



Age
Saturday 14/02/2009
Page: 8
Section: Travel
Region: Melbourne, AU
Circulation: 203800
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 847.65 sq.cms.



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Lodged in Kiwi opulence

Sue Wallace is charmed by the attention to detail – and the bedtime stories – in a splendid New Zealand lodge.

Stand on the veranda of Otahuna Lodge in spring and you are treated to the sight of a sea of golden daffodils at the bottom of the estate's sweeping lawns.

The display is thanks to the original owner, Sir Heaton Rhodes, a philanthropist, politician and horticulturalist who was among the first to grow daffodils in New Zealand's South Island.

Every September thousands of the flowers carpet the private parkland. The owners, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, who reopened Otahuna Lodge in May 2007, share it with the public on the first Sunday in September with the revival of Sir Heaton's traditional Daffodil Day.

Built in 1895, Otahuna, which in Maori means "little hill among the hills", sits atop a small rise at the base of the Banks Peninsula with views to the distant Southern Alps.

Today it is one of New Zealand's most opulent and intimate small lodges. As you follow the winding drive lined with 100-year-old oak trees and step through the heavy front doors, you know you are in for something special.

No one knows its charm better than Cannon, a former property developer, and Refo, who has a marketing background. Deciding to escape their frenetic Manhattan lifestyle, they travelled throughout British Columbia and New Zealand, searching for a place to create a retreat.

On their first visit to Otahuna they said no because of the expense and work required but something kept drawing them back. Soon they

were overseeing a four-month restoration costing more than \$NZ10 million.

Heritage-listed Otahuna is considered one of the nation's best examples of Queen Anne architecture. Auckland interior designer Stephen Cashmore, known for his sophisticated treatment of historic properties, has worked his magic in the public rooms and seven luxury suites with themes relating to Sir Heaton, wife Jessie and life in the early days.

Our veranda suite, with its views of the Canterbury Plains, was where the Duke of York, later King George VI, stayed in 1927.

It has open fireplaces in the bathroom and bedroom, original artworks and handmade furniture echoing period pieces. Extra touches include a regularly replenished biscuit jar, a sheepskin rug placed by your bedside at turn-down and a bedtime story sheet on your pillow each night with tales of Otahuna and Sir Heaton.

The lodge is home to 28 commissioned artworks by the country's artists including Peter Beadle, Anna Caselberg and Craig Primrose, as well as historic Otahuna photographs reproduced from the Canterbury Museum.

New Zealand kauri and rimu wood panelling feature in the interior design, a highlight being the hand-carved kauri staircase. A regal painting of Rewi Maniapoto, a Maori warrior and former chief of Ngati Maniapoto, stares down at guests as they enter the green-toned lobby with intricate lead-glass windows and plaid chairs and sofas.

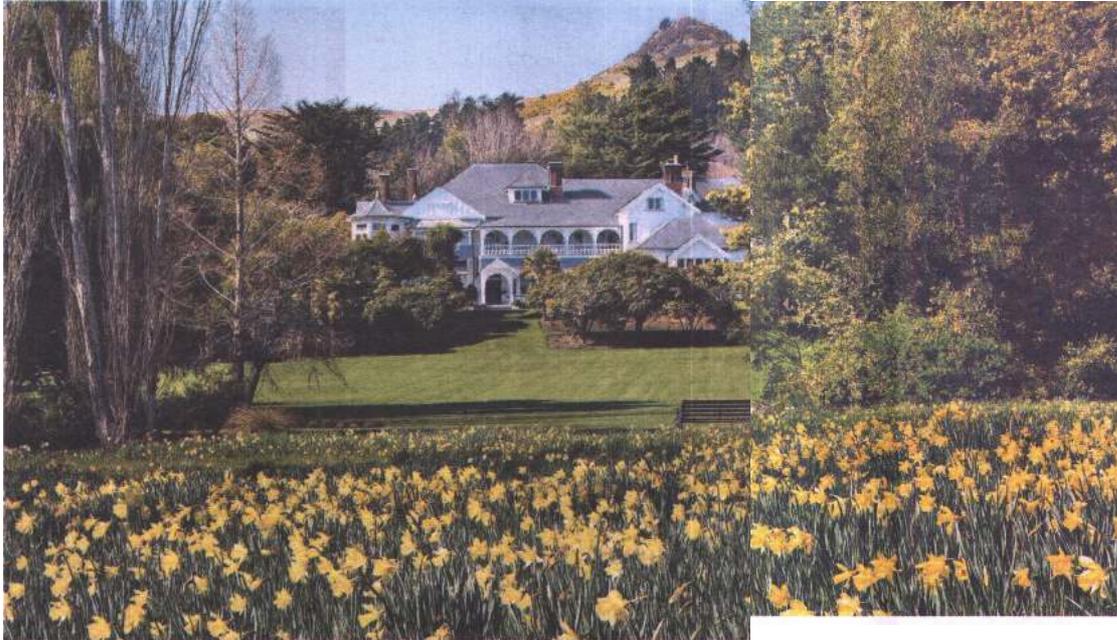


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The 12-hectare historic garden is being restored by head gardener Steve Marcham.

Sir Heaton, who was president of the Canterbury Horticultural Society for more than 50 years, planted many exotic and native trees and shrubs that have flourished over the years.

Take a guided walk in the Dutch garden, named for its windmill shape, and discover six buxus-lined gravel lanes that radiate from a central circle under a canopy of exotic trees including camellias, a loquat and weeping cherry. The a heady perfume of lavender, bay leaves, orange blossom and boxwood hangs in the air.

There are also woodlands with original rhododendrons, where you might hear the call of bell-birds, fantails and rare New Zealand wood pigeons. Otahuna has an impressive orchard and stone-walled organic vegetable garden with 95 vegetables, 25 types of fruit and 20 herbs – to the delight of the lodge's executive chef, Jimmy McIntyre.

I cross paths with McIntyre, his arms laden with leeks, artichokes, tomatoes and raspberries that he will use in tonight's dinner. "Fresh vegetables are the starting point for my menus and I have a fabulous variety at my doorstep," he says.

Pre-dinner drinks and canapes are served each night in the drawing room, alongside the lodge's grand piano, which was owned by the Duke and Duchess of York and left behind after their 1927 New Zealand visit.

Dinner, a five-course degustation matched with New Zealand wines, is served in the formal dining room with its original gilded wallpaper, floor-to-ceiling sideboard and crystal.

It's a communal table and we share stories with guests from Montreal and Vienna;

romantics can dine as a couple in the library, veranda or wine cellar.

Tonight's menu has cauliflower soup with salsa verde, salmon ceviche, beef fillet with kale, broccoflower, potato gnocchi and beetroot, followed by aged cheddar with nectarine chutney and chocolate gateaux with raspberries, cherries, vanilla mascarpone and rhubarb sorbet, all served with a flight of wines including Pegasus Bay and Tresillian Estate.

The next day we toss up whether to play tennis, swim in the heated pool or grab the mountain bikes – we choose the latter and we cycle along quiet country roads.

If you want to see the region by air, a helicopter will collect you from the front lawn and take you to wineries, whale watching, trout fishing or to the Southern Alps.

Be warned, you may just want to stay; I also find it doesn't take long to fall under Otahuna's spell.

Sue Wallace stayed courtesy of Otahuna Lodge.



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Blooming marvel ... (from left) springtime daffodils in the grounds of Otahuna Lodge; works by New Zealand artists hang in the entry hall; the Clark suite.



FAST FACTS

Getting there Air New Zealand and Virgin Blue have regular non-stop flights to Christchurch. Air NZ flies for \$126 from Melbourne and Sydney while Virgin Blue charges \$85 from Melbourne and Sydney. Qantas flies non-stop from Sydney (\$152) but Melbourne passengers have to change aircraft in Sydney and pay \$247 for the privilege. Jetstar charges \$133 from Melbourne and \$119 from Sydney. Fares are one way and do not include tax. Otahuna Lodge is 20 minutes by car from Christchurch.

Staying there Otahuna Lodge, a

Relais & Chateaux property, has doubles from \$NZ700 (\$550) to \$NZ1000 a person a night in peak season, excluding tax. Low-season rates from \$NZ500 to \$NZ800 a person a night. The tariff includes breakfast, laundry service, pre-dinner drinks, canapes and a five-course degustation dinner with wine pairings. Great Mushroom Hunt and Daffodil Day packages are available. 224 Rhodes Road, Tai Tapu, Christchurch, New Zealand. Phone +64 3329 6333 or see otahuna.co.nz.