

Wake up to the wonder of Waikato

Many of us miss out on the subtle delights of this stunning countryside as we speed by heading elsewhere, writes John Gardner

FOR SOME reason we have never really thought of the Waikato as a destination. Like too many Aucklanders, I suspect, we have approached the district as somewhere to be driven through as fast as legally possible while heading somewhere else.

A weekend based at Emanuel's by Lake Karapiro showed this has been a mistake, as our visit turned out to be too brief to do all we wanted. It offered pleasures of town, country and water and even the scenery proved much more interesting than the long flat hauls which were the abiding impression from our previous transits.

The first suspicion that we had been displaying unforgivable ignorance came with the mesmerising view from Emanuel's which is perched on a ridge above the lake and looks across a panorama of rich, country landscape towards the hills of Maungatautari with its scenic reserve.

Our hosts, Ann and Eddie Rempelberg, suggested we take time to visit there and it was good advice. The volcanic cone is home to an extraordinary restoration project conducted by the Maungatautari Ecological Island Trust. Some 47 kilometres of pest-proof fence surround an area of forest from which imported species and pests are being eliminated to provide some glimpses of the diversity of the original New Zealand ecology. The project is driven by volunteers with support from local authorities and other sponsors and some \$14 million has been raised. It is still a work in progress but even now, as we ambled through the forest almost alone, it has a distinctly individual sense of place. It could, I suppose be argued, that it is a little too manicured with its easy footpaths and viewing tower built by the



WEEKENDER GREAT GETAWAYS AROUND NZ

local Lions Clubs, but this does make it wonderfully accessible to almost everyone. The full chorus of song from native birds is not yet back but it already provides a hint of a vanished natural world.

Outside the reserve gates too there are terrific views of a softer rural landscape with a distinctive appeal and this charm came again when we went for lunch at Judge's Valley vineyard

The building, while paying tribute to English country style, is no replica but a beautifully proportioned modern lodge.

which nestles in an alluring little pocket providing the microclimate which allows its planting of Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec to flourish. The Bordeaux-style wine lives up to its premium quality billing and tasting it with a good food platter in the vineyard restaurant is a very pleasant way to spend an hour or two. And if this has whetted your appetite there are several other Waikato vineyards,



SOAK IT UP: The delightful rolling countryside of the Waikato.

The Waikato's attractions are not, however, all rural. Emanuel's is not far from Cambridge, a pleasing town which manages the difficult act of highlighting its tourist appeal while retaining a working country town feel. The anonymous multiples haven't taken over its main streets which feature an excellent bookshop and some decent cafes with the one we stumbled into, Rata, being a real find. And there is a fine walk along the Waikato River within easy reach.

If your taste is for a bigger city our fellow guests at Emanuel's — also Aucklanders making a first stop in the Waikato for some time — had been so pleased with their Hamilton shopping experience on the way down that they returned the following day for an encore.

It has to be conceded that the development of our warm feeling for the Waikato was kick-started by Emanuel's itself.

The building, while paying tribute to English country style, is no replica but a beautifully proportioned modern lodge, designed by Ed and Ann. The rooms, from bedrooms to lounge and dining room, are generous and furnished in traditional style but to the highest contemporary standards. Our shower would not have been out of

place in an episode of *Star Trek* and I had visions of being beamed up, nude and dripping wet and not a pretty sight.

The hospitality is unassuming and relaxed with an excellent dinner that appeared to have been planned to cater for an appetite bigger than mine — and I class myself in the greedy rather than gourmet category. The breakfast was matching in quality and I have to mention the superb black pudding.

The views from the rooms are just spectacular. State Highway 1 is tucked under the ridge and Lake Karapiro glistened in the sun and on our weekend was awash with serious kayakers. The lake does, of course, offer a full range of other water sports. We passed on them but they are another weapon in the region's considerable armoury of diversions. We didn't go riding or play golf either but they too are easily available.

The centrality of the Waikato means you can just blast past but if you do decide to stop there it provides a great jumping-off ground with excursions to the coast at Raglan, to Waiotomo (although Emanuel's do a nice trip to a local glow-worm cave), the Kaimai and Pirongia forest parks, Rotorua or Taupo being less than daunting.

For ourselves, next time we might just stick around the neighbourhood.



PEACEFUL: Emanuel's nestles by Lake Karapiro and offers wonderful views across this famous farming region.

CHECKLIST

✓ EMANUEL'S

Accommodation from \$350 a night including full breakfast. With three-course, silver-service dinner \$420 per night. Two-night minimum stay. See www.emanuels.co.nz
Email: info@emanuels.co.nz
Postal: Karapiro Heights (20km south of Cambridge), Waikato, Ph: (07) 827 8286

✓ KAYAKING

Theboatshed@xtra.co.nz
See www.theboatshed.net.nz

✓ RESERVE

Maungatautari Ecological Island Trust, P. O. Box 476, 64 Alpha St, Cambridge. Ph: (07) 823 7455. Email: mail@maungatrust.org
See www.maungatrust.org

✓ VINEYARD

Judge Valley Vineyard, 178 Judge Rd, Te Awamutu; freephone 0800 2JUDGE. See www.judgevalley.co.nz/

✓ WAIKATO TOURISM

www.waikato.co.nz www.tourism.net.nz/region/waikato