

A LONELY,



HAPPY PLACE

High in the hills and away from the pressures of city life, John Bishop discovers an authentic Maori cultural and spiritual experience.



(Photo: Tom Loughlin)

The day Tom Loughlin takes me into the bare hills high above Lake Taupo, the only sound we hear standing on the deck of the *whare* overlooking the vast valley is a gentle wind and the far-off cheep of a miromiro bird or tomtit.

If you can't bear your own company or if you are terrified by your own thoughts when you are alone, this is not the place for you.

But this is Tom's happy place, and he brings international and local visitors here to help them find their happy place.

Tom runs Kai Waho, a tourism business that gives high-end visitors an authentic Maori cultural and spiritual experience; one of a number of Maori-run tourism businesses using cultural values and practices as a key point of difference.

Kai Waho literally means "outdoor food", and there's



(Photo: Tom Loughlin)

"Te Kai Waho literally means 'outdoor food', and there's plenty of that. Visitors can hunt deer – but only ageing stags and old hinds to cull the herd. Or go fishing in the local streams, and then Tom gets them to build their own fire or to help lay down the hangi."

plenty of that. Visitors can hunt deer – but only ageing stags and old hinds to cull the herd. Or go fishing in the local streams, and then Tom gets them to build their own fire or help lay down the hangi.

The *whare* (lodge) sleeps eight and has a full kitchen and bathroom. It's fed by a local stream, and uses solar power for light and gas for cooking. There's a large outdoor cooking and sitting area looking down the valley and across to the barren hillsides.

There is a garden with yams and *kamokamo*, the large, round courgette or Maori squash.

Food is seasonal; Tom and his helpers gather *pikopiko*, a fern used as a vegetable or a garnish, and green

fiddlehead, the coiled green fern that some say tastes like asparagus. There is also *riwai*, the purple Maori potato.

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

His is quite consciously 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."

This remote piece of hill country is accessed through 20kms of private road running up behind Lochinvar Station, which is at the Taupo end of the Napier Taupo highway.

Close to town, but suddenly and

very quickly remote. Once off the main highway the only person we see all day is Nigel, the local pest-control officer, heading home as we arrive.

There's an airstrip at the entrance to the *whare*. Light planes and helicopters use it regularly for pick off. That's the calibre of his customers. He charges \$A1200 per couple per day to provide the experiences his clients want.

He doesn'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.

"I had this Chinese guy from Hong Kong, a very successful businessman, who could afford to go anywhere and buy anything.

"He came here and 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

Canal Cruising in France
www.canalcrusinginfrance.com



Cast off and take a leisurely cruise at your own pace, along canals and rivers or unwind on board one of our luxury hotel barges and meander the inland waterways of France.



Australia: 02 4363 1617
 New Zealand: 07 865 9842

doing something here he couldn't do anywhere else."

Tom is a trained chef who has played rugby and rugby league around the world, worked at so many different jobs he's lost count, and now, among his other duties, he maintains the road, he explains as we pass a digger parked on the side of the road. "The job needed doing so I taught myself how to drive it."

I mention *Man Alone*, John Mulgan's classic Depression-era New Zealand story of isolation, loneliness and confronting nature. Johnson, the Englishman and hero of the story, kills the farmer he's working for in an argument over the farmer's wife and takes to the hills.

The incident takes place somewhere in the central North Island, and in an epic journey, Johnson escapes by walking over the Kaimanawas in torrid winter conditions to Tauranga and gets a boat overseas.

Tom doesn't know the story, but I tell him that this is *Man Alone* country. He nods quietly.

He talks of the Maori spiritual

"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."

forces: the Mauri (or spirit) of the land; of Ranginui, the sky god; of Papatuanuku, the earth mother; of Maui, who fished up the North Island; of the forces that have shaped him and given his life meaning. He talks gently, unassumingly, but with the quiet certainty that comes with faith that there is more to the world than just material surroundings.

I challenge him on animism, the

idea that hills, trees, rivers have spiritual lives. He says even the most scientifically minded rationalists, like the doctors and engineers who come to him, accept the creation stories and tribal legends he shares with them.

They are entertained in this, very far from the normal maddening world of the city, with all its attendant pressures. Up here there is 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. •

John Bishop is a travel writer based in Wellington, New Zealand where he is a member of the Rotary Club of Port Nicholson. His work can be seen at www.eatdrinktravel.co.nz.

"He talks gently, unassumingly, but with the quiet certainty that comes with faith that there is more to the world than just material surroundings."



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The whare is ringed with a wooden palisade in the traditional manner. Guests are welcomed in song and prayer and with a wero, a Maori challenge (if they request it) before moving on foot into the whare itself; Tom Loughlin; Looking down the valley from the sitting out area with table, pot belly stove and verandah of the whare on the right (Photos: John Bishop).

