

Paradise Found
by Rob Harris

Awaroa, New Zealand

A solitary, middle-aged man is standing on a deserted inlet at low tide, trying to keep his umbrella pointed into the wind. A duffle weighs on one shoulder but he dares not rest it on the sand or his vacation clothes will be as wet as his socks. He's been standing there for about ten minutes, watching raindrops wriggle in tidepools like rhinestones on a cocktail gown.

He checks his watch but he can't see the time because he lost his glasses somewhere between stopping for gas and phoning the Awaroa Lodge to get directions over a 30 km stretch of dirt and gravel switchbacks, across Washaway Creek (with the welcoming signage, "road subject to flash flooding"), ending at the cliff above this beach. He is certain the last 45 minutes thudding over the pitted dirt track, as rain turned to storm, have relocated a vital organ.

Two lights in the distance draw near. Astride the all-terrain vehicle, in weather gear that makes him look like a blue-vinyl blowfish, is Terry Knight, resort owner, operator, builder, promoter, and St. Bernard rescue team. The hapless traveler climbs aboard the ATV behind his host, visions of a restorative holiday reduced to hopes of finding a dry pair of pants at the bottom of his bag.

I had been based in Auckland for the previous five weeks and, in the week I allowed for travel at the end of the job, I decided to forego thoughts of Sydney, Fiji or Raratonga for a further exploration of New Zealand. I mentioned to a co-worker that I

wanted an “authentic New Zealand experience” for my brief holiday. She recommended the Awaroa Lodge - with the caveat, “I haven’t been there. It’s kinda new. Hope it hasn’t gone bust since my friend visited.”

To visit New Zealand and see only Auckland is like flying into San Diego and thinking one had seen California. Worse, it *feels* like one has flown to the other side of the world only to find what could have been found in a two-hour drive south along the 405 from Los Angeles.

Part of the problem is perception: a country this far from the rest of the world *should* look more exotic than San Diego. It *should* have a cultural history with art and artifacts at least as ancient as the padres of the old pueblo. It *should* have wildlife that can be found nowhere in San Diego outside the zoo.

The fact is, Auckland is a handsome but not particularly distinct-looking city and while the pervasive Maori culture is fascinating, it’s not one with a wealth of architecture or artifact and is uniquely well integrated into the mainstream. As for rare fauna, New Zealand's indigenous mammal population consists of two species of bat.

New Zealand has two main islands - North and South - the topography, climate and culture of which vary dramatically. The entire country has a population of approximately 3.6 million. The United Kingdom and Japan, with comparable land masses, have populations in the neighborhood of 25 and 50 million respectively. About 75% of the population of New Zealand lives on the North Island - most of these within commuting distance of Auckland.

The heart of the North Island is Auckland and commerce. This is not the heart of New Zealand. It is not what I flew 18 hours from New York hoping to find.

The main building of the Awaroa (the name means "Long River") Lodge is built of native woods with glass doors overlooking a covered patio where no one is sitting on this dreary night. I am told the region only gets 60 inches of rain a year. This does nothing to cheer me. Dripping on the register as I'm checked in by Leela, pageboy crop of silver hair, wire rim glasses, in her late 50s or early 60s, I glumly notice about 15-20 warm, dry bodies in repose around the cozy dining room and lounge area.

The bungalow-style guest cabins are all named after local trees and I am put in Kauri, one of the world's biggest evergreens. The room (a single suite) is clean and spare with sofa and table sitting area, a desk, single bed on which I unpack my damp clothes and a queen-sized bed on which I long to collapse after dinner. The large slate-tiled bath is an open shower room with a window through which one can observe nature - and vice versa. There is a solitary socket (somewhere) in the cabin and none in the bathroom - so forget the electric toothbrush. There is no television or radio.

After changing into semi-dry pants and taking off my soggy socks (it would do no good to put on a fresh pair since my hiking boots - the only shoes I've brought along - are still soaked), I make my way back to the dining room and politely decline Terry's offer to join him at a table of other guests. I prefer sullen solitude in which to succor the full festering misery of imagining myself touring Sydney by taxicab tonight.

The surroundings don't lend themselves to sulking. I've positioned myself within warming distance of the large brass-hooded fireplace, where the waiter brings me cognac. A lounge near the fireplace takes down one of three guitars hanging on a wall and begins strumming. I've been aware of a John Coltrane ballad coming from the stereo speakers

but as the musician proves his proficiency, the stereo politely recedes and the acoustic guitar swells and floats nicely above the chorus of conversation. The rain becomes a rhythm section.

I had dinner in Auckland one night with film director Harry Sinclair who made "Topless Women Talk About Their Lives," winner of this year's New Zealand Film Festival and the third biggest home-grown box office hit of all time (following "The Piano" and "Once Were Warriors").

"For all the remoteness of the place, people here aren't so provincial," he told me. "They have a fairly large world view. We know we're isolated and so we make a greater effort to find out what's going on in the rest of the world."

New Zealanders were among the best-traveled people in the world. There was hardly a Kiwi I'd met in five weeks who hadn't been to some part of the United States at least once. Most had also made multiple visits to Europe and many to South America. The Christmas holiday here is six weeks long. People rarely go away on vacation for less than a month.

As New Zealanders explore the rest of the world, some of the rest of the world is discovering New Zealand - and not leaving. The fastest growing segment of the population comes not from native birth but immigration. And the majority of immigrants cite their ready acceptance as one of the things they like best about their adopted country.

"We came here for a better life than we could have in Fiji," related a cab driver, father of two, whose wife graduated from the University of Auckland. "New Zealand is the land of opportunity. If you open up to people - not just stay within your own ethnic

group - people are very open and friendly here. They don't care if you are an immigrant."

A Korean camera store operator who moved to Auckland from Seoul three years ago told me in broken English that besides "clean air" what he likes best about living here is "people get along. I don't think people don't like me because I am a foreigner." He asks if it is the same way in America and I mutter something about all people being individuals.

A young street vendor who has been in Auckland for 10 years moved back here after living in London for two years. She finds Auckland "pretty boring"; she "loved it" in London. "I suppose you come back for friends really. To be with people you know. For the people, I guess," her voice trails off.

"Climate, lack of people. It's got just about everything, " muses Ponti, the Awaroa Lodge handyman and groundskeeper. A stocky man in his late 50s, tranquility hovers like an opium cloud as he repaints the exterior of the main building by the backpacker's showers. "It's one place you can survive without a lot of pressure. Golden Bay is probably about 20 years behind the rest of New Zealand."

The sun is shining but the trails are still wet. So are my hiking boots but they've brought me to the top of the South Track where I've entered Abel Tasman Park and stopped at a vista that encompasses all of Golden Bay. The sea is a hue lighter than the sky where it covers the inlet and a dark sapphire where the water deepens. It is nearly 7:00 a.m. and I've walked for about an hour. I return to the Lodge where, at 7:30, the dining room has just begun serving.

Haydn is behind the counter. Nordic and in his late twenties, he runs the

restaurant and selects most of the music on cd. Morning is mostly classical: we breakfast with Mozart and Vivaldi today. Night time is always jazz. Afternoons can be anything but Haydn's taste runs toward soft rock.

"Sometimes Terry'll slip in some Slim Dusty," he lifts his eyebrows in the direction of the boss who has just switched cds. "He loves that stuff. Don't ask me why."

Terry joins me at the table as Haydn brings us each a fresh pot of tea. I notice Terry wears a Chicago Bulls watch.

A fifth generation New Zealander, Terry was the second of five children born to a builder and his wife on Chatham Island, a rural outpost 500 miles east of the city of Christchurch. His father, Peter Knight, prospered during the "Crayfish Boom" of 1960 which saw the population rise to its present level of approximately 700.

"Chatham's claim to fame is having more Harleys per capita than any other place in the world," Terry says with little irony. "All those wild young fisherman."

When Terry was four, the Knight family left the island, on one of 16 boats and was lost at sea for two weeks. Four of the 16 boats never made it to the mainland.

Peter Knight later found fame and some fortune as a hydroplane racer. He still holds three world speed records. Terry first traveled to the U.S. as a member of his father's race team. Though he was only there for six months - mostly in Chicago and Michigan - something of him was defined in that first visit to the States.

The next time he traveled to the U.S. was to Balboa, California to sell a 1952 Citroen he had restored and gotten the U.S. Navy to ship over. He spent every cent he made from the sale and returned to New Zealand broke. But it was another taste of American enterprise. Back home, with his brother, he built a block of flats on land they

borrowed money to buy, sold those and, in 1985, bought his own land inland from Awaroa. Two years later, he sold that for three times what he paid. By then, he was in love with Golden Bay.

He was hired by a man named Whitwell to build an additional bathroom in his house. As part of the deal, Terry got the man to sell him 100 acres at the edge of the Abel Tasman National Park for \$30,000. With a couple of partners, he bought it and financed the initial stages of construction for what was to become the Awaroa Lodge. Recently 10 acres of nearby land sold for \$1.3 million (NZ).

Now 40 years old with a wife, Kerstin, who is also his bookkeeper, and a year old daughter, Terry Knight is confident he has found paradise.

"I traveled all over New Zealand and went looking for what I considered the most premium part of the country," he says with Tom Sawyer-certitude. "We opened in '91 and we now have about 10,000 guests a year. There are about 55,000 people who walk the trails through here. We started off to be a high-class backpackers stopover. But the restaurant was too good, so we built around it. Some think we built up too fast but we made a go of it."

Get in and give it a go, Mate

A bit o' hard work won't killya

Our big brown land needs your helpin' hand

So get in and do your bit (for Australia)

- Slim Dusty

"You oughta go out on the inlet cruise later," Terry suggests after I tell him I've

already hiked the South Trail and ask what other recreation the lodge offers. "If Richard Hoder was around, he might take some people out on the pirate ship during the day. We call it that; just his boat, really. Cruise around the bay blasting Beethoven at full volume, listening to him tell sea stories. He's a fantastic storyteller.

"You oughta go evening kayaking if you're around later. The kayaks are out right now. Evening's better though; good time to see a school of dolphins. You could take the North Track as far as it goes but you can't go too far 'til the tide's lower. This time of day, most people enjoy just hanging around the grounds or going out on the beach."

So, I take a walk along the beach where the water has been painted by Maxfield Parrish.

Slow down, slow down, take your time dear brother
Why must we all be frantic bound
Why must it be the trend to hurry towards the end
Cuz in the end you'll always seem to find
That yonder hills have burned and then you've sadly learned
The green hills of happiness are the ones you've left behind
- Slim Dusty

Back at the lodge, I have a large garden salad and an espresso for lunch and request Haydn play some Neil Young. All the vegetables come from the garden, which I passed on the grounds during an earlier walk. Most of the other lunch customers are eating on the patio. But inside, I get a chance to talk with the two waitresses on duty.

Selma comes over because she recognizes my American accent. She is from

Chicago, has been in New Zealand for a year-and-a-half and seems to be reenacting Crusoe finding Friday. I might think she was flirting but she quickly mentions the Dutch husband to whom she has been married about a year. They live on a commune she describes as "metaphysical." She had worked for four years gathering field data for Harvard Medical School on children in poverty areas like Cabrini Green. She saw one empty-eyed child too many and can't imagine going back. She talks about her work in Chicago as if describing the charred remains of a house she tried to save with a leaky bucket. The commune, she says, sets up models for social change. She is in no hurry to re-enter the world where those models might be applied.

Ouria is 28 but I guessed she was ten years older. She is Algerian, raised in Marseilles, came to New Zealand six months ago from Dingle, Ireland. She lives in a farming community called Shambala, which provides room and board in exchange for labor as part of the international Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) program. She has worked at the Lodge for a month-and-a-half to save money for her next journey. It could be Peru, then maybe Columbia. Someday, she might return to Ireland. But right now there's still too much world she hasn't seen.

I watch some birds about the size of game hens, bright red beaks extending to mid-cranium, coal black and marine blue plumage, strolling about the main lodge patio. They seem almost tame, sauntering up to diners and scrounging under tables. "Pukekos," Haydn says. "Cheeky little beggers. The Weka are even worse."

Leela is shuffling invoices at the front desk where I buy a disposable camera and a book with descriptions of the local fowl. I move out to the deck and watch the birds

and backpackers pass through the main lodge garden.

The reception desk is quiet and Leela takes a smoking break outside. Her thin frame holds a formal pose even when she is at ease but there is a softness in places where Scandinavians are famous for being rigid. She has been working at the Lodge for about a month, having only recently returned to Golden Bay where she lived for 10 years shortly after she and her husband (long since divorced) moved to New Zealand.

"We had spent a few years in India and did not want to return to the madness of Europe," which they left in 1968. Earlier this year, she went to see her mother in Sweden. It was the first time she'd been home in three years.

"When I came back here, Trevor knew I needed a job and he told me about this place. Trevor is a very interesting person. You should talk to him."

Trevor is the Lodge's lifeline to the outside. He will be bringing in a load of supplies at around 1:00 this afternoon. Terry has already encouraged me to take the barge out with Ponti to meet him.

I finally see a Weka, a fat brown woodhen who marches out of the forest that surrounds the garden and directly up to the table of a woman who shoos it away with her foot. Leela goes back to the reception desk and I wander to the other side of the main grounds where Terry is working the handle of a yellow priming pump.

"Damn kids pour sand down here and it mucks up the pump." He runs a waterhose through the top as Ponti takes over the priming.

Leela appears with a message for Terry as Ponti goes to "load up the cart." She informs her boss that a family of 10 has its own foldout cots, which it wants to put in one of the eight-sleeper units.

"No. Tell 'em we'll bring in a couple more twins. Those cots'll scratch the hell outa the floor. Oh, and tell 'em there's no cooking in the room." He turns to me, explaining, "That's the kinda group brings along stove or a hotplate. We can't have any of that."

Ponti drives up in the ATV with the cart full of bagged garbage. Terry calls out to two couples who've been sitting around the patio, introductions are made and the five of us find seats in the cart, on or between garbage bags. Terry rides behind Ponti who drives us along the grassy airfield to the edge of the inlet where the barge is docked.

The airstrip has been there since 1952, Terry tells us after we stop. "A wealthy woman and her husband had planned to build a luxury hotel in the area then. But she withdrew funding when she caught him fooling around with his secretary."

Passengers follow trash onto the flat-bottomed boat and I take a seat on a bag across from Richard and Sarah. Terry returns to the Lodge on the ATV as Ponti captains the boat. Anchored in the harbor we pass what appears to be a pirate ship and, not far away, a 30 ft. sailboat in the cabin of which I can see two people preparing a meal. There is laundry drying on the rigging.

Richard is not the most loquacious individual I've encountered here. But Terry has told me a bit about his work. There is a grove of manuka and kanuka trees between the main lodge and the ocean. Terry says the early British settlers called these "tea trees" because the lemon-eucalyptus scented leaves were flavorful in hot water. The Maori had many medicinal uses for the leaves and these applications are Richard's business.

He is a bio-chemist who tells me only that he makes ingredients for health items. After I press a bit he adds that he set up a company which processes the manuka leaves

into medicines that are particularly effective against streptococcal infection and MRSA (called the "H-Bug" or "Hospital Bug"). That company is now Maori run, he says. But I learn no more about it.

I figure he doesn't want to talk shop, so I change the subject. First time here? In fact, he has visited Awaroa Lodge 10 or 12 times and it is "where Sarah and I met."

"It's where we 'got together,'" Sarah corrects. She's obviously the one who carries the conversational ball in the family. "We'd met in groups before. But he was paragliding around here with a few of his chums. I was a parachutist and I'd never seen any gliding so I went to watch and drove the car to pick them up at the bottom. Then we tramped in here to stay for a few days and that's when Richard and I, er, got together."

Both smile. It's been only six months. They got married in England where she and the other woman in the barge, Jo, grew up together. Jo and her husband Peter flew from London to Hong Kong where they stayed a few days before coming here. They are on their way to Cape Town after this. "Hong Kong and South Africa are two places where the world is changing right now," says Peter. "We thought it would be good to see a little history first hand."

Ponti steers the barge toward an unprepossessing couple standing on a sandspit beside the inlet, the man wearing an Aussie outback hat, his wife a sensible light wrap, both in plaid Bermuda shorts, looking like they're waiting for a bus in suburban Auckland – which is where they're from. At Ponti's invitation, they climb aboard. This is the moment when it dawns on me that the garbage scow on which I am riding is the Awaroa Lodge "Inlet Cruise."

Phillip and Val are here celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary. Phillip

learned about the Lodge from a cable television travel show and secretly made their reservations and travel arrangements seven months ago. They have four children, the youngest of whom is 18 and this is the first of what they hope will be a series of empty nest adventures.

"We'd told ourselves, when the children are all out on their own, maybe we'd do a bit of, you know, sightseeing somewhere," says Phillip whose wide grin and assertiveness lead me to conclude he is a salesman of some sort.

These two are among the few people I've met here who have never vacationed anywhere outside of New Zealand. Nor have they especially wanted to.

"Phillip went to Sydney once on business but he didn't think much of it," says Val. "We decided we wanted to see New Zealand first. There's so much right here that we haven't seen. Phillip loves getting back to nature, you know. Away from the city and all that."

Phillip asks what I do and when I mention the movie business, he blurts a disarmingly companionable, "Well, good on ya."

Trevor and another man are waiting beside a panel van when we arrive at the beach where Terry picked me up the first night. Trevor is a man of the sea, thick limbed and balding with a tangle of grey beard. He and Ponti exchange what little small talk there is after a separation of only 24 hours. Apparently Ponti had a doctor's appointment yesterday - the first time he'd visited the world of commerce and traffic in two months. Trevor asks him how long he was in town.

"Two hours," Ponti says. "That was enough."

After unloading the garbage, we all help load supplies from the van onto the barge. Trevor joins us on the return voyage. He engages everyone in his conversation with Ponti, making inclusive asides, explaining private jokes and references.

Ponti points out a lone dwelling on a hillside he calls "The Runaway Sailor's House." I ask Trevor who the Runaway Sailor was.

"No one special that I know of," he replies, adding with a smile that winks on its own, "All sailors are runaways, aren't they?"

I notice that Trevor has a butterfly tattoo on the back of each hand.

"I was in the city, down on my luck, down to my last dollar," he launches in. "Muhammed Ali was fighting. I'd always liked Ali. I was in a bar and I put down a wager with my last dollar. Fella gave me good odds. Well, Ali won and I was so happy, first thing I did with the money was go to the tattoo parlor and have these put on. Y'know, 'float like a butterfly.' Anytime Ali fought after that, I always bet on him. Changed my luck."

Wherever his travels took him, Trevor always came back to Golden Bay. "Best thing about it is no people," he says.

He points to a mountain on the north shore. Near the top is the white frame house that he tells me Terry and Kerstin are building. That's where he had his accident.

"My father went down in a boat on his 49th birthday and never came up," Trevor relates. "I always had this feeling I was never gonna make it to 50. So coming up on my birthday, we were planning a big blowout. A few days before the party, I was returning a truck I'd borrowed from Terry when I went right over the side of that mountain. I thought I'd breathed my last."

Instead he survived unscathed. "Came out better than new. Saw an osteopath who fixed up some things that had been wrong with me for years."

As we turn up the inlet towards where Terry is waiting with the ATV, I see a woman reaching for laundry on the sailboat rigging, her armpit hair waving in the breeze. This is Josey who lives on the boat with her husband John. Josey was Terry's business partner in the Lodge until she decided she no longer wanted to be part of running it.

"It got way too big," Josey says when I meet her later at the restaurant as Haydn fills her arms with wine bottles to take back to the boat. "It's all Terry's now. This is what he wanted."

After driving us back to the grounds, Terry goes to put up driftwood coat racks by the cabins while Ponti and Trevor unload supplies.

I pack up my cabin and drag my duffle to the main lodge where I join Terry, Trevor, Ponti, Leela and the rest of the staff for afternoon tea. Tea break for Terry only means he works sitting down.

"I'm thinking about putting one of those in every room," he says, indicating my Kodak throwaway. "How much do we sell those for, Leela? How much do they cost us? Never mind. Whatever it is, we can just add it into the room costs. I think it's a good idea."

He solicits other opinions and those few of the gathered who are not stuffing themselves with crumbcake agree the guests might appreciate it. Even those who have only been here a short time have heard enough of Terry's inspired outpourings to offer a respectful indulgence for the wildest of them. He is a dreamer whose will is nearly a match for his imagination. I say my goodbyes to all except Terry and Trevor.

After tea, I sit in the garden enjoying the sun and sights of Pukekos, other lounging guests and the trampers who now and then appear from out of the forest.

At 4:45, Trevor announces the tide is low enough for Terry to drive him and me back across the inlet. It takes about 15 minutes to pry Terry away from the new sitting area he is constructing near the cabins. I toss my bag in the ATV cart and climb in.

The shags and oystercatchers are already hard at work on the sandy floor of the receding inlet as we wind our way across, avoiding the larger standing pools. Terry spots a unique looking piece of driftwood and stops to pick it up.

The sun is hovering just above the mountain where his unfinished house overlooks the bay. Offering Trevor and me a smoke, he shuts off the ATV motor and turns to admire it as two men approach on foot.

One of the men is Richard Hoder, the Beethoven-loving, yarn-spinning pirate captain. In his 60s with seemingly boundless energy, Richard gives a hale greeting and Trevor asks how he's doing.

"Good as gold, mate."

Within a breath of introductions he asks if Trevor has read his letter to the editor elucidating the merits - or lack thereof - of some local issue. He talks so fast that I'm not even sure if Terry and Trevor understand him. After 10 minutes stream-of-conscious commentary, he takes his leave and he and his friend continue north along the inlet.

As laughs soften to smiles, Terry tells me Richard is dying of leukemia.

We remain in the spot where Terry has parked for a few more minutes. Gazing up at his house, he muses, "My dream was always to own a block of native bush

somewhere in the Pacific. But you have to make a living. You can either be a smuggler, grow dope or do something like this. I'd rather do this."

With that he flicks away his cigarette and climbs back on the ATV. Trevor and I climb aboard and we ride the last couple of kilometers back towards civilization.

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