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THE OPENING OF A LUXURY LODGE AT THE  
KINLOCH CLUB FULFILLS ONE MAN'S DREAM FOR A  
WORLD-CLASS RESORT EXPERIENCE AT LAKE TAUPO.

By Patrick Smith – Interior Photography: Simon Devitt – Course Photography: Des Frith

John Sax had a vision for “a unique lodge and estate in one of the country’s most scenic areas” when he bought the financially troubled Kinloch Club and its Jack Nicklaus-designed championship golf course in 2011.

Sax’s vision comes into full focus with the opening of The Lodge at Kinloch. The Lodge occupies an enviable site above Lake Taupo, surrounded by the 254-hectare estate of the Kinloch Club, with opulent suite and on-course villa accommodation.

The multi-millionaire investor and CEO of Southpark Corporation knows a thing or two about luxury lodges: he also owns exclusive Treetops Lodge and 2,500ha Wilderness Estate near Rotorua. He sees the two properties, an hour apart (or 10 minutes by helicopter), as a good fit. In fact, Treetops has for some time been offering guests packages that include a round at Kinloch. Now, diehard golfers will be able to step straight onto the first tee after breakfast and maybe play another nine holes before a gourmet dinner at The Lodge.

Award-winning Auckland architect Andrew Patterson designed The Lodge to a brief inspired by the baronial features of Kinloch Castle on Scotland’s Isle of Rum – although translated into a thoroughly modern 21st-century design.

With its simple lines and walls of local schist stone, the lodge presents an imposing face to arriving guests. But once through the impressive entranceway, they find themselves in a welcoming central courtyard complete with outdoor fireplace and reflecting pool. Views from lodge windows take in the rolling fairways and greens of the golf course, with the blue expanse of Lake Taupo in the distance.

Lodge interiors are the work of Virginia Fisher, the go-to designer for a number of top lodges and hotels in New Zealand and around the world.

The Great Room, an opulent mix of lush textures – velvet, fox fur, brass and copper – leads to the dining room, a light and airy space with seating on banquettes and plush sofas.

The Bar has a clubby, masculine feel: all leather

and rock surfaces, cowhide, goat fur and burnt-wood flooring, while The Den, with its slate floors and designer rugs, is the place for private dinners or meetings.

A short stroll from the lodge are the one- and two-bedroom luxury villas with dark-stained exteriors that appear to melt into the natural setting of the surrounding course. Outdoor patios and furnished terraces lead into calm, elegant rooms with handmade rugs scattered across oak floors, big fireplaces and sumptuous en suite marble bathrooms with freestanding tubs.

A world-class restaurant uses produce reared or grown on the Treetops estate; wherever possible, the lodge’s philosophy is one of organic “estate to plate” food. The wine list includes some of New Zealand and the world’s finest drops.

As for the golf course outside the windows, it was voted the country’s top layout last year by a team of leading New Zealand professionals. Tom Long, who has been the Kinloch pro for the past eight years, agrees wholeheartedly with the assessment.

“I’ve always believed we’ve got a great product and we’ve finally got an owner who cares about it, and with the vision to put it on the world map,” he says. “This really is an undiscovered diamond among New Zealand golf courses.”

Nicklaus himself drove the opening ball when Kinloch’s front nine was completed in 2007 and he flew back a year later to tee off for a full 18 holes. After his round he declared the course “pretty unique”, adding: “You won’t find another golf course that looks much like this in the world.”

But the club and its par-72 course – the only Jack Nicklaus Signature Course in New Zealand – struggled financially over the following years until Sax stepped in, buying the land and course from one of its major creditors.

Soon after it opened, the course – a hybrid of links and parkland features – was named in the top 10 new golf courses in the world by *US Travel + Leisure Golf* magazine (the only course outside North America to

OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Panoramic views  
of the Kinloch  
Club golf course  
and Lake Taupo  
encourage guests  
to linger in the bar.





feature in the list) and its reputation has only grown since – although some visitors have pronounced it “a hell of a challenge”.

They should probably have listened to the Golden Bear after his own round from the back tees – all 6,734 undulating metres of it. “If you find a golf course such as this, which has quite a bit in it,” he said, “it’s probably far more fun to play short rather than long. The only reason those gorilla tees are back there is for these [long-hitting] young guys... It’s meant to be a sporty-type golf course, a fun golf course; don’t go back and ruin your day by playing the course too long.”

When Sir Bob Charles played it for the first time with Tom Long, he commented: “I can honestly say this is the number-one golf course in New Zealand. For those unable to play the great links courses of Scotland, Kinloch compares with the best of them. A true links experience with Jack Nicklaus at his best.”

Says Long: “It’s a thing of perception. It’s a championship golf course but people come here thinking they’re going to murder it the first time they play it. Realistically, though, if they did that they’d drive out the gate and have no reason to come back. I’ve given out a fair number of hugs in the carpark after rounds!”

And people do come back, he says. The reason? “You’re not always going to score well, but you’ll never be bored. I’ve said before, if there’s one golf course I could play for the rest of my life and not get bored, it would be this one.”

ABOVE: Dining at The Lodge at Kinloch; conference lounge.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Villa den, a cosy corner with woodstove, great views and a fairway through the sliding glass doors.





The par-4 14th.

The par-5 18th.



The par-3 17th.



The par-5 2nd.



Long grew up in the UK playing on traditional links course where the two nines stretch out and back again beside each other. “Here,” he says, “the way the holes are angled, you’re only aware of the hole you’re playing. It feels like being out there on your own; it feels like there’s this multi-million-dollar golf course and it’s all yours.”

When Nicklaus was asked which was Kinloch’s signature hole, he replied that every hole on this course was a signature hole. But Long confesses he does have a favourite: the 4th, a 454m (391m from the white tees) dogleg par 4 with a bunch of fairway traps on the left and a well-guarded green. Long hitters may clear the fairway bunkers but then leave themselves a downhill lie for their second.

“It’s not always a hole I play well but I love the design of it, and that you’ve got so many options – it’s a risk and reward hole, a brilliant par 4, and it comes quite early in the round.

“The 3rd is the visual gem of the front nine. You hit over a small lake and you see Lake Taupo in the distance. The rest of the front nine is all about the golf course and then you arrive at number 10. It’s an elevated tee and you get this fabulous vista of the lake. Fifteen and 17 are also visually beautiful holes.”

The pro suggests golfers “bring their A-game” and don’t get hung up trying to play to their handicap the first time out. A pre-round practice session might be a good idea: the club has a grass-tee driving range, a putting green and chipping



ABOVE: The well-protected green on the par-4 4th. BELOW: Kinloch's head professional, Tom Long.



green with bunkers. There's a fully stocked pro shop and you can hire clubs, carts and trundlers.

Post-round, the modern glass-walled clubhouse is a pleasant spot to relax in over a drink or a meal from the daily menu as you take in the view over the course to Lake Taupo.

As well as golf and the area's myriad other attractions – think trout fishing, swimming, water-skiing, flightseeing, geothermal activities and more – there's an on-site spa specialising in sporting, therapeutic and organic wellness

treatments, an infinity pool, gym and tennis courts.

Staying over may also tempt golfers into a second round on the Golden Bear's masterpiece – and the chance to better appreciate its unique challenges. Come to that, those determined to master the beast might decide to simply live on the course and play it every day: freehold properties for sale range from luxury villas to residential sites with golf course views and larger hillside sections with views over the golf course to Lake Taupo. **W**

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