

NEW ZEALAND

South Island luxury lodge takes visitors back to 1895

Twelve-hectare estate offers commanding views, impressive art collections and truly unique accommodations

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

On New Zealand's spectacular South Island, a historic luxury lodge offers timeless tranquility.

The effect is cinematic, like the opening credits of an Edwardian era saga. As my black town car glides past the entrance gate and up the winding gravel pathway beneath a canopy of Japanese maples and huge oak trees, sheep graze from behind a curved white picket fence. In the distance, across a field seasonally sprinkled with daffodils and roses, a gleaming white mansion beckons like an invitation to Masterpiece Theatre.

I've flown to New Zealand's South Island to sample the not-so-simple pleasures of country life here, circa 1895. That's when Otahuna Lodge, which means "little hill among the hills" in Maori, came into existence. Once New Zealand's largest private residence, Otahuna, remains Australasia's best example of Queen Anne architecture. It has been fully restored after receiving extensive damage in the 2011 earthquakes that devastated nearby Christchurch and the surrounding Canterbury Plains.

A storied legacy

Built by prominent New Zealand politician and philanthropist Sir Heaton Rhodes, who resided here for more than 60 years, Otahuna survived several incarnations after his death in 1956. It even served as a Catholic seminary and then a hippie commune in the early 70s before being converted into a guest lodge in 2003.

Wanting to greet me as the stewards of Otahuna's storied legacy, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, Americans who fell in love with this grand old lady of Kiwi lodges when they first visited in 2005. A year later, they purchased this 12-hectare estate, with its commanding views of the Southern Alps and the Canterbury Plains. Cannon and Refo then set about restoring Otahuna to its former glory, while also amassing one of the country's most impressive private art collections, including 35 major works from renowned New Zealand artists.

"To have a piece of history from the 1800s in such a young country where the gardens haven't been subdivided into small farms, and where the house had not been demolished or completely desecrated over the years, is rare," says Cannon as he ushers me into the main foyer.

From the billiard, hunter green walls, leather furniture and a hand-carved Kauri staircase leading to the bedroom suites evoke a 19th-century aura of British colonial wealth and elegance. "We want our guests to have a unique experience that couldn't have occurred anywhere else but in 1895 in Canterbury, New Zealand," Cannon adds.

Otahuna's seven bedroom suites are certainly unique. One has a 30-foot (9 metre) long terrace offering panoramic views. Another, a four-bedroom suite featuring a hand-carved teardrop woodwork inspired by the flora surrounding Otahuna. But it's the 1,100 square foot Rhodes Suite, with its palatial bedroom, marble-clad Victorian wood-burning fireplace with inglenook seating and stained glass windows, that's especially fit for royalty. I'm not surprised to learn that King George VI once slept here on a state visit before ascending to the British throne.

My room is the former attic, transformed with a variety of hand-painted and nut doors, themed hideaway, complete



Hiking trails provide access to nature reserves carved from volcanic craters.



Guests can take personalized cooking classes with executive chef Jimmy McIntyre.

with fishing and hunting memorabilia and eclectic antiques. On my bedside table is a book entitled *A Short History of Sheep in New Zealand*. Perfect preparation for my journey the next morning by helicopter to one of the South Island's woolliest outposts.

Sheep station side trip

There are reportedly 20 sheep for every person in New Zealand, around 60 million in total. You see them in nearly every field and along every roadside. Even clustered beside the runway like greeters as you land at Christchurch international airport. Most, however, keep the grass mowed on vast high country homesteads like Mount Somers. A 40-minute crop ride from Otahuna across the snowcapped Southern Alps where scenes from *The Chronicles of Narnia* were filmed, this 4,000-hectare family run sheep station is one of the nation's largest.

After landing on the station's front lawn, I'm invited to take a tour with David Acland, scion of a pioneering clan that's been tending its flocks up here for well over a century.

After gaining an understanding of the vital role that sheep stationing plays in New Zealand's economy, I lunch with the Acland family before returning by car to Otahuna, where executive chef Jimmy McIntyre gives me a tour of the estate's extensive gardens.

A foodie's fantasy

Most of the cuisine prepared in Otahuna's kitchens comes directly from the property's vegetable, mushroom and herb gardens, as well as an orchard with a variety of fruit and nut trees. Guests are invited to explore the



Canterbury is sheep country, with an estimated 20 sheep per human.

garden with Chef Jimmy and assist in choosing vegetables for dinner. They can also participate, as I did, in personalized cooking classes. Boasting a daily inclusive menu that includes cooked and continental "Kiwi" breakfasts, pre-dinner canapés with drinks and a daily five-course degustation dinner menu paired with New Zealand's finest wines and cheese, Otahuna is a foodie's fantasy.

Chef Jimmy's succulent creations are served each evening in the dark wood-paneled formal dining room, with its ornate original wallpaper, a roaring fire and sparkling candlesticks. One evening, we dine on seared yellow fin tuna and scallops saffron risotto, Canterbury lamb rack and lemon tarts. On another, it's cauliflower soup, Denver leg of venison and chocolate almond tart.

Chef Jimmy even indulges his affection for Asian cuisine by serving up a meal of steamed pork dumplings, pho Vietnamese broth and chili salt squid. Every course is perfectly paired with New Zealand wines sourced from Marlborough, Canterbury and Hawke's Bay wineries and stored in Otahuna's 3,000-bottle wine cellar.

City on the mend

While at Otahuna I also tour Christchurch, which was devastated by the earthquakes of September 2010 and February 2011, which killed almost 200 people and left much of New Zealand's second largest city in ruins. Guide David Hargett points out

structurally unsafe buildings marked for demolition.

"We've all been experiencing anger, sadness and frustration in Christchurch," he says. "But I'm at the stage now where I'm really excited. Hopefully there will be construction going on that will create heaps of employment."

The so-called "Cardboard Cathedral," a temporary house of worship replacing Christchurch Cathedral, which was irreparably damaged in the quakes, best symbolizes the city's architectural resurrection. Constructed of paper and cardboard tubes hung on an in-frame of timber beams

IF YOU GO

Getting there

Air New Zealand offers non-stop service from Vancouver to Auckland, with convenient one-hour connections to Christchurch. www.airnewzealand.ca

Where to stay

Otahuna Lodge is located at the head of a secluded valley on New Zealand's South Island, a 25-minute drive from Christchurch International Airport. This historic, 30-acre Relais & Châteaux estate provides guests with a quintessential New Zealand luxury lodge experience. www.otahuna.co.nz

and structural steel, this transitional structure will hold up to 700 people. Expected to last at least 20 years, it opens this February.

French flavours

From Christchurch it's just an hour's drive to my final destination on this whirlwind trip, the postcard pretty village of Akaroa. Situated on a natural harbour formed by the collapse of a prehistoric volcano into the sea, this popular seaside resort was initially settled by the French. Akaroa still retains a distinctly continental ambience, with francophone street names and plenty of locals who still speak French. The nearby Harbour is renowned for its sea life, including the world's smallest and rarest dolphins, the Hector's Dolphins, as well as New Zealand fur seals, tiny blue penguins and abundant bird life.

We set out along the rugged coastline, where several schools of these playful cetaceans dart under and alongside our catamaran. On board is a special crew member, a feisty terrier cross named Murph who can hear the dolphins approaching and alerts the captain by barking furiously at the water when they're near.

Watching this little dolphin spotting dynamo in action, I wonder how Murph would enjoy having a cracker at rounding up Otahuna's sheep. Of its pampered guests, for that matter, before they irrevocably succumb to the Edwardian charms of this magnificent colonial Kiwi manor.

Getting around

Canterbury Guiding Company offers private bespoke guided tours within Christchurch and the wider Canterbury region. www.canterburyguides.com

Recommended booking agents

Stays at Otahuna Lodge can be booked through the following Canadian travel agencies:

- Vision 2000 (1-866-802-6676; www.vision2000.ca)
- Mason Horvath (1-888-999-3570; www.masonhorvath.com)
- Truffle Pig (1-416-628-1272; www.trufflepig.com)