

Kiwi Calling

Family eco-adventures in New Zealand pay off big for the planet.

BY COSTAS CHRIST



Clockwise from top right: Cape Kidnappers, and the Upchurches fly-fishing and at a lobster picnic arranged by Minaret Station.

“**I** LOVE IT WHEN TRAVELERS HAVE the ability to engage in positive and unique experiences that support conservation,” says Virtuoso’s CEO, Matthew Upchurch. He and his wife, Jessica, and their two boys, Clay, 12, and Benji, 8, recently watched rangers release a flightless kiwi – one of the world’s most endangered

species – into the wild. The release program is part of a pilot project between the Department of Conservation and Auckland Tourism on New Zealand’s Motutapu Island, a nature reserve in the Hauraki Gulf just outside Auckland. Maori elders were on hand to provide a traditional blessing for the occasion.

Witnessing the kiwi disappear into the

(CAPE KIDNAPPERS) JIRI FOLTYN/GETTY IMAGES, (UPCHURCHES) NICK WALLIS

Greater Good

bush was one of numerous eco-highlights during the family's journey through New Zealand – their second trip in a yearlong series of travels honoring the United Nations' 2017 International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. "As a family, and as part of Virtuoso, we believe in the power of travel to make the world a better place," Jessica says.

Seasonz Travel, one of Virtuoso's in-country tour connections, organized the 12-day adventure, beginning with an exploration of New Zealand's North Island, including Lake Taupo, Hawke's Bay, and the Bay of Islands, then moving on to the South Island's Fiordland and Southern Alps. "Most people think that sustainable tourism is only about the green footprint, but it's much more than that," says Matthew, noting that the family chose New Zealand in part for its myriad activities and lodges that safeguard cultural and natural heritage and benefit local people. "Sustainable tourism matters because protecting our planet for future generations is the right thing to do," he says. "More travelers today are looking for peak experiences that also have a positive impact on the people and places they visit."

Bigger than the United Kingdom but with one-fourteenth its population, New Zealand is made for travelers who are passionate about outdoor living, indigenous cultures, and fresh, hyperlocal cuisine, the last of which was on display at every meal. "There's no question that New Zealand served up some of the most creative culinary experiences I've ever come across," Matthew says. "Chef Paul Froggatt at Huka Lodge draws daily inspiration from nearby farms and vineyards. And during a visit to Kauri Cliffs, we dined on snapper that Clay caught in the surf, along with fresh-picked cauliflower and sausages made in the kitchen."

"I don't think we had one meal where some of the ingredients weren't harvested in the previous 24 hours," adds Jessica. "On the South Island, Matt Wallis, Minaret Station's general manager, jumped right into the ocean and came back with three huge lobsters – locals call them crayfish – that he then cooked for us. There's a deep connection among the land, the sea, and nourishing, healthy food."

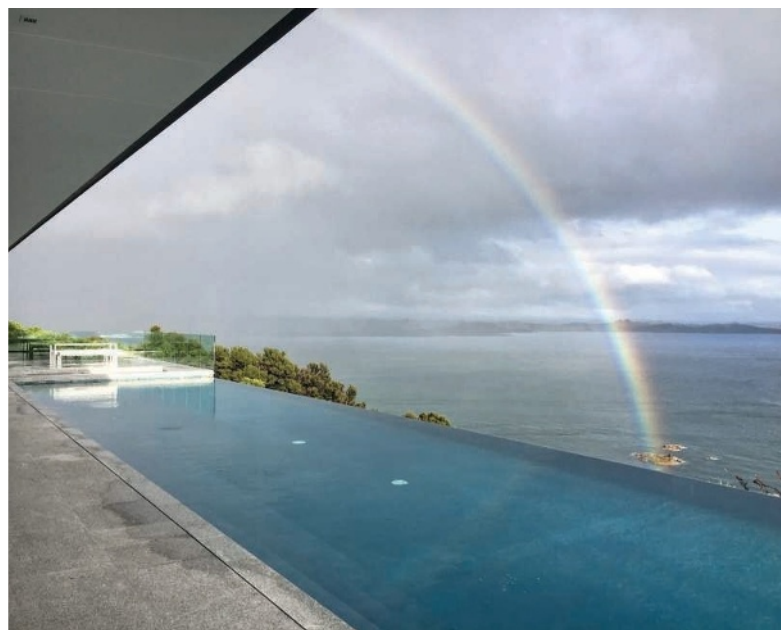
ON THE NORTH ISLAND, A HIKE INTO Waipoua Forest organized by Eagles Nest lodge leads to Tane Mahuta ("Lord of the



Above: Benji Upchurch and a kiwi. Below, from left: High adventure with Minaret Station guides, the Bay of Islands, and Clay Upchurch's catch of the day at Kauri Cliffs.

(KIWI) CLAY UPCHURCH, (BAY OF ISLANDS) GEORGE CLERK/GETTY IMAGES





From left: Four-wheeling at The Farm at Cape Kidnappers, Eagles Nest's premier perch, and tiny-house life in Hobbiton.

Forest”), a giant 2,000-year-old kauri tree that is sacred to the Maori. At The Farm at Cape Kidnappers, where the Upchurches also stayed, guides lead families by flashlight at night into pitch-dark caves that twinkle with glowworms like a subterranean city’s skyline. “Nature’s Las Vegas Strip!” as a delighted Clay put it.

Perhaps no place showcases the country’s splendor like Minaret Station Alpine Lodge. Located in a high South Island valley accessible only by helicopter, the four-chalet outpost serves as a luxe base camp for glacier visits in Mount Aspiring National Park, penguin encounters on the coast, and explorations of fjords where 2,000-foot waterfalls tumble into the sea.

The Upchurches wrapped up their journey at Matakauri Lodge, situated in a forested grove on Lake Wakatipu ten minutes’ drive from Queenstown – known as the “adventure capital of the world.” But it wasn’t the adrenaline-inducing zip lines, bungee jumps, and jet-boat rides through canyons that captured their attention. Rather, it was reflecting on how their sustainable-tourism holidays are also inspiring the family.

“When we order drinks now, both our boys say, ‘Please, no plastic straws,’ ” says

Jessica – a request Benji and Clay began making after learning about plastic pollution in the oceans while at The Brando resort in French Polynesia.

“I don’t know how I can put it into words,” Benji says of his encounters with New

Zealand’s rare endemic species and fragile habitats. “People need to see it with their own eyes to understand.” Which is precisely the point of the family’s focus on sustainable travel – to help safeguard our planet for future generations.

LEADING THE WAY

Sustainability with star power in French Polynesia.

The Upchurch family kicked off their year of sustainable travel at **The Brando** in French Polynesia for good reason: It may be the most sustainable resort in the world.



Barack Obama tours The Brando's ecostation.

Set on the private island of Tetiaroa, the property uses solar and coconut-oil power to meet 100 percent of its energy needs, locally sources or grows its food in on-site organic gardens, and supports a conservation program to protect Tetiaroa Atoll, one of the country’s most spectacular. The Brando even caught the attention of former **President Barack Obama**, who recently stayed there. Among the highlights of his visit was taking the resort’s sustainability tour, where he talked with Tetiaroa Society staff about topics ranging from climate change impacts to the baby sea turtles that hatched on the beach in front of his villa.

(BARACK OBAMA) COURTESY OF THE BRANDO, (EAGLES NEST) ANDREA GONZALEZ