

You want pampering and perfect vistas along with your crayfish pasta and perfectly aged wine?
Kris Mc Gehan checks into the growing luxury lodge market.



TASTE OF LUXURY: Villa Toscana brings a slice of Italian-style decadence to the Coromandel

the price of paradise

GIORGIO Allemano waves a bronzed arm seawards across the balcony to the Pacific Ocean laid out before him, and gesticulates wildly.

"You see ... it is the most beautiful place in the world," he cries in a strong Italian accent. "Nowhere else in the world will you find this. It is perfect."

At mid-morning on a baking hot summer Coromandel day with a gentle breeze rustling the native ferns below, the expansive balcony of Villa Toscana is indeed the most perfect of places. Just 10 minutes north of Whitianga, through the outer reaches of a new subdivision and up a long, private driveway, a slice of Italy sits on the hillside, nestled in native bush.

Giorgio and his wife Margherita have a procedure when guests arrive at their villa. There is a customary pause of several minutes while visitors stand and gasp in amazement at the Mediterranean beauty before them, the mustard yellows and terracottas of a rustic Italian country mansion emerging from the Kiwi bush. And visitors are rightly gob-smacked - not just by Villa Toscana, but by the vista of ocean and the islands of Mercury Bay that lie like a blue velvet blanket at the base of the hill.

The privilege of visiting Villa Toscana does not come cheap. Bed and breakfast rates at the villa, as featured in the latest Friars' Guide to New Zealand Accommodation for the Discerning Traveller, are from \$440-\$640 for two people per night, with dinner extra. It's at the top end of a growing luxury accommodation market - and Waikato is becoming one of the major destinations. Tourism Waikato chief executive Lynda Keene says there is a "definite increasing trend" toward top-of-the-range accommodation in the Waikato. She fields calls daily from tourism operators and travellers wanting luxury homestays, farmstays or bed and breakfasts.

"There is a gap in the market here in the Waikato," Ms Keene says. "People are wanting privacy and luxury with a personalised touch. And they're prepared to pay for it."

Waikato hosts half a million visitors a year in paid accommodation. Ms Keene estimates that about 10 percent of those visitors stay in luxury accommodation.

They are classed as FITS - free independent travellers - and are most likely to be American, English or European.

They are more likely to stay in New Zealand longer than the average tourist - usually about a month - and want per-sonalised. eco or, nature tours.

"It's definitely a burgeoning industry in the Waikato," Ms Keene says. "But it's also a 'quiet' market. Part of the product is selling privacy."

The Allemanos know what it's like to be overseas tourists. They came to New Zealand from Tuscany three years ago on a holiday that turned into a scouting mission.

They were so taken by the country that they decided to move permanently and run a luxury accommodation business. They chose Whitianga over several other tourist "hot spots" they were considering. They arrived in the town at 3pm and by 5pm had bought 1.6ha of sloping, bush-covered land overlooking Mercury Bay and a berth at the marina for their 32ft game fishing launch Mamma Mia. Villa Toscana was built as a family home - Giorgio and Margherita have an 11-year-old son and five-year-old daughter - with a separate wing for hosted accommodation. Two containers were shipped from Italy laden with 13 tonnes of terracotta tiles, 12 square metres of granite and Carrara marble slabs, antique furniture, paintings and a genuine terracotta pizza oven. Much of the furniture has been in Giorgio's family for several generations. The three-level villa is just under 600sq m; it took one year to build. If it had been built in Tuscany, it would have been made of brick, the Allemanos say.

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The Kiwi version is styrofoam blocks filled with concrete, then plastered. The villa lies spread-eagled in two wings extending from the central living areas.

Guests have their own self-contained two-bedroom, 100sq m suite decorated with country antiques and furniture. The theme is stylish rustic, with an eclectic mix of modern and old Italian. Giorgio is keen to show off his ample wine collection to guests. Rows and rows of bottles imported from mainly smaller northern Italian wine producers rest safely in a temperature-controlled basement that runs the complete length of the villa. Its walls are lined with glorious old family photographs and memorabilia Giorgio brought from his homeland.

Upstairs, the Tuscan villa comes to life. Giorgio does most of the cooking for family and guests and today treats his visitors to a mouth-watering crayfish pasta served in chunky Tuscan crockery.

It has been created in a typical Tuscan country kitchen overflowing with handpainted china, bric-a-brac and exotic-looking comestibles in elegant jars.

Giorgio insists his guests sample his home-made cheeses and there is a selection of wine to accompany the meal - "you would never be able to swallow a meal without wine," he laughs.

The atmosphere is warm, relaxed and homely. The Allemanos have a knack of entrancing their guests with tales of Italy. The wine, laughter and conversation flows and the hours disappear too quickly into the late afternoon. There has been a steady stream of overseas guests at Villa Toscana who return again and again. They love the view, the atmosphere and the cooking. Recent visitors included an American couple whose son crewed on the Stars and Stripes America's Cup boat. "Our European guests think it is paradise here," Giorgio says. It would be difficult to disagree.