure, nonchalantly eating grass on a sunny rise, unaffected by our presence. "On horses, they can't tell we're people," explains Skye.

We stop for lunch in a spot overlooking a valley and feed the horses apples and carrots. For one magical stretch we gallop, the wind in our faces as we barrel along a narrow ridge flanked by lush paddocks and dusky blue hills. Spring is in the air and there are farm babies everywhere; just-hatched ducklings trailing their mothers, newborn lambs unsteady on their feet and cute black-and-white calves.

For guests with more time, there are high country horse rides with an overnight stay at the Safari Camp, a secluded glamping spot of Poronui, and the chance to experience a traditional Maori *kai waho* (outdoor barbecue). After a full afternoon in the saddle, though, I swap hoofs for wheels and roll up to the Safari Camp in a four-wheel drive.

Tucked behind a screen of manuka and beech trees, the secluded glampsite is situated near the banks of the Mohaka River and is both cosy and private, with hot showers, solar lighting and a private chef. The sound of the river is so soothing it almost lulls me to sleep.

We dine at dusk on barbecued seafood and venison kebab paired with local wines (guests of the camp can help themselves to the cellar). There is a wintry chill in the air, even for November, so the pot-belly stove is lit and a hot water bottle placed in my double bed.

And then I'm alone. I find my way back to the riverbank in the moonlight. The Mohaka River bends here, tumbling and frothing like creamy soda over the glistening rocks – a wondrous cacophony of clashing, splashing and crashing that drowns out everything else. Above, the night sky glitters like a starry web. Miles from anywhere, this slice of wilderness is like nothing else.

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Air New Zealand flies to Auckland from all major Australian cities, with connecting flights to Taupo. Return flights from Sydney start from AU\$450. airnewzealand.com



STAY THERE

Poronui is located in the high country of Taharua Valley, a 40-minute drive from Taupo and a short heli-flight from world-class hunting, hiking and fly-fishing. During low season, double rooms at Poronui start from about AU\$575 per person per night. The price includes all meals and drinks (except from the cellar reserve list). The Safari Camp is available to guests from October to April. Prices start from AU\$575 per person per night and include a private chef.

Poronui also offers a number of activities including guided walks, archery and shooting, mountain biking, fishing and horse riding. Guided heli-fishing day trips start at AU\$1815 per person for a maximum of two people, and a half-day guided horse ride and picnic lunch starts at \$265 per person.

poronui.com



TOUR THERE

Chris Jolly Outdoors run guided heli-hiking day trips throughout Taupo for a variety of fitness levels. Tours start from AU\$1720 per person for a group of three people. Additional costs apply for door-to-door heli-transport.

chrisjolly.co.nz

For those looking for something a little more extreme, take the plunge along the famed Tongariro River on a half-day whitewater rafting adventure with Tongariro River Rafting. Tours from AU\$139 per person.

trr.co.nz



GET INFORMED

For more information on things to see and do in Taupo, check out their tourism website.

greatlaketaupo.com

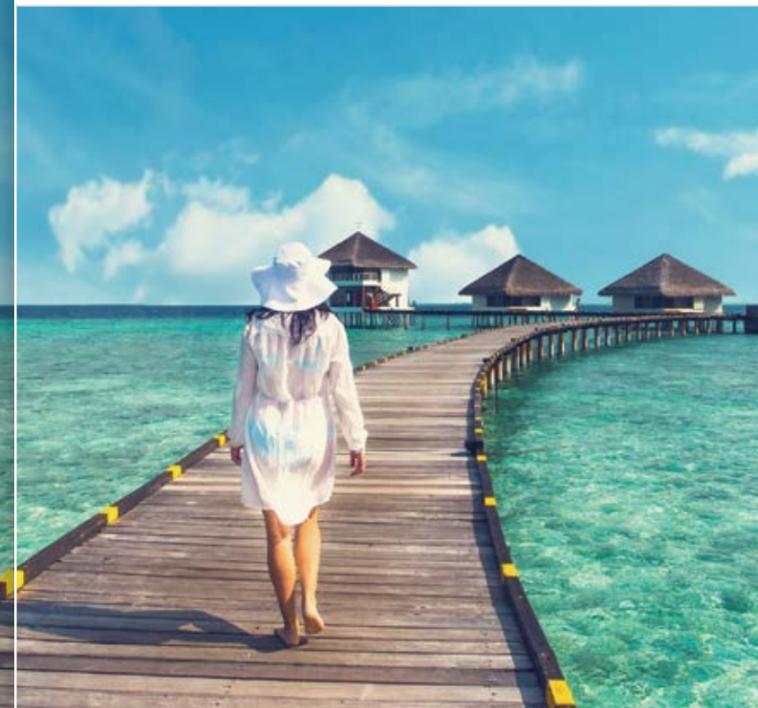


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