



SIR HEATON WOULD APPROVE

The fabulous Otahuna Lodge in Tai Tapu is the perfect retreat for a relaxing break allowing you to unwind in its luxurious surroundings.

Words by **Michael McHugh**

When you stand in the entrance hall of Otahuna Lodge you could be forgiven for imagining the country squire and original owner, Sir Heaton Rhodes, a once high-profile pioneer of Canterbury, walking from the library and his wife Jessie coming down the stairs to greet you.

Although I'm sure each room at Otahuna has many stories to tell, the renovations are in keeping with and completed with such respect to the Queen Anne period of architecture that you believe Sir Heaton and Jessie would be very happy and proud of what has been achieved. The Lodge with its picture-perfect setting is now protected by a Category I listing from the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

The name 'Otahuna' is Maori and translates to 'little hill among the hills'. Sir Heaton built and remained in the home for more than 60 years, dying at the age of 95. His funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Christchurch.

Most people in Canterbury knew of Sir Heaton and his gracious house at Otahuna for quite a different reason: daffodils. The grounds of Otahuna were opened to the public annually to view the fields of daffodils. This longstanding tradition is now kept alive by Otahuna's current owners. ▶



COUNTRY HOUSE

Clockwise from left: Built in 1895 and now fully restored, the impressive Otahuna Lodge – with its white painted walls, slate grey roof and sweeping driveway – stands out in the surrounding countryside; take in the views as you enjoy breakfast on the magnificent veranda of the Verandah Suite; Otahuna is famous for its daffodil fields and they were once the largest in New Zealand.



WEEKEND GETAWAY

Sir Heaton created one of the most remarkable gardens in New Zealand and, with his wife Jessie, shared his interest in flowers and helped hand-pollinate narcissi to develop new varieties at Otahuna.

Until 2001, successive owners had maintained the house more or less in its original condition. The famous blue and white silk carpet in the drawing room, laid for the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York in 1927, which never did eventuate, was taken up and stored in the attic. The only original wallpaper now surviving from Sir Heaton's time is in the dining room. In early 2004 Otahuna was converted into a luxury lodge, and started receiving its first guests.

In 2006 Otahuna was bought by its current owners, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, and the real upgrade began. They completed the lodge's refurbishment, installing a commercial-grade kitchen and changing the furniture to echo the architectural elements of the house. New furniture was designed and manufactured in Canterbury, and original paintings and antiques purchased. Photographs of the house from days gone by remind visitors of the past and are dotted around the lodge. The original woodwork was restored and oiled, including fireplace surrounds, and underfloor heating added as before this, even with open fires, the house was very cold.

UP THE GARDEN PATH

Full-time gardeners were hired, new flower beds laid, and hundreds of daffodil bulbs planted. The lake was drained and relined, the frog pond and Dutch Garden restored to their former glory and a potager kitchen garden added, complete with herbs and vegetables to supply the kitchen, reviving Otahuna's self-sufficiency to the days when it was a working sheep and beef farm.

The 110-year-old gardens were originally laid out under the direction of AE Lowe, who trained at Kew gardens in London. The wide sweeping lawns and views over the lake in front of the estate are edged by a mix of wooded areas giving guests a chance to explore through a range of different planted areas. The grounds of Otahuna are magnificent and are recognised as a 'garden of national significance' by the New Zealand Gardens Trust.

My favourite part of the garden is the kitchen potager. It made me want to dig up our back lawn and grow vegetables. The sunny stone-walled paddock included many vegetables and herbs I knew of, and many I didn't know existed. You can select your own vegetables for dinner, or an apple, pear or quince from the orchard. Perhaps even a pineapple. Or a selection of mushrooms from the small little mushroom shed at the side of the garden.

Jimmy McIntyre, Otahuna's executive chef, maintains high standards with the cuisine. Dinners are often degustation and menus change daily and always use fresh seasonal produce from the estate's gardens. The food is simple, allowing the palette to experience the fresh tastes from the Canterbury region. Most meals are like sunshine on a plate; with a light touch McIntyre creates some of the best food you will find in New Zealand.

On the first night I dined in the Victorian dining room with my fellow guests and was served wild nettle and homemade ricotta ravioli in broth, seared yellow fin tuna with pea puree and pickled lemon and fennel salad, pan-roasted duck breast with a caramelised shallot tart, followed with Otahuna Granny Smith ▶



"The new owners completed the refurbishment by changing the furniture to echo the architectural elements of the house."



HOME COMFORTS

Clockwise from left: Drinks are served before dinner in the elegant drawing room, a light pretty room just to the left of the entrance hall; the entrance hall, with its inviting fireplace, is the perfect place to curl up with your favourite magazine or book and let the hours roll by; the luxurious Rhodes Suite complete with octagonal room in the turret, stained-glass windows and view to the Southern Alps.





FLAVOURFUL FOOD
Jimmy McIntyre, Otahuna's executive chef, uses the finest local ingredients for his degustation dinners.



DINNER IS SERVED

A member of Relais & Chateaux, an exclusive collection of 475 of the finest hotels and gourmet restaurants in 55 countries across the globe, Otahuna is one of the best lodges in New Zealand.

apple and vanilla bean brûlée. Wine served was a mix of Hawkes Bay viognier, rieslings from Marlborough, a reserve syrah from Church Road and a late-harvest gewürztraminer from Gisborne. Interestingly enough I didn't feel like breakfast the following day.

And if the grand Victorian dining room with roaring fireplace and the original ornate wallpaper is not to your liking you can have dinner in the wine cellar, outdoors on one of many verandas, in the kitchen or in your own room.

All five suites and two master suites are upstairs and have ensembles with deep baths. I stayed in the Rhodes Suite, the original master bedroom, which had more than enough room to swing an army of cats as it's actually a series of four rooms. The octagonal annex situated in the turret was ideal for sitting in while writing my editorial as I looked out over the garden and sweeping driveway. It is also a perfect room for a private candlelight dinner. The room had a beautiful carved wooden fireplace, stained-glass windows and a veranda with views out over the Canterbury Plains. In the distance the Southern Alps waved back and the air felt fresh and clean.

My suite didn't have a television, but it did have internet access and it felt like the perfect room for reading and disappearing from the world for a few days, just as I'm sure Sir Heaton would have liked it. It has been some years since he has passed on and Otahuna has also had a number of reincarnations throughout the years. Its current starring role as a luxury lodge is perhaps its best. I certainly want to return. **MF**

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GARDEN, COOK & VISIT

GARDEN TOURS

No stay at Otahuna Lodge is complete without a tour of the estate's own century-old garden. The tour provides insight into the history of Otahuna, explaining why and how Victorians grew certain kinds of plants, as well as the many ways in which the current garden team restores and maintains Sir Heaton's greatest legacy.

Further afield, it is easy to see how Christchurch earned its nickname as 'The Garden City'. Guests can visit a number of renowned gardens, either on their own or with a local expert who can provide access to gardens usually not open to the public.

COOKING CLASSES

Culinary adventure is a cornerstone of the Otahuna experience. A three-hour cooking lesson with executive chef Jimmy McIntyre provides an overview of the philosophies behind the lodge's celebrated food and wine program. Classes incorporate time in Otahuna's organic potager garden. They offer a chance to learn first-hand cooking techniques and can be tailored to any dietary requests.

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

Originally settled by French immigrants, Akaroa is a picturesque seaside town that has retained many of its 19th-century public buildings and cottages. The one-hour drive from Otahuna's gates takes guests over an extinct volcano, with stunning views of the harbour and the patchwork of farms and forests below. Akaroa offers the opportunity to swim with the world's rarest and smallest dolphins, the Hector's dolphins. Other excursions might include forest and hillside walks, a two-hour cruise on a classic 1940s sailing yacht or a visit to sea caves via kayak. Within the village guests can enjoy charming shops and restaurants as well as the 'Giant's Garden' – a horticultural and artistic statement bedecked in mosaic tiles and sculpture.

LOCATION

Otahuna is hidden away in Tai Tapu, just 20 minutes' drive from Christchurch city in the glorious South Island of New Zealand. Christchurch is the gateway to the South Island and the magnificent Southern Alps.