

Deep in the lap of luxury

It may be one of the smallest and lesser-known of New Zealand's luxury lodges, but those in the know recognise Edenhouse as a leader in the pack. Geoff Collett paid a visit.

The setting

The Thorpe-Orinoco-Ngatimoti district is hardly Nelson's best-known back block. Between the Motueka River valley and the tough, tumbling clay country of the Moutere, it's a classic slice of the sort of countryside this region specialises in: veering suddenly from the bucolic to the shambolic, lots of twisting, little-known roads, obscure valleys, rolling hills, a backdrop of the Arthur Range. Edenhouse itself is down a side road off a side road, then up a long driveway. A large, elegant country house surrounded by a vast country garden, it's at once unexpected and totally at home in this hidden world.

The space

Edenhouse's owners, Peter and Bobbie Martin (he an Australian, she a Kiwi) arrived here in 2002, after successful careers in England – notably for the Edenhouse story. Bobbie's background is in the highest-end of interior and garden design.

They display photos of the block of land they bought to pursue their New Zealand dream, and they illustrate her startlingly far-sighted vision and design skills: it may have looked to be a decrepit, rundown affair, with a mouldering old cottage, littered with rubbish and drought-stricken, unfenced pasture, but she saw an enticing contour and setting. They set about clearing things up and building their dream home and in 2005, vision realised, decided to open it up to a handful of guests at a time, as luxury accommodation.

It may not have the profile of a Huka Lodge or Kauri Cliffs, but within the luxe market Edenhouse is routinely mentioned in the top echelon of New Zealand's lodge sector. There are two guest rooms in the main house, and a semi-self-contained cottage. Rich and, occasionally, famous types are among typical clientele, and as is standard with such places, no-one will ever know they were here.

While the house is the Martins' home, their hospitality skills and the warmth of the property makes it feel like an exclusive and fine private hotel. Which is pretty well what it is, minus the fuss and scale.

The kit

Elegance and finery are defining features of pretty well everything here, but without becoming ridiculously ostentatious or intimidating. The fridge is well-stocked, food and snacks on constant offer, the furnishings



Edenhouse luxury lodge has provided a giant-scale canvas for Bobbie and Peter Martin to realise their dream home and garden vision on.

exquisite, and an eclectic and large collection of excellent art and books line most walls; but you don't have that uneasy feeling of being afraid to walk or sit around the place for fear of sully something. The place feels lived in, inviting and real. Many of the comestibles and toiletries are proudly Nelson-made.

Comfort factor

Exceptional. As good as it's reasonable to expect, and then some. Fittings, beds, linen, bathrooms and all else are what you'd like to have in your own place if the fates had been kind to you. The nights are utterly silent, the days punctuated mostly by sheep bleats and birdsong. Expect to see pheasants and quail along with the usual tui, koromiko, fantails and so on. The cottage gets all-day sun, and is double-glazed, carpeted and fitted with heat pumps and panel heaters so you'd never know a hard frost had settled overnight.

Food

Whereas a popular lodge model seems to be to bring in a name chef or association with a smart restaurant, here the meals are treated far more as a home-cooked experience. The Martins figure that their guests are often spoiled for restaurant-style meals and want something simpler. They pride themselves on sourcing good-quality local produce; and on drawing their staff from within the immediate district, which precludes celebrity chefs. Our meals included fresh scampi, lamb rack, Stewart Island salmon and roast beef; we could have gone for fresh snapper if we'd wanted. It was unfussy, fresh, tasty and, as they say, all good. The wine selection was exceptional (and non-stop, it seemed): Peter Martin was a generous hand with bottles of such rare local gems as Neudorf Moutere Chardonnay, Himmelsfeld Cabernet Sauvignon, and

Ruby Bay Pinot Noir. Snacks, cakes, refreshments, fruit, biscuits are always close at hand; no visitor here is in danger of hunger pangs, or an unquenched thirst.

Worth stepping out for

The property's gardens. Mt Arthur and the Kahurangi National Park are just over there for serious outdoorsy stuff. The pretty, scattered community of Upper Moutere and Neudorf includes some of the best examples of the things Nelson is best known for and is an easy drive. Neudorf Vineyard remains the king of Nelson wine; just down the road, artist Michael MacMillan and his partner Jackie Crow have built what deserves to be the standard-bearer for artist studios. Throw in various cheesemakers, wineries, berry farms, craft brewers, arty and crafty types, and it's plenty to occupy a good half-day's trawling, if not more, while barely venturing on to a main road.

Then there's Motueka and Mapua for any number of cafe/craft beer/winery/tourist shopping experiences; Nelson city, if you're that way inclined, is an hour's drive away. Peter Martin advises that one of the more popular day-trips for guests here is a helicopter ride down to and then up the West Coast, stopping in at the likes of Kohaihai and Wharariki Beach. But the most popular destination is the Abel Tasman National Park, not much more than a half-hour drive to the northeast, and a guaranteed hit with visitors from countries who only usually look at pictures of unspoiled, bush-fringed, golden-sand beaches.

Getting there

As mentioned, it's about an hour's drive from Nelson if you're arriving from there, and you'll want your GPS or Google Maps app running if you don't want to wind up in some other, even more obscure valley. If you've

driven from the south (like Christchurch), it's quickest to head up the Motueka Valley, rather than cross the Spooner Range into Nelson proper. I suspect quite a few guests helicopter in, in which case all you need to know is that it's gloriously isolated, but still near enough to where you need to get to, and the views up there must be sensational.

Essentials

OK, no surprise – you pay to stay here. Low-season tariffs start around \$875, or \$1300 in the busy period, depending on room and meal choices. It's not really been on the radar for Kiwis, but there's no reason why that should put off anyone wanting a taste of luxe in peaceful Nelson.

Be advised that it's highly popular with Europeans and Americans come spring and summer, and books up quickly. We went in the depths of winter, when Nelson is sleeper than ever, and were the only guests. The frost was hard but the day was brilliant beyond a chilly edge; Mt Arthur, just across the Mot Valley, looks even more regal with a thick cloak of snow. The garden was far from its best, but winter's veil can't hide the grandeur. Bobbie Martin was out enthusiastically in the frigid morning, directing another epic round of tree-planting.

The tariff is definitely for the wealthy, or the once-in-a-lifetime treat, but you can be confident that you will get your value. Only other advice is make it at least two nights so you can really sink into the good life.

The verdict

Excellent. Delivers all that it promises and some. The isolation and tranquillity are as essential to the success as the home and the hospitality, so don't balk at the apparent remoteness.

■ The writer was a guest of Edenhouse.



One of Edenhouse's dining rooms, reflecting Bobbie Martin's classically English-inspired design background.



The main living room in the Edenhouse homestead and lodge.



A guest suite in the main homestead.