

# TRACING THE LONG WHITE CLOUD

With a focus on local cuisine, luxury accommodation and breathtaking vistas, travelling through New Zealand's South Island via its luxury lodges is the easiest way to get under the skin of this unique destination, says **Nick Walton**.





Above and below:  
Otahuna has retained  
its timeless beauty as a  
luxury lodge.

It's the silence you first notice at Otahuna Lodge, a beautifully preserved historic mansion on the outskirts of Christchurch, New Zealand's second largest city. As soon as our hire car comes to a halt on the manicured gravel driveway a pervasive silence, punctuated by distant bird's song and hints of an evening breeze through the willow trees, washes over us. It's utter bliss.

This is the kind of experience people are seeking when they travel to New Zealand,

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known as *Aotearoa*, or the 'Land of the Long White Cloud' in the Maori tongue. But in the age of mass tourism, it can be hard to really experience a destination, meet its people, and understand their way of life. That's where luxury lodges come in.

Travelling via New Zealand's luxury lodges, which slowly developed from humble fishing cabins to world-acclaimed houses of slumber, is slow travel at its very best. At each fascinating property, many of which are members of the acclaimed Luxury

Lodges of New Zealand association, guests delve into the personalities and histories of the property's owners and hosts, kick their heels off amidst lavish accommodation, sample the best of local produce, and do so against some of the country's most stunning landscapes.

A Queen Anne-style home lovingly reborn, wreathed by 30 acres of stunning gardens and staffed by hospitality innovators, Otahuna was built in 1895 and bought by Americans Hall Canon and Miles Refo



in 2007. With the help of Kiwi manager and executive chef Jimmy McIntyre, they have created a sublime property that welcomes visitors from across the globe. Its five sumptuous guest rooms, including our spacious Rhodes Suite, named for the mansion's first residents, are decked out in ancient wood, bespoke furnishings and subtle cutting-edge technology, and feature Victorian fireplaces, balconies with views to the Southern Alps, and plenty of little nooks to explore. All this lavish living is complemented by a stunning art collection by Kiwi artists like Peter Hackett and Virginia Leonard, as well as plenty of little touches, from the ironic bedside tome *A Short History of Sheep in New Zealand* by Richard Wolfe, to Royal warrant-holding Quercus toiletries.

Chef McIntyre is renowned for his simplistic yet elegant approach to fine-dining, a philosophy that places locally-sourced ingredients, including 130 varieties of vegetables, fruit and nuts from the lodge's own gardens, and meats from Otahuna's own smokehouse, front and centre. McIntyre, with Austrian sous chef Thomas, serves freshly shucked Bluff oysters with glasses of chilled Central Otago Riesling in the Lodge's leather-clad lounge, followed by a delectable five-course dinner in the dining room, a fire-warmed space dressed in timber the colour of molasses. Dinner is included in the tariff of most lodges, and McIntyre thrills with fat chipotle prawns with tomato and roasted pepper soup; locally caught monkfish

Captivating  
landscapes  
are a major  
drawcard for  
New Zealand's  
lodges.

with saffron risotto and a decadent lemon and vanilla sauce; and Canterbury duck breast with quince jus, kumara purée and autumn vegetables, all from Otahuna's gardens.

It's with real reluctance that we leave the next morning, driving east into the deep valleys and hidden bays of the Banks Peninsula, stopping at the Trading Rooms in charming Akaroa for lunch, before climbing the switchbacks to Hilltop Tavern and descending down into Pigeon Bay, home to New Zealand's newest luxury lodge property.

Envisioned by New Zealand-born real estate tycoon Mark Palmer, Annandale isn't really one property but a collection of four, each vastly different from the next, and each spaced a good 30-minute drive across a working farm from each other, ensuring the ultimate in privacy. There's the historic and beautifully restored Homestead; the rustic elegance of Shepard's Cottage; the open-plan, family-friendly living of Scrubby Bay; and then there's Seascape.

We arrive at Seascape after a 45-minute drive along spectacular clifftops that plummet to the mussel beds of Pigeon Bay far below, the farm's Black Angus cattle watching our progress. A simple farm track leads steeply down into a remote bay wreathed by a stony beach and rocky headlands. Nestled into the hillside, Seascape is stunning. A spacious, unashamedly modern one-bedroom space, the open-plan villa offers spectacular views, gas fireplaces, and beside

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From top: Pen-y-bryn; gourmet cuisine is a lodge fundamental; owners James Boussy and James Gluckman.

the outdoor jacuzzi a simple kitchen with Miele appliances and a deep soak tub that looks out across the secluded bay. There is nothing between the king-size bed and the expanses of the Pacific.

While not a traditional lodge, Seascope offers the same chance to become a part of the landscape, to slow down, sleep in, and leave the rest of the world behind. To that end, guests can choose to have a chef cook up a storm in the butler's pantry; have raw ingredients delivered and be left to their own devices; or, like us, opt for the "we create, you serve" approach, which has executive chef Paul Jobin prepare a gourmet dish that's vacuum packed and needs minimal preparation. That evening, we dine on local green lip mussels with tamari egg yolk and tomato jelly; Canter valley black lacquer duck leg with banana lychee relish and scallion pancake; and lemon passionfruit curd and honey macadamia wafers with the farm's own raspberries. In fact, all ingredients either come from Annandale's farm and extensive gardens, or from producers within 50 kilometres of the property.

After dinner, my wife Maggie and I curl up on a duo of day beds by the outdoor fireplace, the waters of the bay before us cast in the lingering light of a startling canopy of stars, the inky landscape surrounding us unmarred by manmade light. It's nothing short of magical.

From Annandale we drive west, back up the winding valley roads of Banks Peninsula, and then south towards Taitapu, where we stop for coffee at The Store, a local institution that's half art gallery and half restaurant. We reach Oamaru by late afternoon, the shadows of this historic little town, which was recently named New Zealand's Coolest, already growing long. We stop in at the town's recently revitalised historic precinct

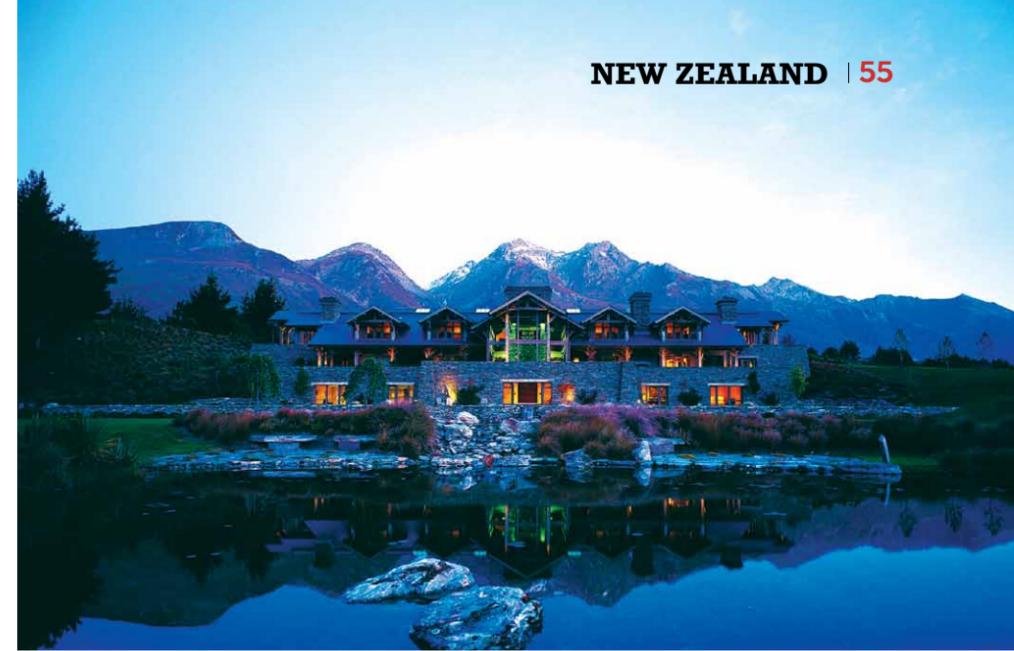


to sample time-honoured drops at The New Zealand Whisky Collection, the cellar door of which sells the last whisky ever produced in the country, before climbing the hill to Pen-y-bryn, a category one heritage-listed home nestled in dazzling gardens overlooking the township.

Built in 1889, Pen-y-bryn was bought by former World Bank economist James Glucksman and dentist James Boussy in 2010. Of the historic Victorian home's five cozy guest rooms, three will become suites by September, complementing the beautifully preserved living rooms, dens and lounges. (including one featuring a full-size billiards table commissioned by the New Zealand houses of parliament). Filled with beautiful art and artifacts from the "James" many years in Asia, Pen-y-bryn is a traditional lodge where the lines between private home and accommodation option are blissfully fuzzy, and where the old world hospitality of the owners, married with fantastic local fare, are the major drawcards.

In fact, the convivial atmosphere and warm welcome of our hosts is second to none. Evenings commence with cocktails and canapés by the roaring fire, followed by a five-course dinner that includes South Island salmon and Bluff oysters with greens from the gardens; and indulgent roast pork with homemade lemon curd. Slow food lover James Glucksman is an Officier Maître Hôte in the Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, the Paris-based gourmet society, and serves up dishes that are not only inventive and delicious but are almost entirely sourced from the lodge's own gardens, homemade in its kitchens, or brought from local suppliers. The Jameses' years of travelling the world come through in the lodge's décor, its fascinating object d'art, and its world-class cuisine, making a visit to Pen-y-bryn a sensory journey as well as a night at a homely inn.

From Oamaru we drive up the glorious Waitaki Valley, passing through Central Otago's wine belt and the all-year Alpine playground of Queenstown towards Glenorchy, taking a scenic road regularly listed among the top ten in the world. At its end you'll find Blanket Bay, the Grand Dame of New Zealand's modern luxury lodges.



Above: Blanket Bay is the grande dame of modern lodges. Below: Lodge visits combine many local activities.

Unlike Otahuna or Pen-y-bryn, Blanket Bay was purpose-built as a luxury lodge, designed to attract the well-heeled from the US and Europe, although today you're as likely to hear Arabic or Chinese spoken in its Great Room as English or French. The lodge, flanked by Lake Wakatipu on one side and imposing peaks on the other, is a destination in itself. Designed by US architect Jim McLaughlin and built using locally-sourced schist rock and recycled timber, Blanket Bay boasts 12 luxurious guest rooms and suites, including four elegant standalone Chalet

Suites. In addition, there are cavernous living rooms with double-height picture windows and towering fireplaces, intimate bars, a modern games room, wine caves (plural), a spa and fitness centre, a seasonal outdoor pool, and an indoor spa that looks through French windows to the western tip of the lake.

Located at the base of the Southern Alps, the lodge is the perfect jumping-off point for travellers looking to explore Milford Sound and Fiordland National Park by helicopter,



the Dart River by high-powered speedboat, or the ancient rainforests and towering peaks of Middle Earth with a hike in the Mount Aspiring National Park. Here the fly-fishing is phenomenal, the heli-skiing the best in the Southern Hemisphere, and the horse-riding sensational. Guests return to dinner cooked by multi-award winning executive chef Corey Hume and served in the cozy Lake View Dining Room. His culinary creations range from Canterbury quail with celeriac purée and chorizo; through to Port Nicholson crayfish tail with coral and miso emulsion, seared scallops, and roasted vegetables from the lodge gardens.

The last stop on our itinerary is located just down the road, closer to Queenstown. Matakauri is the five-year-old sibling of acclaimed North Island golf destination lodges Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers, and brings a much more contemporary feel to the South Island. Positioned, like Blanket Bay, overlooking Lake Wakatipu and the towering Tooth Peaks that form the border with the province of Southland, Matakauri features just 12 guest rooms, four located within the main lodge, and the rest standalone apartments with glorious views and clean, modern décor that takes its design cues from autumn in Otago. Each retreat boasts a gas fireplace, private balcony, flatscreen TVs hidden behind artwork, and quite possibly the world's best bathtub view. The Owner's Cottage, the lodge's penthouse, accommodates eight in absolute luxury.

Luxury Alpine living at Matakauri.

The warm colours of the suites are continued in the main lodge, where breakfast and dinner is served in the intimate dining room, on the outdoor patio, or in the private Library. Head chef Jonathan Roger's menus are inspired by the produce of the deep south and his ever-changing a la carte offerings are laced with the likes of roasted scallops with black pudding and beurre noisette, North Island terakihi with mussels and dill; and smoked Otago duck with beetroot, goat's curd and blood orange. If you're lucky, the chef will pop out and serve you himself. It sums up the luxury lodge scene to perfection - world-class cuisine, in a world-class setting, with a touch of the inherent humility that makes New Zealand such an endearing destination.

## TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

**Fly:** Cathay Pacific has direct flights between Hong Kong and Auckland. [www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com)

**Stay:** Learn more about New Zealand's leading luxury lodges at [www.lodgesofnz.co.nz](http://www.lodgesofnz.co.nz)

**Get Around:** Hertz New Zealand has a fleet of late model SUVs ideally suited for a South Island road trip [www.hertz.co.nz](http://www.hertz.co.nz)

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