

The Best Boutique Hotels & Small Lodges

River Birches

(Turangi; tel. 0800/102-025): This is one of my favorite new discoveries. Transplanted New Yorker Jason Bleibtreu and his wife Rebecca -- both former journalists covering the world's hot spots -- have spent years living in hotels, so they know exactly what it takes to create a restful haven. They've imbued this special place with an extra level of professionalism that's hard to fault. And the location? Right beside one of the best trout-fishing rivers in the world!

Te Whānau Lodge

(Whānau Island; tel. 0800/20-2286): Every time I visit Te Whānau, I'm convinced all over again that Gene O'Neil and Liz Egleston give you the best of everything -- winning personalities, fabulous food, great rooms, and views you won't believe. There's something phenomenally great about the whole experience that I'm proud to recommend.

Ridge Country Retreat

(Taunanga; tel. 07/640-1371): The generosity and style of rooms here leave many more expensive stays in the shade. Joanne O'Keefe and Perry Conant were some of the best (and funnest) hosts on my last road trip, and I'm confident your expectations will be exceeded at every level. The food is divine!

Miller Road

(Frankton; tel. 0800/20-1871): Making up to staggering views over vineyards, orchards, and rolling green hills is only part of the pleasure of this exquisite

