



Elemental Elegance

Create your own personalised country retreat at Heaven Under the Moon on the Sunset Coast.

The writer in me wants to buy some quiet time. A swing seat in the garden at **Heaven Under the Moon**, a relaxed retreat on the Awhitu Peninsula, seems the perfect place. I sit and gaze down the green valley to the calm of the inner Manukau Harbour, the seven bedroom homestead my backdrop. Gnarly, moss-covered fruit trees stand beside rimu and kauri on the edge of a steep amphitheatre and I'm entertained by soaring tuis and wind chimes that sound in the soft breeze lending an air of sacredness to this church of nature.

Cheryle Gail and her Dutch partner, Falco, discovered Awhitu Peninsula 18 months ago. I'm sure Cheryle was a pioneering colonial in another life because she's already trapping and skinning possums, and giving the fur to the locals to spin. And in the hilly terrain beside

Heaven Under the Moon provides endless ways to relax, pamper and enjoy nature.

the rambling kauri mansion, the pair have cut steps all the way to the bottom of the magnificent stand of bush.

After a scrummy candlelit dinner in front of a blazing fireplace, we puff on an exotic huka pipe of Egyptian fruit-flavoured tobacco before going on a night walk with torches. Down, down, down the steps we go, until we look back up at the glow worms dangling in the hollows of the bank. While there, we take turns on the bush swing – the wind whooshing past your ears as the seat propels you into darkness.

Back up the hill and the house is ambient with lamp and candle light, filled with music and I can imagine the ballroom giddy with giggles and dancing.

I unwrap a fortune chocolate. "Time to let your imagination go", it declares. Cheryle certainly has. In the Dream Suite, where we sleep, the walls are strewn with gold stars and plants are potted in silver coffee jugs. The other four guest rooms – named the Butterfly, Angel, Green and Sun Rooms – are just as colourful and quirky.

I marvel at this "full-on" approach, even more so when I step into the massage room for a tingling, full-body salt scrub. For 14 years Cheryle had a private bodywork practice in California. There's not enough time to luxuriate in the outdoor tub for two, but I bet under a full moon it is the heart of romance.

If being more active is your preference, the rugged West Coast is a 45-minute walk away or you could book Falco for a tango lesson. He too is terribly skilled, whipping up a wonderful breakfast omelette with fluffy eggwhites, bacon, garlic and banana. Sometimes it takes a foreigner to fall in love with Aotearoa and present it back to us as heaven under the moon.

VERITY GEORGE

Heaven Under the Moon 265 Boiler Gully Rd, Awhitu.

THE UNDISCOVERED AWHITU PENINSULA

So where is it? Known as the Sunset Coast in the Franklin District you head south on the motorway, exit at Drury and hang a right, westward ho, to Waiuku. Ngaati Te Ata are the local Maori tribe who settled the verdant Awhitu area for centuries, they used to carry their waka a mile overland from the Waikato River to the Manukau Harbour.

Mid 19th-century Waiuku was the second busiest inland port in New Zealand. Awhitu Road is narrow and winds along the hilly peninsula, offering spectacular views back to Auckland.

Waiuku Museum A pioneer museum with permanent displays and exhibitions. *Weekends 1.30-4pm, \$2/50c. 13 King St. Ph: 09 235 8698.*

Excelsior Café The coffee hit the spot and the \$4.50 kumara/pumpkin soup was scrummy. The new owner is friendly and keen to please. *Mon-Fri 8.30am-5pm, Sat 9am-2pm, 13 Queen St. Ph: 09 235 7901.*

Outlaw Sporting Clay Shooting Guaranteed to get the blood pumping! Started in France in the 1720s by a Marquis who used glass balls filled with feathers, plugged with wax and hooked on

to a line as targets. Nowadays the pitch and lime fluoro targets fly out of automated trap stations.

It's all very safe and ace shot Brian Gleeson is a patiently encouraging coach, I shot three-and-a-half targets. Great fun for corporate groups or stag and hen outings, Outlaw Ranch even does a hogget on a spit for \$10 a head.

By arrangement ph: 09 235 1191. \$58 for 100 targets. 77 Kemp Rd.

Awhitu Regional Park 80 minutes from Auckland up the Awhitu Peninsula through Matakawau, after 2kms turn right on Brook Rd to the Park. Lovely spot for a picnic, or a barbeque (wood provided) with pockets of trees, plenty of kingfishers and an open style shade marquee. The inner harbour is much calmer than the West Coast beaches.

Awhitu Earthtalk Over ten years Tanya Cumberlain and Charmaine Poutney have created a small organic farm that acts as a learning centre. They give guided tours on the last Sunday of the month and have fruit tastings by reservation. I loved the rainbow valley pawpaw, candied feijoa and quince fruit leather. Stay in the Pohutakawa Cottage here and drink in the water view. \$75 double, \$40 single. *Ph: 09 235 1375, 60 Kauri Rd.*