

# A DISTANT PARADISE



STEPHEN SZURLEJ

**NEW ZEALAND HAS BECOME A NEW  
BUCKET-LIST DESTINATION FOR GOLFERS,  
AND THEIR TOP COURSES DO HAVE A  
SPECTACULAR AURA ABOUT THEM.  
BY STUART McLEAN**

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**KAURI CLIFFS**  
The 17th hole with its glorious  
views over the Bay of Islands.





## THE HILLS

Another 17th hole, in the Central Otago landscape near Queenstown.

**A**SK A SOUTH AFRICAN what they associate with New Zealand golf and they will likely give you a blank stare, or brightly mention Cape Kidnappers. It's one of the coolest names for a golf course on the planet, and Cape Kidnappers does indeed live up to its reputation as one of the game's special venues. But Cape Kidnappers is only part of a triumvirate of remarkable new courses on the other side of the world from us.

Earlier this year I travelled across 11 time zones from Johannesburg to Auckland, and drove the length and breadth of New Zealand for 3 weeks exploring some of the courses that have made the Land of the Long White Cloud a new bucket-list destination. It is a bucket-list for millionaires though, because spectacular modern layouts like Cape Kidnappers, Kauri Cliffs and The Hills come with exclusive high-season price tags of \$500 to play 18 holes.

Admittedly that is New Zealand dollars and not US dollars, but these days the Kiwi currency is not weak, and \$500 is still R4 000 and change. Times three and that's R12 000. I haven't yet mentioned that the three of them are vast distances apart. It took me a fortnight to drive from one to the other, although you can obviously hop around quicker on regional airlines. Kauri Cliffs stands in the very north of the country, Cape Kidnappers is midway down the North Island, on the east coast, while The Hills is in the lower quarter of the South Island, amidst the Southern Alps.

The Hills flies under the radar compared to the other two, which are both ranked in the top 20 of the planet's best courses outside the United States. That's because it has a New Zealand owner and not an American billionaire, who has generated extensive publicity for his two courses back in the States. But The Hills is nonetheless a one-of-a-kind experience in golf.

Sir Michael Hill is an entrepreneur





## THE COURSES I PLAYED

### ★★★★★ Kauri Cliffs

Near Kerikeri, Bay of Islands, North Island  
Kauricliffs.com; \$490 international visitor  
green fee in high season

### ★★★★★ Paraparaumu Beach

Near Wellington, North Island  
Paraparaumbeachgolfclub.co.nz; \$150

### ★★★★★ The Hills

Arrowtown, Lower South Island  
Thehills.co.nz; \$500

### ★★★★½ Cape Kidnappers

Hawke's Bay, Eastern North Island  
Capekidnappers.com; \$490

### ★★★★½ Jack's Point

Near Queenstown, Lower South Island  
Jackspoint.com; \$175

### ★★★★½ Kinloch

Near Taupo, Central North Island  
Thekinlochclub.com; \$235

### ★★★★½ Wairakei

Near Taupo, Central North Island  
Wairakeigolfcourse.co.nz; \$160

### ★★★★ Arrowtown

Arrowtown, Lower South Island  
Arrowtowngolf.co.nz; \$75

### ★★★★ Chisholm Park

Dunedin, Lower South Island  
Chisholmlinks.co.nz; \$60

### ★★★★ Cromwell

Cromwell, Central Otago, South Island  
Cromwellgolf.co.nz; \$50

### ★★★★ Otago

Dunedin, Lower South Island  
Otagogolfclub.co.nz; \$75

### ★★★★ Titirangi

Auckland, North Island  
Titirangigolf.co.nz; \$150

### ★★★★½ Millbrook

Arrowtown, Lower South Island  
Millbrook.co.nz; 27 holes; \$180 for 18  
Resort guests pay \$80 a day for unlimited golf

### ★★★★½ Otaki

Near Wellington, North Island  
Otakigolfclub.co.nz; \$25

### ★★★★ Hokitika

Hokitika, West Coast, South Island; \$20

### ★★★★ Nelson

Nelson, Upper South Island  
Nelsongolf.co.nz; \$48

who made his fortune in the jewelery business. Less than a decade ago he transformed the land around his home near Queenstown into not just a fabulous golf course, but a modern art gallery – or its proper title, a Contemporary Sculpture Park. Each of the 18 holes has a sculpture to define it, some more dramatic than others, yet each fitting naturally into the landscape. Shortly before I visited in March, Sir Michael had trumped every other Australasian-created sculpture on the property with the delivery from China of his new *pièce de résistance*: Liu Ruowang's *The Wolves are Coming*.

Standing prominently in the rough on a hillside overlooking the 18th is a giant statue of an ancient helmeted warrior claspng a sword, defending himself against 110 life-sized wolves! It's the most impressive feature I've seen on a golf course in all my travels. I was taken aback by the sheer scale of the scene. While playing the course on a Sunday morning I was overtaken by a golf cart containing two couples, but no golf clubs. I recognised the driver as Allan McKay, head professional at nearby Millbrook Resort, which is the New Zealand equivalent to Fancourt. "It's my wife's birthday," he said. "And I'm treating her to the sculpture tour!"

Sir Michael Hill discovered *The Wolves are Coming* exhibition during a visit to Beijing's art district, and idly asked at the time what a few wolves would cost. The artist, Ruowang, gave some inflated figure, and Hill walked away. A year later he was approached by an agent, and a deal was done to take the entire display. Forgetting for a moment what the exhibition alone must have cost Hill, figure out the expense of transporting 110 wolves from Beijing to Queenstown. Each weighs 200 kilograms.

The Hills is a private club, and you need an appointment to open the front gates, once you find the entrance on a

quiet back road. Only a few holes are visible to the residents of adjoining Arrowtown, a historic gold mining village that has become both a tourist attraction and trendy residential area. While Cape Kidnappers and Kauri Cliffs are rugged layouts in lonely country, atop high cliffs, The Hills is more Augusta National in its elegantly manicured setting. Its Masters is the New Zealand PGA, a high-profile celebrity tournament played in March each year along the lines of Johann Rupert's Alfred Dunhill Links Championship at St Andrews.

My day there came as a pleasant surprise. Softly undulating terrain and schist rock formations made for terrific holes with individuality, the greens were as beautifully crafted as the displays of art, and the conditioning was superb. And once I was aware of the sculptures, studying them provided a new source of interest and energy on every hole.

New Zealand was in the midst of its hottest, driest summer since the 1940s during the month I was there. There were no clouds. The weather and the courses made for one of the most memorable holidays of my life.

Of the 20 courses I played, Kauri Cliffs was my standout No 1. In the picturesque Bay of Islands, it could lay claim to being the most scenic golf course on the planet. All day long you stare out at a blue Pacific Ocean dotted with uninhabited islands, and occasional passing yachts. It's a picture of tranquillity, and the golf course is a damn fine one too, by a man who never found personal fame as a designer. American David Harman worked for some of the best in the business, but died aged 51 in 2005 when he was coming into his own. He built this in the late 1990s.

The Lodge at Kauri Cliffs is a Relais & Chateaux hotel, and without this luxury

component no golfers might ever have come this far out of the way to visit. Those few who do come for the lifestyle which accompanies the golf experience: there were more chefs in the kitchen than there were golfers on the course the day I played. (The rack rate for a night is about R14 000 for a single person, which does include dinner, but not golf.)

Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers are both part of working sheep-and-cattle farms. American owner Julian Robertson, whose Tiger Fund in the 1990s was the second-largest hedge fund in the world (\$20 billion in assets), after George Soros' Quantum Fund, bought a 2 500-hectare farm in the Bay of Islands for less than the price of a modest New York apartment, and transformed it into a golfing utopia that would appeal to wealthy American golfers. A few years later he did the same with Cape Kidnappers in Hawke's Bay.



**THE WOLVES ARE COMING**  
This remarkable sculpture, and others (above right), are on display at The Hills. *The Wolves are Coming* has been placed on a hillside next to the 18th.



## 3 NEW ZEALAND HOT SPOTS

### 1 NELSON TASMAN

This magnificently scenic region at the very top of the South Island, with the vibrant city of Nelson on Tasman Bay at its heart, enjoys a warm, mild climate, and is a haven for tourists. You can either fly in from Wellington, or take the car ferry across the Cook Strait via Picton. It is close to two national parks, the Abel Tasman on the ocean being most popular for boating, hikers and kayakers. The hills around Nelson are loved by mountain bikers, with many trails to ride, and the surrounding area offers a wide variety of other outdoor pursuits, including for golfers the 18-hole Nelson links, beaches, adventure rides (Happy Valley has the remarkable Skywire) and craft beers. Some of the best vineyards in New Zealand to sample white wines are located here and eastwards at Marlborough and Blenheim.

### 2 LAKE TAUPO

Hot springs, jetboat rides and waterfalls on the Waikato River, reputedly the best fly fishing waters in the world, are among the numerous attractions around this large volcanic crater lake in the centre of the North Island, which has some of the purest waters in the world. It's a three-hour drive from Auckland. Top quality golf experiences are available in and around Taupo, on the north side of the lake, while Turangi in the south is a mecca for fly fishing on the Tongariro River, as well as white river rafting. Nearby are the North Island's highest mountains, in countryside where *The Lord of the Rings* was filmed (the sinister Mordor). The Tongariro Alpine Crossing south of the lake is regarded as one of the best day hikes in the world.

### 3 QUEENSTOWN/CENTRAL OTAGO

This is the most popular tourist destination in New Zealand, so it is particularly busy at peak times around Queenstown itself. It's a region of mountains and lakes, and the epicentre of the adventure industry, including the original A J Hackett bungee jump on the Kawarau Gorge (the first jump was in 1988) where they queue for the honour. The resort town of Queenstown, on Lake Wakatipu, seems to exist only for tourists – it has an international airport – but this is a rapidly growing part of the country. The golfing options in Central Otago are among the best in the entire country. If you're a golfer one of the best places to stay is the luxurious and restful Millbrook Resort at Arrowtown, close to many of the activities. The accommodation and facilities are superb, and there are 27 modern holes to play while you're there.



#### CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP

A waterfront restaurant at Nelson; Kiwi humour at Otaki GC; Millbrook Resort; Arrowtown GC.

Both sites are so vast in scale that they immediately convey a sense of remoteness from the outside world. The drive from the front gate at Cape Kidnappers to the clubhouse is eight kilometres through a quiet wilderness. (Here, the resort element is well away from the golf, and the clubhouse from the outside resembles a sheep shed – not so from the inside.)

Robertson by then had discovered the design skills of another American, Tom Doak, after playing golf at Pacific Dunes in Oregon, and Doak was his choice for Kidnappers. While the course is on even higher cliffs overlooking the Pacific, it's not as visually impressive as Kauri Cliffs to play. Aerial photos in magazines suggest a remarkable feast of vistas, but on the ground you don't see terribly much. Doak, nonetheless, has created a rugged and natural feel, particularly on the inland front nine, which fits in perfectly with the rural surroundings. Yet overall it's not in the same league as his work at Pacific Dunes, because the site doesn't allow it. I classified it No 5 behind the Paraparaumu Beach Links, The Hills and Jack's Point.

New Zealand, it is claimed, has more golf courses per head of population than anywhere else in the world. It doesn't have the depth in quality of golf courses as South Africa has, but it has more world-class layouts in significantly special settings. Real estate has disfigured nearly all of our best sites, whereas that element is absent over there.

As a golfing destination though, New Zealand is something of a curate's egg. It's not all laid out on a plate for you. The best courses are away from the major cities, and in the North Island they are spread far and wide. Lake Taupo in the centre has a distinctive Jack Nicklaus design called Kinloch which rambles over undulating topography in barren countryside that gives it an inland links feel. Wairakei is a splendid older course



**GOLDEN BEAR DESIGN**  
Kinloch is an unsung Jack Nicklaus design overlooking Lake Taupo on the North Island.

nearby carved through a forest that is great fun to play. The Wairakei Resort is a favourite resting place for South African rugby teams between games.

Paraparaumu Beach is close to the capital of Wellington, and is the best old-fashioned links by far I have seen outside the British Isles, a visually striking layout that with some extra length could be a fabled major championship venue. It was opened for play in 1949, and the designer was Australian Alex Russell, a partner of Alister Mackenzie. Its strengths are all to be found around its wondrous raised greens, of a quality that has seldom been replicated anywhere in the world. Pram Beach has hosted 12 NZ Opens, including the only one in which Tiger Woods played in 2002.

If there is such a thing as a golfing destination within New Zealand for golfing groups, it would be Queenstown in the very south. You can access its international airport within a couple of hours from Sydney, and once there you have a wide choice of courses to play within an hour's drive, high-end and also great value.

At the upper level are The Hills and Jack's Point, which many Kiwis and Aussies incorrectly associate with

Jack Nicklaus, but is in fact the work of local course designer John Darby. Jack's Point is another new course sandwiched between some of the most glorious scenery in New Zealand, the Remarkables mountain range on one side and Lake Wakatipu on the other. I was playing the opening hole on a clear Saturday afternoon when I heard people whooping in delight somewhere around me. I looked up, and witnessed about eight skydivers about to land nearby. As they did so, a single-engined plane roared in over the course to touch down at a grass airstrip. Over the next few hours, as I drove Jack's Point in a golf cart, that Cessna climbed its way to 4 500 metres at least 10 times, dropping off a full load of passengers on each occasion. The turnover generated by that plane must have been about \$40 000, while I was one of a handful of golfers on the course.

Golf courses are actually the only places where you can escape the hordes of tourists in Queenstown. It's not one of the major drawcards. This relatively small resort town must be one of the most tourist-centric places on earth. The Kiwis have developed every possible fun pursuit on earth to keep the visitors occupied, and this generates



**CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT**  
 Jetboating on the Waikato River in the North Island; Titirangi is an Alister Mackenzie design in Auckland; the Paraparaumu Beach links.



**ON THE PACIFIC OCEAN**  
 Chisholm Park in Dunedin.

# KIWIS HAVE A SIMPLER APPROACH TO GOLF

**T**HE NEW ZEALAND golfing culture is very different from other parts of the world, as I discovered on my travels around the country. Golf is

not an expensive pastime for the average Kiwi, because the costs of running a golf club are kept at a minimum. They don't expect their courses to look anything like Augusta National. Even the top city clubs are quite unpretentious. There is a laidback do-it-yourself and get-on-with-it attitude.

In these recessionary times, many South African golf clubs could learn from their methods, but the adjustment would be difficult. Golf clubs there operate with a small staff complement, and members have a great communal spirit of support. They will happily pitch in and build a new tee or green themselves, without calling in an outside contractor, as I witnessed myself at Mangawhai Golf Club in Northland.

When I visited Otago GC, a prestige old club in Dunedin, on Easter Monday, one person was running the club from the pro shop. And it was busy.

At Arrowtown GC there was a hole-of-the-day. Kiwis carry sand buckets on their trundlers (pull carts), not sand bags, and there were dozens of buckets lined up on the side of a tee. Every golfer took a full bucket, and repaired divots on the fairway.

At Cromwell GC the Wednesday afternoon competition saw golfers starting at a variety of different holes near the clubhouse. Everyone finished

within 30 minutes of each other, packed the clubhouse (showering was ignored), and the prizegiving immediately went ahead with lots of banter.

At Titirangi GC in Auckland, a rare gem of an Alister Mackenzie design, I was coming off the course at 5pm on a Thursday when I encountered dozens of golfers streaming on to it. They were heading out for the shotgun start of a 9-hole weekly twilight competition. They would all finish by 7.30, fill the clubhouse for dinner and drinks, and then go home.

I played with a member at Hokitika GC, a remote 18-hole links on the west coast of the South Island. The clubhouse was deserted (many NZ clubs rely on an honesty box green fee system). John Hamilton told me the club only had one employee, and pointed him out to me. He was mowing the fairways with a tractor. "We raise his salary on one weekend of the year," he said. "Hokitika hosts the Wild Food Festival, and the golf club is given the beer tent."

Even the New Zealand pro tournaments are different. Elsewhere in the world, if a pro makes a hole-in-one he often gets a prize, but not at the NZ PGA. If a player made an eagle two on a short par 4 the spectators round the green got a free "shout" (drink). 🍷

was asked to join their club competition, and before the game member John McDonald served me up a quick meal at his house alongside the ninth fairway.

The courses were all in immaculate condition and the green fees a fraction of the price of the newer creations. Arrowtown is a unique golfing experience, with unusual holes twisting through narrow rocky valleys where once miners might have searched for gold, and was total fun. Cromwell has one of the best designs in the South Island, on natural links terrain, and the local town council helped the golf club pay \$1 million to transform its look and feel, with the help of Greg Turner, a former European Tour player turned course designer. The town felt the golf club was one of its major assets, a refreshing attitude.

I ended my golf travels in Dunedin, a surprisingly beautiful city of charming character, old buildings and steep streets, situated among hills and a natural harbour. Playing golf at Balmacewen (Otago GC) had a feel of the Highlands about it, so no wonder the Scottish migrants built a course on its hilly slopes. Chisholm Park on the Pacific Coast was a terrific natural links. The club pro, Andrew Whiley, is a widely travelled golfer who has a website where he ranks the New Zealand courses (golfrankings.co.nz).



a massive industry. They don't just take you up a hill to view the scenery. When you reach the summit you can go paragliding, bungee-jumping, biking, or bobsledding. Or you can just be a spectator.

Jack's Point is an astonishingly good layout on a dramatic site, its holes spread out over a substantial expanse of rugged countryside where you seldom see another golfer. It's a property development outside Queenstown, but very

few houses are on the course, they are located in their own areas.

This Central Otago area is blessed with wonderfully distinctive 18-hole courses in virtually every rural town, places like Wanaka, Cromwell, Alexandra, Arrowtown and Queenstown. These five clubs have an autumn classic week in April each year which attracts hundreds of golfers to the region. I found myself warmly welcomed. On arrival at Cromwell I

## OTHER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NZ AND SA GOLF:

**Two holes** cut on every green, so that pin positions can be easily switched from day to day.

No young person is ever seen riding a **golf cart**. The "trundler" is ubiquitous.

Distance markers at **135 metres** instead of 150.

A **national computer system** which makes us positively antiquated by comparison. When a golfer registers for a round, the system prints out a personal scorecard which has all the golfer's details, plus can advertise upcoming events and local rules. Afterwards this is put back in the system.

**All-in memberships** are common, so that members don't pay green fees.

The **halfway house** is non-existent.

Lots of **women golfers** out during weekdays.

A **relaxed dress code**. The Kiwis don't much like tucking in their shirts.

The **Slope system** is in place at every course, even remote 9-holers.

Older courses are **relatively short**. It's unusual to find a course over 6 000 metres.

**Maintenance** work is carried out during the day, rather than early in the morning.

**Course bets** are settled in beers after the game.

New Zealand and Australian residents get **preferential green fee rates**, up to 50 percent discounts at the more expensive courses, which irritate other golfing tourists.