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NEW ZEALAND'S rugged beauty fits into 5,000 acres on **Great Mercury Island**. Soaring white cliffs, a sheep and Angus cattle farm, and forests of skyscraping pines and *pohutukawa* trees, which seasonally produce brilliant red flowers, border silica sand beaches and ocean as aquamarine as a tropical sea. Hiking, swimming, fishing, and diving are among the pleasures afforded by this abundant isle, which is accessed via a 30-minute helicopter flight from Auckland.

Families (children are welcome) and other small groups can reserve Great Mercury for their exclusive use. Guests stay in two neighboring villas designed by Sardinian architect Savin Couelle as a family retreat for the island's long-standing owners, who reside there for a few months each year. The houses' stone-slab roofs blend in with the hills behind, and the interiors, awash in white, feature marble floors, winding stairways, arched doorways, and tucked-away bedrooms with ceilings decorated with twisted tree trunks. Views are of the harbor and boathouse, just

steps away, and of the hills and cliffs on the other side of the bay.

Like New Zealand at large, Great Mercury is a haven for outdoor activities such as hiking, horseback riding, and kayaking, but the island also offers less sporting pursuits. Children, with the staff's guidance, can haul crayfish pots from the deck of the *Mercury Fisher* or swim in the pool just off the main villa's terrace while their parents savor a picnic lunch on a private beach. In the unlikely event that island fever sets in, you can take the short flight to Auckland, or to the Coromandel Peninsula for nine holes on the Matarangi golf course.

At dusk, settle into the main house's dining room or head straight from the harbor to the boathouse for an aperitif. But for dinner—perhaps crayfish with aioli or venison with sweet potatoes and blueberries prepared by the island's chef—the best setting is the deck adjacent to the boathouse, where a grill on wheels allows for alfresco cookouts under a Kiwi canopy of stars. —LOBI BRYAN



★ Location ★

Off the east coast of New Zealand's North Island, near the Coromandel Peninsula.

★ Accommodations ★

Eight bedrooms with en suite bathrooms in two adjacent villas, plus two bedrooms in the boathouse.

★ Recreation ★

Kayaking, diving, guided hiking, and horseback riding; touring the island's working cattle and sheep farm; and casting a line from the dock or at sea and then cleaning your catch (should you wish to) in the boathouse's filleting room.

★ Dining ★

The chef's specialties—primarily scallops, snapper, and other seafood caught just offshore by the island's fisherman—can be enjoyed alfresco or in the main house's dining room.

★ Worthy Diversion ★

Let the staff drop you and a picnic lunch off at Peach Grove, a half-moon of white sand bordered by craggy rock, turquoise sea, and peach and New Zealand *pohutukawa* trees.

★ Rates ★

The island rents to one party at a time for approximately \$20,000 per night for up to six persons (additional per-person charge for more than six).

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