



Otahuna Lodge's entry hall

Otahuna lap of luxury

Derek Green discovers a suite for every mood at this Canterbury lodge

The big idea

With late spring not offering much in the way of warm weather, we eschew our usual beachside weekend escape for luxury in the countryside. Otahuna, the secluded Canterbury lodge and one of the largest private homes ever built in New Zealand, is under new ownership and recently renovated. We need no more encouragement to head south.

Getting there

A grey, drizzly morning is forgotten once luxury car dealer Archibalds introduces us to our getaway wheels—a beautiful grey-blue 6-speed Audi 3.0L Quattro ... mmmmm! Sinking into the luxurious heated Milano leather upholstery makes us wish we were facing a road trip of several hours

instead of the 20-minute hop towards Banks Peninsula.

Maybe we can squeeze in a jaunt to Akaroa tomorrow to put the beast through its paces, check the claimed fuel miserliness, the manual transmission override for tricky passing manoeuvres, and the adaptive air suspension. I sense driving the family sedan will never be the same again.

All too soon the mansion's sweeping gravel driveway is crunching satisfyingly under the alloys as we skirt a field of daffodils and expansive front gardens, and come to a halt in front of Otahuna's freshly painted majestic sprawl. Courtesy of the advance warning provided by the security system at the gate, no sooner have we popped the boot than Tim

Ogle, the genial Clefs d'Or concierge, has scooped our overnight bags from the Quattro's cavernous interior, and Miles Refo, co-owner and host, is ushering us up the front steps and into the reception room. Otahuna is a quintessential 19th-century country home—plush carpets, hundreds of square metres of native and exotic timbers, sumptuous drapes and an eclectic mix of antique furniture.

Despite its grandeur, the property feels welcoming. The central heating is making its contribution, but we're naturally drawn to the crackling wood fire—one of fifteen still in operation, including three in bathrooms. The luminous woodwork and soft furnishings in pale green, beige and natural tones convey an aura of gracious comfort.

Fulfilling the needs

On a tour of the interior, we learn from Miles how he and fellow American and partner Hall Cannon found Otahuna during a three-month trip around the country in search of the perfect property, and how they snapped it up at a subsequent mortgagee sale. The previous owners had done much of the modernisation work during the previous decade, but Miles and Hall closed the property for three months to finish the work to their exacting standards. The Stephen Cashmore interior décor incorporates a number of local and American antiques and collectibles without being fussy or overdone. More than two dozen newly commissioned and purchased local artworks also contribute to the final effect.

There's a suite for every mood: the calming greens and garden outlook of the Botanical Room (with a clever bi-fold shower door for disabled access); the snug cabin feel of the tongue-and-groove lined Garret Suite, with its dormer windows, old trunks and assorted fishing and hunting relics; or, for romantics, the several suites with enormous bathrooms, each with a free-standing two-person bath and open fire.

We are staying in the palatial, 100-square-metre Rhodes Suite, named after the property's founder, Sir Heaton Rhodes. Rhodes was a member of parliament, stock breeder and keen horticulturalist, and Otahuna was his home for more than 60 years. His

impressive legacy includes a stately formal garden, woodlands, a daffodil field and, of course, this Queen Anne mansion, completed in 1895 and now a Category One-listed building with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. Our massive boudoir is accessed from a private entrance hall hung with photos of the founding family, and furnished with a king bed, plump sofa, ottoman with accompanying inglenook seating and yet another fireplace.

A large wooden free-standing wardrobe and occasional furniture add to the impression of being in a king's private quarters. On one wall, large French doors open onto a deep private verandah overlooking the front entrance and with views to

the distant pond. A table and chairs suggest a perfect spot for afternoon gin and tonics, or breakfast for two, while wrapped in Otahuna's fluffy white robes. A nearby octagonal turret houses the cutest private dining room and study.

We like

The hour before pre-dinner drinks is spent trying out the spa bath, from where we catch a glimpse of the estate's heated swimming pool, spa area and rear woodlands. Stepping out onto the warm tile floor, we eye up the double rainforest shower—it can wait till morning. Had I brought the laptop I could have made use of the Wi-Fi (available in each suite), but

we're happy to remain cocooned in our luxury retreat, isolated from the world for a few more hours.

Let's dress for dinner, I say. It's a 5-star property—it would be rude not to! We sweep star-like down the grand staircase. A wonderful dry martini is poured for her, the neighbouring Kaituna Valley Summerhill Vineyard 2006 Pinot Gris pour moi—as suggested by the attentive Tim. We chat with Miles and Hall in front of the crackling fire, while sampling tiny pre-dinner delicacies.

By the time our glasses are drained, dinner is served. We are seated at the massive, gleaming 12-seater table in the formal dining room. The table is set with white linen place



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Rhodes suite bedroom; canapés; Otahuna's elegant entrance; the Verandah suite with free-standing bath and open fire

mats, smart tableware and a multitude of wine glasses.

The dinner menu can be designed to allow for any advised allergies, which is a relief for a coeliac like me. Tonight's superb meal includes a number of ingredients from the lodge's gardens, plus locally sourced ingredients such as the entrée of Smoked Salmon with Spring Greens, and the Duo of Lamb with Otahuna Porcini Jus main.

The Cauliflower Soup to start and the Chocolate and Espresso Parfait to finish provide a very satisfying array of tastes, and prove that part-time chef Adam is a worthy stand-in for head chef Jimmy McIntyre, at home tonight with a newborn daughter. The Desert

Heart 2006 Bannockburn Chardonnay and Pegasus Bay 2001 Pinot Noir complement each dish—as does the special dessert wine, which will remain our secret. You really should go and discover it for yourself.

After a deep sleep, invigorating shower and light breakfast (our choice) taken in the bright kitchen, we brave the drizzle for a wander through the estate's varied gardens. All too soon we bid our hosts farewell and hit the road—reluctantly leaving behind Otahuna's stunning surroundings.



HOT TIPS

Otahuna Lodge is a 20–30 minute drive from Christchurch city or airport. Refer to houseoftravel.co.nz for the best deals on all flights to Christchurch

Staying overnight in a standard suite during summer costs \$1,200 per couple, inclusive of evening drinks, canapés, a 5-course dinner with matched wines and full breakfast, exclusive of GST. Off-peak rates are available between April–September

INSPIRED DEAL: *Inspire* readers staying at Otahuna Lodge between November 1, 2007 and March 31, 2008 can enjoy a bonus gourmet picnic hamper or a guided garden tour taken by one of the gardeners. Guests who stay for two nights or more can enjoy both bonus extras. Be sure to mention the Inspired Deal when booking to secure these extras

FROM TOP: Dining room; Dutch garden