

RL MAGAZINE

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Savvy golfers are heading down under to New Zealand for an above-par putting experience

Like religion, golf has its rituals, its traditional garb (at what other time are wind shirts acceptable?), and, of course, its pilgrimages—to Augusta, to Pebble Beach, to Scotland, and so on. Yet as pilgrimages go, golf meccas Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers, located on the North Island of New Zealand, are off the beaten cart path. Even Australia is twelve hundred miles away. As Julian Robertson, the legendary seventy-seven-year-old American hedge-fund guru who developed the properties, says, "It's about as far away as anyplace in the world. But the people who come realize it's about as close to heaven as you can get."

Such superlatives abound when describing the dramatic views and towering cliffs of these two courses perched seemingly at the edge of the earth. In his signature Carolina drawl, Robertson says of his decision to purchase in 1995 the site for Kauri Cliffs, a sixty-five-hundred-acre sheep farm, and in 2001 the six thousand acres for Cape Kidnappers, "You could buy the equivalent of a U.S. National Park for the price of a modest New York apartment." Of course Robertson made his fortune making good bets. In its heyday, his Tiger fund had more than \$22 billion under its management. And in September 2009, Golf Magazine ranked Cape Kidnappers the fourth greatest golf course in the world, and Kauri Cliffs number eighteen.

"If Cape Kidnappers were bigger or any more dramatic, it would probably be cordoned off as a national park," says Tom Doak, who designed the course. Situated atop a hulking promontory on the shark's tooth-shaped tip of Hawkes Bay, the fairways of Cape Kidnappers jut into the Pacific like fingers on a hand reaching palms up as if joyously accepting the gifts of the golf gods. The par-5 15th—aptly named Pirate's Plank—is so narrow it looks like the runway of an aircraft carrier, with a 65-foot ravine to the right and a 450-foot cliff to the left. According to PGA Tour player Brandt Snedeker, "It's like Pebble Beach on steroids." (Pebble stands a hundred feet above the Pacific; Cape Kidnappers, five hundred). Snedeker, along with Adam Scott, Anthony Kim, and Hunter Mahan, participated in the inaugural Kiwi Challenge, a two-day tournament played on the sister courses in 2008. Mahan, who won the 2009

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The annual Kiwi Challenge at Cape Kidnappers, held in November, features the best young golfers on the PGA Tour, including Hunter Mahan and Camilo Villegas in 2009

It's a world Robertson fell in love with in 1978 while taking a sabbatical from Wall Street with his wife and two young sons. "I sorta wanted to drop out," he says. "I'm a geography nut, and there was probably more geography in New Zealand than any comparably sized place on earth." And more sheep: ten for every person.

That's a statistic a lot of people know. One they don't is that New Zealand also has one golf course for every ninety-three hundred people, the highest ratio in the world. Robertson's youngest son, Alex, thirty, who served as the Kiwi Challenge tournament director, says, "The resorts have really put New Zealand on the map as an international golf destination and as a destination for luxury travel, which is great for the country."



The restaurant at Kauri Cliffs serves up local produce and seafood and also hosts a nightly cocktail hour

And the Robertson resorts' luxury is world class. The January 2010 issue of Travel + Leisure ranked the Lodge at Kauri Cliffs seventeenth in the "World's Top 50 Hotels." Wrapped in white verandas overlooking the Matauri Bay, the Lodge looks like a mansion in Southampton. Its twenty-two cottages, each with private porches and elegantly appointed sitting rooms with fireplaces, are the epitome of understated elegance. Cocktail hour is nightly at six (jackets required), and during the day a full slate of activities and amenities are available (tennis, hunting, fishing, kayaking, chef-prepared picnics on the beach, and a full-service spa, and, off campus, wine tours, hot-air balloon rides, and horseback riding).





Cape Kidnappers is situated on 6,000 acres of rolling pastures in Hawkes Bay on the North Island of New Zealand. Suites feature private balconies with views of the farm, the golf course, and the ocean

About 350 miles due southeast, Cape Kidnappers's accompanying hotel, the Farm, resembles a cluster of farmhouses when approached via helicopter charter. Yet with large stone fireplaces, vaulted ceilings, and antler chandeliers; chairs upholstered in shearling, leather, and tweed; and a spa hung with Picassos, pastoral has never been so chic. While both resorts are Relais & Châteaux properties, Cape Kidnappers is located in one of New Zealand's foremost wine regions, famous for its sauvignon blancs and pinot noirs, and entrusts its dining to chef Dale Garland, who worked with Thomas Keller at Per Se in New York. Alex notes that "less than 50 percent of people who come play golf. It's also for the family that just wants to see New Zealand."

But when Alex, the reigning club champion at Shinnecock, in New York, visits, he plays golf. In fact the 13th hole at Cape Kidnappers is named "Al's Ace" because he got a hole in one the first time he played it—the day before the course officially opened. "Everybody was jumping up and down taking pictures except my dad, who complained I was holding up the course," Alex recalls. "The only other person out there was my mom, two holes back with my little cousins."

He continues, "I think you play a lot of courses that are really pretty or very well designed. It's very rare to play something that's as beautiful as both these properties but also has a first-class layout." His father, a connoisseur who has played some of the most challenging courses in the world, was first introduced to Doak's work when he played Pacific Dunes in Oregon just after it opened. "We agreed it was the best golf course we had ever played or, I should say, one of the best," Robertson says. Doak recalls, "He called me almost immediately after he was done. We talked about the piece of property he had just bought in New Zealand."



Cape Kidnappers' golf course, designed by legendary course architect Tom Doak, sits atop 500-foot cliffs that plunge into the Pacific

Robertson, who was recently made an honorary knight by the government of New Zealand, having donated \$115 million worth of art to the Auckland Art Gallery and started a scholarship program for New Zealand residents, says, "The fact that New Zealand is hard to get to will, in the long run, probably be the biggest advantage we have, simply because it won't be run over the way the rest of the world is, and will be."

As when he bought them many years ago, the properties remain as working farms for sheep and cattle. Alex says, "My dad often talks about being not just an owner of the land but the custodian—how it's really just natural beauty that God created, and we just put in a couple of flagsticks."

Lilibet Snellings has written for Flaunt, Anthem, Soma, GOOD Magazine, LA.com, and Metromix, and has appeared on camera, covering the Masters golf tournament for Sports Illustrated's Golf.com and L.A. Fashion Week for Flaunt TV.

1. *Courtesy Kauri Cliffs*
2. *Joann Dost*
3. *Courtesy Kauri Cliffs*
4. *Courtesy the Farm at Cape Kidnappers(3)*

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