

36 hours

kumeu

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SUNDAY, 9.30AM: I am dangling by a wire several metres off the ground in the Woodhill Forest way out West Auckland at Tree Adventures. Actually, no I'm not. I'm sitting on a log watching other people doing the dangling. Heights and me don't get on and, besides, there doesn't seem to be any way down once you're up. A young girl is clinging to her father's leg, yelling: "I don't want to do it, Daddy." I like her style, although I can see that Tree Adventures is a great idea for those who don't mind the odd flying fox or swing bridge. Others may prefer to drive down the road and hire a mountain bike on the premise that if you fall off at least you'll be closer to the ground.

Noon: Kumeu markets itself as "wine country" boasting 17 wineries in a 10km radius – that's more like it. I turn into Soljans winery and hunt for a park. This place is packed. The Soljan family is celebrating the Croatian harvest festival with grape stomping, winery tours and tastings and the cafe is chocker. Tony Soljans, the third-generation owner, is in his element. He loves sharing his family history with visitors and despite the bustle sits down for a chat. I'm on my own for the weekend after the regular travelling companion is landed with some last-minute work – which he'll have to do while firmly tethered to the dog box – so I have to take it easy with the tastings. Pity, really. I opt for a glass of Sojans' Legacy Methode Traditionnelle with lunch – it's light and fruity and I leave with a couple of bottles tucked under my



arm, a practice that becomes very familiar over the next couple of days. From there it's off to Coopers Creek for jazz and a glass of their fine rose. Solo travel has its bonuses – no complaints when you double back to a feijoa honesty box, no having to share. After a couple of hours duty calls – this wine-tasting business is so demanding – and it's off to Awa Valley vineyard, the home of Stewart and Colleen Cameron. They're Parnell escapees who bought Awa Valley on a whim. Sitting on their deck overlooking the vines on a sunny Sunday afternoon certainly gives Parnell a bad name. I leave with a couple of bottles of their divine oaked chardonnay.

5pm: A short drive and I'm at Willows Reach Lodge. Everyone should stay here just once. It's not just the setting, or the luxury accommodation – it's the welcome you get from Geoff Clarke and Jenny Arscott who anticipate what you most want. Suddenly, all the big life issues melt away and you're sitting in a summer house drinking coffee and talking about donkeys and drystone walling. Willows Reach is modelled on an English farm with a kind of *All Creatures Great and Small* ambience. It's an oasis of charm with a boathouse, llamas, birdlife galore and a garden that most recently won Jenny Nor-West Garden of the Year. Geoff delights in sourcing old timber which he has used to create rustic stables, fencing and



West's best: Soljans winery, above, and Muriwai Beach, left.

furniture. There's only one room for hire, so the property is yours to explore and relax in. Geoff and Jenny refuse to let me go off to dinner on my own so the three of us head to nearby Allely House where the food is as good as the Kumeu wine.

8.30am: I'm beginning to think I will have to eat my way out of Kumeu if I'm ever going to leave. Breakfast is another heavenly feast of which the best bit is rose-petal jam.

10am: Muriwai Beach is everything a West Coast beach should be. Windswept but accessible and gloriously scenic. I forgo the surf lesson and instead head out to the gannet colony. It's an easy walk that rewards you with great views and a close up of birdlife you won't see in the city.

12.30pm: More eating and drinking. This time at Hallertau, a specialist brewery. Genius idea to have a brewery in the middle of wine country and there are plenty of smart people in to sample a tasting paddle of their range.

2pm: Either the beer has gone straight to my head or Charles and Camilla are

having a chat in the Matua Valley vineyard. Come to think of it, I've seen a lot of colourful characters all over Kumeu in the past couple of days. It's Scarecrow Festival time and what better way to scare the locals than stick a couple of ageing royals in your prize crop? I leave with a couple of bottles tucked under my arm.

3pm: Heaven on a beauty bed. I'm at Spa Di Vine, having vinotherapy. Thought I'd been having plenty of that over the weekend but turns out this is a beauty treatment using a wine and grape base, long revered for antioxidant and other skin benefits. Bliss. Afterwards I loll about in a robe sipping green tea and nibbling on fresh pineapple and chocolate and wonder if they would notice if I stayed here forever.

5.30pm: I'm on the Southern Motorway heading back to Hamilton with the car a delicious aroma of new season apples, feijoas and plump black grapes. Half a dozen bottles of wine and a jar of rose petal jam are carefully stowed and I am as relaxed as a floppy Kumeu scarecrow.

– Susan Pepperell



fact file

Where to stay:

Willows Reach Lodge, 252 Boord Cres, Kumeu. Luxury boutique accommodation in an English-style rural setting. www.willowsreach.co.nz

What to do:

Wineries: There are familiar names aplenty in Kumeu including Soljans, Coopers Creek, Matua Valley, Awa Valley and Nobilo and some not so familiar such as Kerr Farm and Westbrook. All offer cellar door tastings and sales. Vineyards not on SH16 are well sign-posted and easily found. **Tree Adventures:** Woodhill Forest, discover your inner Tarzan on eight different courses from 3m to 10m off the ground. www.treeadventures.co.nz

Spa Di Vine: 12 Taylor Rd, Waimauku. Large range of relaxing spa treatments in a luxury setting. www.spadivine.co.nz

Where to eat:

Soljans Winery, 366 SH16, Kumeu. Cafe-style set among the grapevines. Wonderfully child-friendly. www.soljans.co.nz **Hallertau Brewbar and Restaurant,** Highway 28, Riverhead. Naturally brewed boutique beers matched with local and seasonal fare. www.hallertau.co.nz **Allely House,** 393 SH16, Kumeu. Restored villa with extensive a la carte menu. www.allelyhouse.co.nz