

Taupo: Go to your happy place

By John Bishop

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A remote high country hideaway offers a unique Maori experience, finds John Bishop.



The pa-style setting of the whare on Te Kai Waho. Photo / John Bishop

Tom Loughlin takes people to their happy place, and that is usually somewhere in his own happy place, a remote piece of hill country behind Lochinvar Station at the Taupo end of the Napier-Taupo Highway.

He runs Te Kai Waho, a business which takes visitors - usually wealthy overseas people and New Zealand corporate suits - into the high country for an authentic Maori cultural and spiritual experience.

Te Kai Waho literally means "outdoor food", but there is so much more than just providing a feed and a bed in his purpose-built whare.

"People come to connect with indigenous lifestyles," Loughlin says. "They want a view about those lifestyles. I offer a personalised Maori experience.

"I am spreading the Maori culture. My vision is to have umpteen opportunities for Maori to tell our stories.

"Some are not nice, but they are part of our history, part of what makes us."

The day he takes me into the hills, the only sound when we stand on the deck of the whare overlooking the vast valley is a gentle wind and the far off cheep of a miromiro.

Arriving at the gateway to the whare Loughlin explains what happens.

"I usually do a karakia at the gate acknowledging the day and the space the visitors are in. Sometimes we do a powhiri - depends on the experience they want."

A couple from Switzerland are flying down in a day or so and Loughlin says he plans to "check their energy levels and see what they want to do".

A typical day would involve a 9am pick up from Taupo, a karakia at the gateway by 10.30am. "Then we'd build a fire, have some kai, go down the river for a couple of hours, then into the bush, and then some more kai."

The whare sleeps eight, has a full kitchen and bathroom, an outdoor eating area with a pot belly stove, heaters, and lights.

It is solar-powered, and the water comes from an underground spring.

His target market is high end: senior management teams from Kiwi corporates and wealthy tourists seeking interesting experiences come here. "There's no internet and no mobile because there's no signal."

Loughlin charges \$1400-\$1500 per person, per day for his journeys into the hills, into a Maori experience, into hunting, fishing, trekking and eating the way the customer wants. "I had this guy from Hong Kong, a successful businessman, who could afford to go anywhere and buy anything.

"He came here and I watched him and worked out he was fascinated by birds.

"I took him to where he could watch birds, and suddenly he was right in his happy place. He was

doing something here he couldn't do anywhere else.

"I don't advertise. The clients find me and we talk about what they want to do and the time they have to do it. For these people money isn't a factor.

"They know what they want and can afford to pay. Getting what they want is more important than the cost."

He will take people hunting, but only people who he knows share his values about hunting.

"I don't market trophy-hunting. I market game management," Loughlin says. "Shooting old stags and hinds is a way of culling the herd. The old guys make exceptional trophies."

Food is very important. There is a garden with yams and kamokamo, the large, round courgette or Maori squash. Loughlin trained as a chef, and blends his skills with Maori cooking techniques.

Food is seasonal. Loughlin and his helpers gather piko, a fern used as a vegetable or a garnish, and green fiddlehead, the coiled green fern that some say tastes like asparagus. There also riwai, the purple Maori potato thought to have originally come from South America.

"A hangi is really pressure cooking, as we used to do in the 1940s and 50s.

He buys mutton birds from the South Island. "When we have a good cook up, people sit and pick, pick, pick all afternoon. They are in a happy place. That's what I do for them."

His guests are entertained here far from the normal madding crowd.

Up here, it's just the wind, a few birds, the occasional stag lying around in the grass, and a few visitors marvelling that a place so remote can also be so accessible and so enjoyable.

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