The New Zealand Herald

Waikato: Roughing it in luxury

By Elisabeth Easther

11:30 AM Thursday Nov 21, 2013

Reading the testimonials on the Poronui website, I was struck by how effusive everyone's comments were; it was as if the visitors had joined some sort of cult. But, once you've been to Poronui, arguably the finest hunting and fishing lodge in New Zealand, you'll discover the raves and wows are all warranted.

Forty minutes from Taupo along SH5, Poronui (Maori for "part of something bigger") is approached through impressive working forest and is a far cry from city life; miles from mobile reception, it's smack bang in the centre of heaven.



Poronui's campsite is nestled in the Taharua Valley, on the banks of the Mohaka River.

We were greeted warmly by Eve, the lodge manager, who gave us a quick tour of the main building with its trophies, roaring fire and delectable cooking aromas, before whisking us off to our campsite.

Driving along in Eve's trusty truck, we set a course through farmland, swivelling our heads to admire the rushing river, majestic mountains and prodigious stands of manuka.

At Christmas, the profusion of little white flowers dotting the branches gives the impression of recently fallen snow. When they heard us coming, little groups of wild sika deer would bound off into the woods, some of the younger ones stopping briefly to look at the people, until their mothers fanned out their fluffy white tails in a gesture of trepidation, telling the inquisitive fawns to get a wriggle on. Hares and rabbits hopped here and there and the townies, my son and I, exclaimed at it all.

As we bumped down the steep pumice-topped track (it's good for grip) to our home away from home, we knew immediately we'd struck holiday gold. On the banks of the Mohaka River, snug in the Taharua Valley, camp consists of two beautifully appointed sleeping huts made of canvas and timber, a similarly constructed cooking and dining room and, though there's no electricity, the bathrooms boast hot showers and flush loos.

As for the bedding, it was as good as it gets, and hot water bottles raise the comfort levels in a homely way. And depending on your preferences, you can create your own food in the well-equipped kitchen or have the lodge do it all for you.

On seeing the river, the open fire ringed with rocks, ready to set ablaze, the hammock strung in the trees, Theo's first word was awesome.

It was also his second, third and fourth word. We really couldn't have been happier or better cared for – and talk about well fed.

As the sun slid out of sight behind the hills, capable sociable fabulous Eve cranked up the barbie and prepared our feast.

The hors d'oeuvre of pigs' head roulade blew our minds while the sika venison and lamb chops were so tender you barely needed teeth to enjoy them and, to ensure we got our share of greens, barbecued broccoli and watercress from the river topped it all off. It's plain to see why the lodge has held on to Eve these past 20 years, since the days it was just one little shack by the river.

That night, we gazed up at a canopy of stars that was out of this world – and if we hadn't had a fair bit planned for the next day, I could have sat by the fire, roasting marshmallows and thinking big thoughts till the sun came up. One feels so marvellously insignificant, gazing out to space.

Waking on a crisp spring morning with a touch of frost on the ground, the water by my bed was so chilly, the first few slugs of it brought tears to my eyes, yet we were snug as bugs inside our beds.

After a hearty breakfast (Chef Eve in charge again) we were transported to the stables for a morning ride. Nicola, a champion equestrian, took us riding through the countryside on two gentle-mannered horses. Little Man and Shelby were ideal mounts for a couple of novices, plodding steadily on, while helicopters occasionally buzzed overhead, taking other more high-flying guests fishing, hiking or hunting.

Once we'd dismounted and thanked our trusty steeds, Tom Loughlin (Tuwharetoa), creator of the Kai Waho Experience, took charge of us, spiriting us away into the woods for a Poronui picnic.

Tom's a regular at the lodge, taking local and international guests on authentic cultural experiences, focusing on food, culture and the wilderness, his stories organically peppered with te reo. Tom also takes guests hunting, (or walking with guns if you prefer) and visits to his pa and stays in the whare can also be arranged.

Demonstrating animal tracking techniques, he tells tales of hunting for food and life before Europeans. The tale of the slave who was thrown into the volcanic mouth of Tongariro, to appease the gods, was certainly a riveting one.

But the best was yet to come and Theo nearly burst out of his skin when he realised we were going to shoot bows and arrows at life-size images of stags at bay.

The targets were placed, instructions given, laws of safety laid down and we were away. Each time we unleashed a quiver, we'd collect our 21 arrows and twang another load off 'till our stag looked more like a sieve. Moving the deer much further back, I was invited to shoot him with a .202 and I have to confess, the buzz and whomp of a big gun was more exciting than I care to admit.

We could've shot guns and arrows forever, but dinner called and it was back to camp where Tom displayed his cooking prowess in the fire with volcanic rocks.

Using radiant and searing heat, he whipped up a banquet of mussels stuffed with trevally, coriander and lemon, juicy chicken roasted literally on a stick that had been sharpened by Theo and, the pièce de résistance, rock-seared Wagyu beef that'd been reared on the farm - what I like to think of as happy meat.

My son embraced the wilderness so completely, Tom dubbed him Cavey (for Captain Caveman) and I loved watching him rocket around, lighting and tending the fire, pouring water on hot rocks for the sizzle and steam, buzzing out at rising trout and fishing for an eel.

Far from screens and distractions, Poronui is the perfect place for kids and adults to learn and play.

Listed by *Forbes* magazine as one of the world's top 10 lodges of its kind, Poronui is also a haven for serious hunters and anglers, the experiences people have here are world class and the staff are all multitalented, people at the top of their fields.

As for the farm, it's 8200 beautiful hectares and the hunting and fishing is done so thoughtfully. There's a significant herd management programme, they're selective about what's taken and a lot of useful data is collected.

The farming operations are also conducted with care and an eye on conservation; from the angus cows to the wagyu bulls, the commercial deer for venison and velvet and the manuka honey (which makes a perfect souvenir), everything here has a story.

Whether you're a family wanting to genuinely bond, a group of friends keen to hang out somewhere more exhilarating than the beach, or honeymooners seeking a dash of wilderness with the romance, Poronui is where you want to be.

CHECKLIST

Details: <u>Poronui</u>, New Zealand's premier fly fishing lodge, rated in the world's top 10 by *Forbes* magazine, for fishing, hunting and outdoor pursuits. For unforgettable cultural, food and wilderness experiences, host <u>Tom Loughlin</u> can create adventures for any party, large or small.

Further information: See greatlaketaupo.com.

Elisabeth and her son were guests of Poronui Lodge.

By Elisabeth Easther

Copyright ©2013, APN Holdings NZ Limited