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Christchurch's Otahuna Lodge, where you'll be at home with luxury

New Zealand's largest private historic residence offers scenic surrounds for the adventurous and plenty of creature comforts for modern Miss Marples, writes Jemima Whyte.



Built in 1895, the seven-suite mansion Otahuna Lodge is 30 minutes' drive from Christchurch International Airport and a two-hour train ride away from the heart of the Southern Alps.

by **Jemima Whyte**

Oh help, should I have changed for dinner? As I bowl into the sitting room, sneakers slightly muddy from a walk around the gardens, I'm greeted by a blazing fire, drinks, a handful of guests, and delicious, tiny meat pies.

Small potatoes, really, given that in the two days I spent at Christchurch's Otahuna Lodge, that's the closest anything came to a hiccup.

This 1895 luxurious seven-suite lodge, located 30 minutes' drive from Christchurch International Airport, might be as upmarket as you'd expect from any one of New Zealand's six Relais & Chateaux lodges. But in keeping with the style philosophy of our friends across the ditch, it's about creature comforts delivered casual and quaint – martinis in puffer vests and gumboots, if you will.

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On arrival, it's the lodge's grand public areas, spilling out onto a daffodil field, Dutch garden and swimming pool, that provide the immediate wow factor. But a weekend stay here is made most memorable by the cosy little things: not locking your bedroom door; browsing the wonderful collection of books; and popping into the kitchen for a piece of freshly baked cake (without being roped into the washing up – owners Hall Cannon and Miles Refo would be horrified at the mere suggestion).

It's easy to see why many of Otahuna's Australian guests fly in for a weekend to unwind, or use it as a base from which to explore Christchurch, a city that continues to rebuild and look forward after a series of earthquakes over the past five years. In an earthquake in September 2010, Otahuna lost its chimneys and was closed for four months, reopening in 2011.

The vast weatherboard mansion with slate grey roof was built by the Canterbury district pioneer, political figure and farmer Sir Heaton Rhodes for his young wife, Jessie, as a wedding present. Today, Otahuna (meaning "little hill" in Maori) is one of New Zealand's largest historic residences.

With roaring fires, wood panelling and stained-glass windows, it's like stepping into an Agatha Christie manor house – but with sensationally fast Wi-Fi and enormous bathrooms. Oh, and brownies in a jar by the bed. Not to mention helicopters on call for heli-skiing or crayfish diving.

We opt for a more sedate Miss Marple-style outing: a day spent at Arthur's Pass National Park, which requires only a scenic two-hour journey on the TranzAlpine train.

Following breakfast (muesli, muffins, sausages home-made from the property's own pigs, and freshly collected eggs done every way imaginable), we're whisked to Rolleston train station by Canterbury Guiding Co's David Hiatt. He leaves us alone for the train ride – spent in an open-air carriage to better view the majestic Southern Alps. We snake along the Waimakariri River, finally meeting up again with David at the station at the top of the pass.

From there, it's a few hours of gentle walking, clambering about on snow-capped mountains, sitting by streams with moss-covered undergrowth and spotting the occasional native bird, including bright green, cheeky keas (the world's only alpine parrot). And then, our picnic.

We lunch next to a riverbed formed of greywacke (who knew it was a rock? I thought it was a cat from one of NZ's great exports, the *Hairy Maclary* children's book series), munching our way through meats and fish cured at Otahuna, breads and salads. And gooey, creamy cake.

Otahuna's chefs don't excel just at picnics and breakfast. Each night there's a six-course degustation dinner, where the produce is mainly sourced locally, matched with New Zealand wines, including a standout 2012 Muddy Water Pinot Noir from Waipara. (The pinots from Pyramid Valley and Bell Hill are also superb.)

On Saturday night, along with guests from the US, we sit down to a communal feast, dining on French onion soup; seared tuna with avocado ice-cream and wasabi chive flowers; confit duck leg with Puy lentils and spinach; and hazelnuts and mini caramel eclairs. Occasionally the chefs use produce from the Otahuna gardens, which include a shed for frost-sensitive melon plants; the old apple store now used for mushrooms; a

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cutting garden for flowers; and, naturally, a vegetable patch.

Hall and Miles can recommend other eating spots, such as the Akaroa fish and chip shop and Ma Maison Restaurant and Bar.

But, really, lazing in the garden, enjoying the sunshine and gazing at the daffodils, it's hard to move. Even when it's time to fly home.

The writer was a guest of Otahuna. Nightly rates from \$NZ1200 per couple, all-inclusive. For the Love of a Place: The Stories and Cuisine of Otahuna, by Hall Cannon and Miles Refo with Simon Farrell-Green was published in July.

otahuna.co.nz

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