

Nestled at the foot of the Port Hills, outside the picturesque village of Tai Tapu on New Zealand's South Island, Otahuna Lodge has undergone extensive refurbishment and post-quake reinforcement. Built for Sir Heaton Rhodes in 1895, it is now part of the Relais & Châteaux luxury accommodation group.

A STITCH IN TIME

A stay at historic Otahuna Lodge, the pride of New Zealand's Canterbury Plains, affords time to pursue the finer things in life, writes **Lisa Green**.

PHOTOGRAPHY KIERAN SCOTT

Standing in a Sydney bookstore, Miles Refo was "quite giddy with delight". In his hands was a book by Tilley and Andrew Govanstone, *The Women Behind The Roses* (Rosenberg Publishing, \$49.95) about the ladies whose names were given to the blooms bred by Alister Clark, an Australian rose-growing pioneer. One such rose, now lost, is named 'Lady Rhodes' after the former lady of Otahuna Lodge, the historic home in Canterbury on New Zealand's South Island, into which Mike and his partner Hall Cannon have poured heart, soul and many dollars.

It was the kind of discovery that spurs on a man deep in the process of overhauling a historic property and its parkland-style gardens – a little signal, says Miles, that the Otahuna project, which has to date withstood two significant earthquakes and protracted La Nina weather patterns, was worth persisting with.

Visitors to the property, a half-hour drive from Christchurch, are of a similar view. From the moment Otahuna comes into sight, past bowed oaks at the whitewashed front gate, with gorse-covered hills as a backdrop, it's clear this place is something special.

The house was commissioned and built in 1895 by a New Zealand parliamentarian, Sir Heaton Rhodes. It was to be a hub for his many gentlemanly pursuits, chief among them stockbreeding and horticulture. Indeed, Alister Clark married Sir Heaton's sister, Edith, so the couple were regulars at the estate, where Sir Heaton lived until his death in 1956 (his wife, Jessie, the 'Lady Rhodes' whose namesake was Clark's crimson hybrid tea rose, died in 1929). In the 50-odd years since,

Otahuna has been operated variously as a commune, a monastery and a bed and breakfast. But its latest incarnation takes it back to its roots.

Current owners Hall and Miles hail from Tennessee and Massachusetts respectively, and, following successful stints in publishing and property in New York, turned their eyes further afield in search of a new challenge. They happened to stay at the then-languishing Otahuna on a roadtrip that saw them travel the length and breadth of New Zealand. Initially, they dismissed the property as too much hard work. But Otahuna had worked its magic and they bought the estate in 2006.

And so it's Hall and Miles who greet us on a spring day, emerging from the lodge as we step from our hire car onto the carefully groomed gravel turning circle. Hot on their heels is Executive Chef and occasional porter Jimmy McIntyre, whose celebrated food and wine program is a backbone of the Otahuna experience.

Otahuna ('little hill among the hills' in Maori), is once again jewel of the Canterbury Plains. With a maximum of 14 overnight guests enjoying the considerable pleasures of its seven suites, and discreet but attentive staff, it's easy to pretend you're staying at a cashed-up pal's lavish country house.

All the trappings befitting the lodge's status as a Relais & Châteaux property are in place, but there are also many special, bespoke touches: custom-made fabric sewing kits, fresh-baked cookies and biscotti, and nightly 'Stories of the House', typed up and placed alongside the chocolate at turndown time. All these elements conspire to sweep us up in the history of >



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

The dining room boasts gorgeous kauri and rimu timber panelling and the original gilt wallpaper. This grand yet cosy drawing room, with a piano of royal provenance, is at the heart of the lodge. A fabulous selection of books on architecture, art, history and gardening reflects the passions of the current owners. Historic artefacts speak to a rich past. Owners Miles Refo (left) and Hall Cannon. **OPPOSITE** At the top of the house, the Garret Suite offers views to the Southern Alps.



< Otahuna. One bedtime story reveals that the piano in the drawing room is from a royal yacht, the HMS *Renown*, left behind after a 1927 tour of New Zealand by the Duke and Duchess of York (later King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, the late Queen Mother).

Our dinner is served in the imposing timber-panelled dining room, with original gilt wallpaper still intact and a crackling fire at our backs. Fellow guests include an American designer from Long Island, happily holed up at Otahuna while friends heli-ski and golf their way around the country (there are more than 25 golf courses on the Canterbury Plains alone), and German bird-watchers. Conversation is broken only by the arrival of a new dish from Jimmy's exquisite five-course degustation menu, with expertly matched local wines.

On the centre of the table is an extraordinarily beautiful floral centrepiece, gathered fresh from the garden and arranged by Miles that afternoon. That's inspiration enough for us to lock in a garden tour with head gardener Steve Marcham, so on our final morning at Otahuna we spend a lovely couple of hours wandering through the grounds, beginning with the Edwardian-style Dutch Garden adjacent to the lodge. Under Miles' direction, Steve has stripped this plot down to its original layout and form, retaining the mature trees. A wall of giant pines functions as a windbreak, there's new hornbeam hedging and we spy the brilliant blue *Ceanothus* shrub we admired

in the table arrangement. Other native plantings include the unofficial but much-loved national floral symbol, the kowhai (*Sophora*), pronounced *ko-fai*.

The picture-book orchard and vegetable plot are framed by a giant, gnarled cork tree on the lodge end and the looming rocky outcrops of the Banks Peninsula at the other. In between, it's all clipped green grass, quaint stone buildings and Victorian glasshouses. Productive trees bear apricots, figs, apples, medlars and quince. The walled vegetable garden, which once held Sir Heaton's champion stallions, now boasts a veritable bounty of seasonal delights. These find their way into Jimmy's sunny kitchen, which is where we wind up for coffee and biscotti after our tour.

In Sir Heaton's day, the estate boasted 2000 hectares. Today it's a somewhat neater 12-hectare spread, offering lovely walks without fear of getting lost. Steve and Miles have been chipping away at the underforest, allowing sunlight to again filter to the woodland floor. The rewards are many: native orchids are blooming after lying dormant for decades and long-forgotten stone paths and garden architecture have been rediscovered.

After two days here, I quite fancy the idea of being 'lost' at Otahuna. At least long enough to read a couple of the books in the cosy study, and to see the 10,000 daffodils burst forth when the weather warms. This is a house for all seasons and for leisurely pursuits, just as Sir Heaton intended. >





Otahuna is an unspoilt example of romantic Queen Anne architectural style. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** *Buxus*-lined gravel lanes in the Dutch Garden. Stone outbuildings have been restored. The lodge's orchard and vegetable patch keep the kitchen well supplied.



How to get there

Qantas has daily flights to Christchurch from Sydney return. Call Qantas on 13 13 13 or go to www.qantas.com.au. For Otahuna Lodge packages, call +64 3 329 6333 or go to www.otahuna.co.nz.

TAKE A SCENIC DRIVE

Akaroa, a pretty village at the top of the Banks Peninsula, was, fleetingly, New Zealand's only French settlement. It's a 90-minute drive from Otahuna Lodge, allowing for photo stops.

A TASTE OF OTAHUNA

This spring degustation menu is an example of the exquisite fare served up by Executive Chef Jimmy McIntyre (below). Guests are invited to join cooking classes at Otahuna.

* **Salmon ceviche** Wine match: 2009 Black Estate Riesling.

* **West Coast whitebait, asparagus, pickled lemon and rocket.** Wine match: 2008 Pegasus Bay Sauvignon Semillon.

* **Otahuna lamb with kumara fondant, eggplant puree, pepperonata and tapenade jus.** Wine match: 2006 Muddy Water Syrah.

* **Tallegio, pear and saffron paste.**

* **Otahuna apple and rhubarb strudel, brûlée and sorbet.** Wine match: 2004 Vinoptima Noble Late Harvest Gewurtztraminer.

For Jimmy's fabulous biscotti recipe, go to www.houseandgarden.com.au. **H&G**

