

It's a half-hour helicopter ride from Auckland to Great Mercury, the island you can call your own for \$20,000 a day.

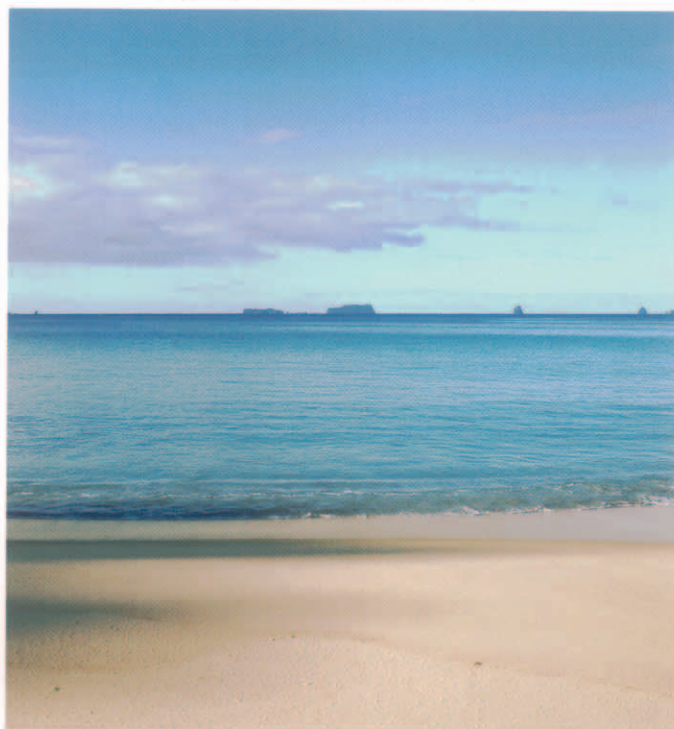
BOOK IT: YOUR OWN PRIVATE ISLAND

GREAT MERCURY RISING

A PRIVATE ISLAND FOUR MILES
OFF THE COAST OF NEW ZEALAND
BY CAROLINE HABERFELD FRIEDMAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY EARL CARTER



Signage outside the boathouse



View from Peach Grove Beach



Farm manager Mark Kilgour tending the flock

In early 2004, Sir Michael Fay, the New Zealand banker best known for championing his country's America's Cup team, received an unexpected telephone call. A high-profile family searching for a secluded holiday spot wanted to know, could they rent his private island?

Thanks to this request, Fay is now willing to rent out the island, on a very limited basis, at \$20,000 a day. Make no mistake: Great Mercury Island may be in New Zealand, but it has nothing to do with hobbits and there's not a hint of the rough and rustic Kiwi adventure. Rather, Great Mercury is the definition of style, the ultimate

expression of luxury. Which is why a famous American stylesetter (sorry, no names allowed) flew his family there last Christmas.

The seventh-largest island off the coast of New Zealand—and just four miles from its northeast shore—Great Mercury is 5,000 acres of myth, magic, and unrivaled beauty. Originally a pair of smaller islands, Great Mercury was formed when a sandbar fused the two. This was how some 5,000 Maori tribesmen found the land when they arrived, circa 700 A.D. And here they stayed until the early 19th century. Evidence is everywhere: in the shape of lookout points, hillsides carved for defense, and tools sharpened as weapons or cooking knives.

Kiwi myth—as well as the sheer reality of a place so magnificent—is what captured the imagination of Fay and his business partner, David Richwhite, when they purchased Great Mercury in 1977. “We wanted to preserve the island as generations had before us and as generations hopefully will after us,” says Fay, who remains committed to taking care of Great Mercury and its inhabitants, which to date include the 400,000 Monterey pines he planted, 4,000 sheep, 500 Angus cattle, and three horses. The only other regulars are the property's farmer and his wife; the chef; and the fishing captain. Of course, a full staff remains at the ready when guests are in residence.



Pool overlooking
Huruhi Harbor

Sardinian architect Savin Couëlle, whom the Fays met while sailing the Mediterranean, designed their house—or houses, as there wound up being two. After choosing a spot overlooking a particularly placid bay, Couëlle sited the main house and guesthouse (called the Up House and Down House) into the side of a hill and covered the rooftops of each with rocks and moss to further the illusion that they'd been chiseled into the landscape.

Stunning as the exteriors may be, it's the inviting design and specific details inside that truly charm. Enormous pieces of driftwood salvaged from the island's 12 white-sand beaches deck the sun-drenched bedrooms' ceilings and walls. Cutouts in the whitewashed walls hold Maori artifacts unearthed when the property was being developed. In the tiled bathrooms, large windows frame postcardesque panoramas of sheep roaming the hills beyond the mirrorlike bay. A model schooner and mermaid share wall space above the doors to the kitchen, underscoring the role water has played in the history of the island.

There are no schedules to follow, no events to attend. Sleeping in is encouraged; reading poolside counts as an activity. Unless, of course, you want to hike, ride a horse, take a long drive in a four-by-four or an even longer walk on the beach. And the property comes loaded with toys for Jet-Skiing, water-skiing, sea kayaking, windsurfing, and scuba diving. For fishermen, the waters are rich: John Dory, red snapper, tuna, kingfish, marlin. The catch is cleaned and cooked up right in the spotless kitchen of the boathouse, a Nantucket-style structure (you can sit on a deck and smoke a cigar or sprawl out watching the flat-screen TV) built just three years ago.

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THE WAY TO GO

How to Book It

Best time to visit? November to May. So says Sam Porter, owner of **Seasonz Travel** and the only person who can book you into Great Mercury Island. Porter started the company after spending five years leading custom trips throughout the world for Abercrombie & Kent. A native New Zealander, he now arranges bespoke trips to the country's top resorts, including Eichardt's in Queenstown and Huka Lodge in Taupo. Great Mercury rents for \$20,000 a day for a maximum of 22 people. To secure the property, contact Porter at Seasonz Travel, 64-9/360-8461 or www.seasonz.co.nz.

Getting to Great Mercury

Air New Zealand and Qantas airlines fly from Los Angeles to Auckland International Airport, 13 miles south of the city center. The flight from Los Angeles takes roughly 12 hours. Porter arranges your pickup in advance and brings you to the helipad, where one of Seasonz' four helicopters takes you on the 30-minute trip to the island.



All told, the property has eight bedrooms and bathrooms, four fireplaces, two state-of-the-art kitchens, a fully equipped gym, and a world-class wine cellar.





One of five guest bedrooms
in the Down House

Fish? Fruit? Whatever you're into, food is central to the Great Mercury experience. Peaches hang on trees in the yard, lemons dangle from fragrant branches, and meals are always prepared to exact request: extra salmon and toast points for a beach picnic, medium-rare steaks by the fire, a light lunch on the patio by the pool, you name it. Marc Zaitman, one of the country's top private chefs, rules the kitchen. Quick on the draw, he'll figure out what you like—and don't like (capers, if found stranded on

a plate, will never again appear). At mealtimes, the Up House seems to hum. No question, this is a house that loves people. No wonder, this is an island people love. Fay is surely a man of many talents, but his genius lies in preserving, even enhancing, this piece of his homeland—its solitude, its serenity, its history, its landscape, its magic. That high-profile family who first inquired about the island? They've since returned, raving about Great Mercury as the best place they've ever stayed. Ever. ■