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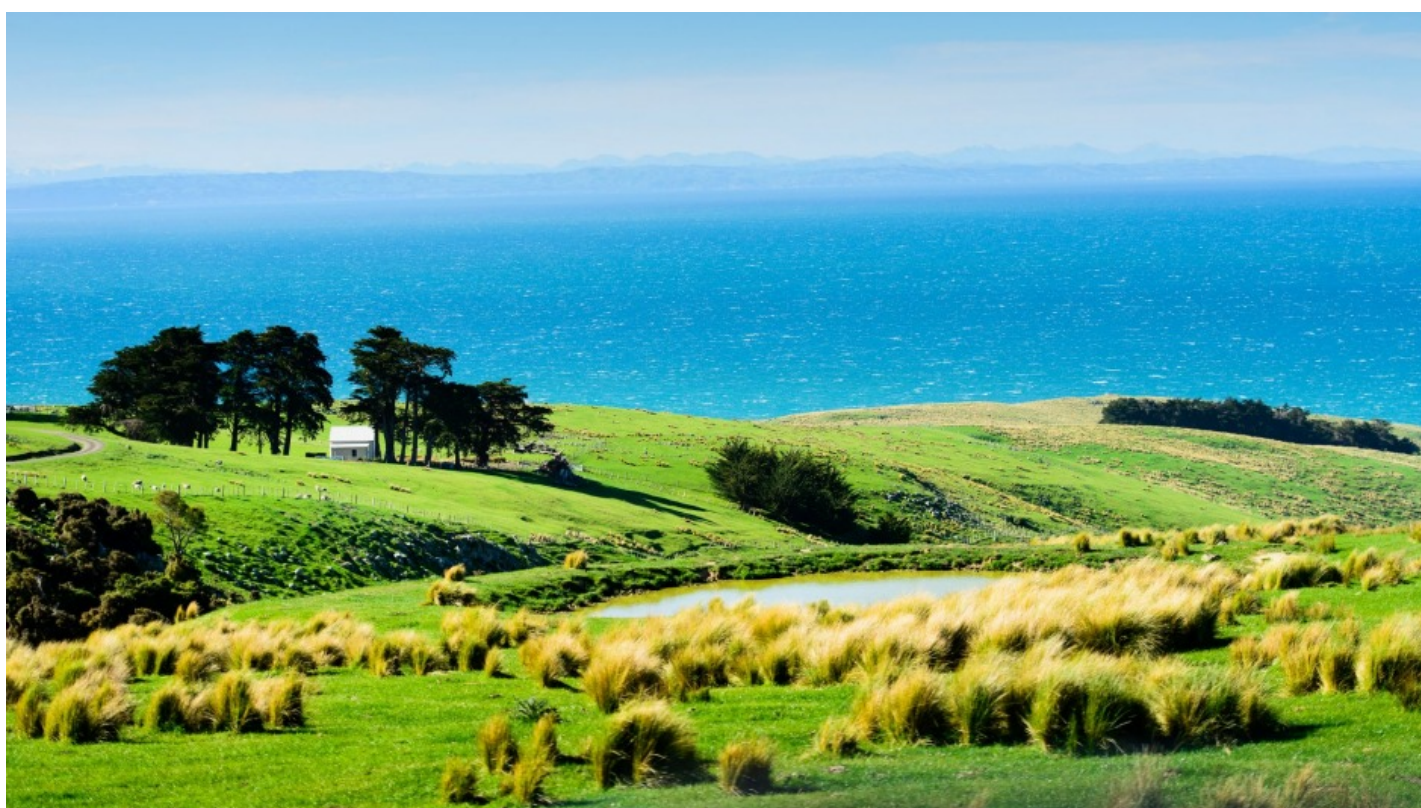
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# Prepping for the apocalypse, New Zealand-style



Annandale, a working coastal farm in New Zealand whose slogan invites visitors to "escape to where the world can't find you". **Whitney Lewis Photography**

by **Dan F. Stapleton**

From the air, the sparsely populated Banks Peninsula, with its steep green hills and chalky-blue bays, seems like a perfect place to hide. We've chartered a helicopter from Christchurch and are heading south, over lakes and forests, towards Annandale, a working coastal farm whose slogan invites visitors to "escape to where the world can't find you".

That notion of escape, especially from malevolent forces, has lately captured the collective imagination of the global elite. Across the North and South Islands, high fliers from Silicon Valley, Singapore and elsewhere are buying patches of land – often

farms, but not always – and repurposing them as secure, self-sustaining getaways.

In uncertain times, stable and isolated New Zealand is drawing more attention, especially from those with the means to acquire prime land. In January, news broke that Peter Thiel, an influential tech investor and member of Donald Trump's advisory team, [had been granted New Zealand citizenship](#) after pledging to invest in the country's start-up sector.

Days later, *The New Yorker* published an article about wealthy "doomsday preppers" and their growing interest in New Zealand as "a refuge in the event of a cataclysm".



Annandale's four on-site villas give foreigners sizing up New Zealand a taste of what life on a large Kiwi property might be like. **Stephen Goodenough**

The influx of uber-wealthy foreigners is even informing the country's cultural conversation. New Zealander and Booker Prize-winner Eleanor Catton pitches these affluent newcomers against a ragtag bunch of locals in a [new book, titled \*Birnam Wood\*](#), to which she sold the rights earlier this year.

## Beautiful bolthole

[Annandale](#) is in fact owned by Mark Palmer, a Kiwi who has spent much of his adult life developing real estate in Texas, where he still lives. Palmer, who grew up on a North-Island sheep farm, bought the 1620-hectare property about a decade ago to fulfil a life-long dream, not to escape impending doom.

Regardless, Annandale's four on-site villas give foreigners sizing up New Zealand a taste of what life on a large Kiwi property might be like. Several people I speak to during our trip cite Annandale as best-practice agriculture, and hope the influx of overseas buyers will follow Palmer's lead.

Fortuitously, Palmer is on site when my partner and I arrive. "Annandale is first and foremost a working farm," he tells us as we four-wheel-drive along a ridge line, the ocean sparkling in the distance. "It will always be operated as a working farm that

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seeks to set the standard for healthy livestock and excellent lamb, wool and beef production."



Peter Thiel, a member of Donald Trump's advisory team: "No other country aligns more with my view of the future than New Zealand." AP

It is possibly the best-kept farm I have ever set eyes on. Palmer is evidently passionate about the project and speaks poetically about the sort of guests he hopes to attract. "Everything," he says, "from the architecture to the home-grown food to the on-site activities provided by local Kiwis is rooted in authenticity and shuns any attempt to be contrived."

## Sea change

At dinner that evening we feast on mussels from nearby Pigeon Bay and panna cotta made with milk from the farm next door. Palmer has given us the keys to Seascape, which sits in a tiny valley and is one of two Annandale villas designed by Auckland architect Andrew Patterson. The other two dwellings on the farm – the homestead and a shepherd's cottage – date back to the 1800s.

Seascape satisfies all my criteria for an end-of-the-world escape: the ocean views from the wraparound windows are epic, the thick walls – made from locally quarried stone – and the poured-concrete floor give the place a bunker-like vibe, and the bath is deliciously deep. At night, we sit out on the deck wrapped in blankets made with the farm's wool and watch the stars.



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Eleanor Catton, the New Zealand author of 'Biram Wood', which pitches affluent newcomers against a ragtag bunch of locals. **Robert Catto**

For now, the Banks Peninsula remains under the radar: none of the locals I speak to know of any foreign investment in the area. By contrast, Queenstown and neighbouring Wanaka, which lie about 200 kilometres south-west, are positively cosmopolitan. It's here that Thiel has bought several properties, and where land has been bought up by dozens more ultra-high-net-worth individuals, including US TV host Matt Lauer and desktop-publishing pioneer Paul Brainerd.

A stretch of foreign-owned mansions alongside Lake Wanaka has been dubbed "millionaires' row". Like parts of Mayfair in London or certain apartment buildings in midtown Manhattan, it is virtually deserted. According to *The New Yorker*, many of these properties are "insurance policies" for Americans worried they may one day need to flee the United States. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none contacted by *Life & Leisure* was willing to discuss their acquisitions.

## Cosmopolitan country town

"Queenstown has quite an internationalism about it," says Graham Wall, whose eponymous real-estate agency brokered the sales to Thiel. "There's a level of sophistication that you can be around if you wish. It has a resort-town feel, like a mini Aspen or a mini Tahoe."



Mahu Whenua ("healing the land" in Maori) operates as a farm and a burgeoning eco sanctuary. **Marina Mathews**

Many of Queenstown's new arrivals have little interest in pastoral life, but a few non-residents have acquired working rural properties in the area.

Most notably, country-music superstar Shania Twain and her ex-husband, music producer Mutt Lange, created [Mahu Whenua](#), a mega property comprising four adjacent high-country sheep stations and covering more than 44,500 hectares. Twain and Lange were trend-setters: they began buying up land near Queenstown in the 1990s, when they were still married and Twain dominated the charts. In her autobiography, Twain cites her love of horse-riding as a big motivator.

Today, Mahu Whenua ("healing the land" in Maori) operates as a farm and a burgeoning eco sanctuary. Since January, it has also begun accepting short-stay guests at its handsome solar-powered lodge, which can be hired for exclusive use for about \$NZ15,000 (\$14,000) a night.

Twain cut ties with the property some years ago, but Lange remains.



Guests can stay at Mahu Whenua's handsome solar-powered lodge for \$NZ15,000 (\$14,000) a night. **Marina Mathews**

## Protecting the land

The conservation efforts on site are undeniably impressive. Almost 90 per cent of the land is protected through an agreement with a private charity, the QEII National Trust, which has stewardship (but not ownership) in perpetuity. Millions have been spent on plant regeneration and bird breeding programs.

"It's impossible to become jaded," says Fiona Stevens, director of the New Zealand luxury travel agency MajorDomo, which manages Mahu Whenua for Lange and Twain. "It's just too jolly exciting."

Stevens, a South Island local, is upbeat about the recent large-scale land acquisitions. "If owners are going to put the care and the investment in, and then make the land accessible to people, I think that's pretty good," she says.

Of course, not everyone in search of a back-up home necessarily wants to preside over hills and valleys. "Most importantly, New Zealand is safe in the broadest sense of the word," Graham Wall says. "It has a secure supply of water and therefore a secure supply of food, a tiny population, no corruption and very little nepotism. The fresh air and the views are a bonus."

## Private and secure

A few days later, we fly up to the Bay of Islands, a verdant region near the top of the country, to visit a comparatively high-density development. The Landing, a 405-hectare peninsula property, has space for 20 residences alongside nature reserves, vineyards, produce gardens and water frontage.

Owner Peter Cooper, whose real-estate and private-equity operations span New Zealand and the United States, was drawn to the site's heritage – it is where Maori and Europeans first met and exchanged goods – and to its serene views of the islands



nearby. Four houses have been built so far, all of which can be rented out for short stays, and several other grassy plots will shortly be developed by individuals. (Entry-level plots, which sit among the vines, start at \$NZ1.5 million.)



Country-music singer Shania Twain bought Mahu Whenua with her ex-husband, music producer Mutt Lange.  
Supplied

Jeremy Priddy, Cooper's sales director, tells me [The Landing](#) will appeal to buyers who value the security and privacy of a gated residence but also crave a village atmosphere. The property, which has 15 full-time grounds staff, also gives part-owners access to walking paths through native bush land – and to the gardens and vineyards.

When we arrive, Priddy takes us on a drive across The Landing and shows us several places that feel completely wild. "We've planted well over a million trees and removed gorse and other pests, which means the birdlife has returned and the place has become an ecological sanctuary," he says.

## Off the grid

The Landing is already proving popular with celebrities in search of relatively unfussy and completely off-the-grid holidays. There has also been a great deal of interest in buying plots, says Priddy, although not every approach has resulted in a sale.

"This is a unique site and we have found that it speaks for itself," he tells me later in a carefully worded email. "In a way, the connections that are made here happen of their own accord. We are looking to build the community carefully, based on those connections."

That evening, my partner and I hole up in The Boathouse, an oversized two-bedroom cottage decked out with intriguing artefacts. We bake ourselves some flathead and stoke a grand log fire. Priddy, who likes nothing better than to cook, has made us an apple crumble, which we slide into the oven. He's spending the weekend on the property with his school-age sons, who enjoy launching boats and fishing off the private jetty.

I suspect The Landing would not appeal to the big-spending doomsday preppers from Queenstown. There's nothing showy about the place, and the closest small town is a 45-minute drive. But for those seeking an immaculate sanctuary – and agreeable neighbours – it's a spot well worth investigating.

*The writer was a guest of Annandale and The Landing.*



The Landing has space for 20 residences alongside nature reserves, vineyards, produce gardens and water frontage. **Supplied**

## NEED TO KNOW

**Staying there** Villas at Annandale from \$NZ995 (\$938) a night for two. Suites at Mahu Whenua from NZ\$1850 (\$1745) a night for two. The Boathouse at The Landing from \$NZ5500 (\$5180) a night for four guests. All rates include food and drinks.

**Getting around** Helicopter transfers from Christchurch to Annandale from NZ\$825 (\$775) for two. Annandale, Mahu Whenua and The Landing can all arrange helicopter transfers within New Zealand for guests.





The Boathouse at The Landing is an oversized two-bedroom cottage; relatively unfussy and completely off the grid. Kieran Scott

*AFR Contributor*

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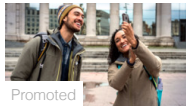
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