



ABOVE, AND BEYOND

Spectacular landscapes, abundant activities, satiating cuisine, fine wine and gracious, engaging hospitality make New Zealand's South Island a must-visit.

By Beth Weitzman

Photography by Sara Hanna

Given the distance between the United States and New Zealand—approximately 12 to 24 hours of travel time, depending on starting point, destination and layovers—everything about the island country, including a wide scope of adventurous sidelines, makes the journey to reach its stunning shores beyond worthy.

Because winter in the States is summer in New Zealand, the prospect of a sojourn to the Southern Hemisphere during our cold winter months is all that much more enticing. While I had heard that at least two weeks (or more) is needed to make the long haul worthwhile, photographer Sara Hanna and I are slated for an enjoyable seven nights in Christchurch and Queenstown, two South Island areas separated by a quick domestic flight.

Topping a long list of wonders is the landscape (astounding at every turn) and warm, genuine hospitality (the kindness of New Zealanders is like nothing I've previously experienced). Called Kiwis, they greatly respect their homeland (which explains why it is so clean and well cared for) and one another. They work hard to readily enjoy their free time, which includes nearly endless sporting and leisure pursuits, produced in part by an abundance of clean, fresh air. Warm days give way to winery tours; evening brings a sea of brilliant stars under which to laze and linger at a cafe, chatting up locals. And for foodies, especially lamb-lovers and locavores, the fare is tantalizing. Stay longer if you can, but don't let the prospect of one week in New Zealand stop you from one of the most amazing vacations of your life. Go anyway.

View of the Otahuna Lodge, a Relais & Châteaux property, on the helicopter's descent in Christchurch, New Zealand

DAYS 1 - 5

THE DESTINATION

Canterbury, Christchurch and surrounding areas

THE HOTEL. Otahuna Lodge, a Relais & Châteaux property, Christchurch, New Zealand

A CANTERBURY TALE

If you're familiar with Christchurch, it's likely you've either been there or know its name from the news, where it made headlines after devastating earthquakes (in September 2010 and February 2011) left New Zealand's second-largest city, and surrounding Canterbury Plains, in ruins and eternally transformed its landscape. But the disaster didn't shake the awe-inspiring Kiwis, whose passion and adoration for their home city has continued unabated. As soon as the dust settled, in fact, one of the largest urban rebuild projects undertaken in the country's history began—one involving radical new design plans, a church built from cardboard and Re:START (an award-winning, open-air city mall comprised of shops set inside overhauled shipping containers painted a bevy of bright colors).

About 20 minutes outside Christchurch, at the head of a secluded valley, is Otahuna Lodge (otahuna.co.nz, @otahunalodge), a Relais & Châteaux property offering a customized New Zealand lodge experience. Fully restored after receiving its fair share of the earthquake damage that rocked Christchurch, the historic property—originally built in

1895 as the private residence for New Zealand politician and philanthropist Sir Heaton Rhodes—is now a luxury lodge an hour south of Waipara, one of the country's hottest wine regions, best known for its pinot noir and riesling. It is also the largest privately owned, heritage-listed house in New Zealand, widely celebrated for its Queen Anne architecture.

Scattered throughout Otahuna's 30 acres—pastoral surrounds against the fluted cone of an ancient volcano—are winding paths, the Great Lawn, large trees and woodlands, a daffodil field, a thriving half-acre vegetable and herb garden, and a fruit and nut tree orchard, as well as a greenhouse, lake, swimming pool and wine cellar. So magnificent is this sprawl, New Zealand Gardens Trust recognized it as A Garden of National Significance in 2010.

Otahuna owners Hall Cannon and Miles Refo greet us like old friends. On a visit to the area in 2005, these New Yorkers were so enamored with the property and its commanding views of the Southern Alps and Canterbury Plains, that they purchased the estate and began a multiyear process of restoring the century-old grounds.

Although a buyout of intimate Otahuna is an option, it's engaging to meet up with other savvy travelers, their



The front of Otahuna Lodge



The restored, but very authentic, dining room at the lodge

Snow-capped Southern Alps, as seen from the helicopter tour of the area





Otahutu Lodge's early fall and sitting area

names etched in a guest book in the lobby, itself a beauty with hunter green walls, Rimu paneling, leather furnishings and a crackling fireplace (one of 15 wood-burning total chimney spots throughout). It all calls for a refined sense of casually elegant ambience that pays homage to its rich history and founding owner.

ROOMS WITH A VIEW

A hand-carved Kauri staircase leads from the main level to the second floor, with five uniquely designed bedroom suites. Each boasts 19th century architectural details (such as original and ornate wood-burning fireplaces, carved inglenooks and stained-glass windows), as well as newer additions (sheepskin rugs, custom-made linens and Wi-Fi). Luck finds me luxuriating in the Rhodes Suite, the largest of the accommodations, and originally Sir Rhodes' bedroom. Spanning approximately 1,100 square feet, the resting spot is comprised of four rooms within. The grandiose bedroom flaunts a majestic Victorian fireplace with inglenook seating, while a separate octagonal sitting area is situated in the turret. These join a distinct, well-lit study, and a large white-tiled bathroom with a marble double vanity, dreamy spa tub and glass-enclosed rainhead

showers. Just off the bedroom is a screened-in porch with table and chairs for sipping Champagne.

The 1,000-square-foot Verandah Suite features a 30-foot-long terrace with large white rocking chairs, fireplaces in both the bedroom and bathroom, and embroidered Colefax & Fowler draperies, adding romantic élan to Sir Rhodes' former guest room, believed to have hosted King George VI upon his visit to the property in 1927. Of the 700-square-foot options, the Butler Suite boasts original artwork with scenes from the Canterbury region in its separate bedroom and living areas, along with two bathrooms and a fireplace, while the Polo Suite is an ode to Sir Rhodes' passion for its namesake sport, playing out in classic leathers, houndstooth fabrics and oak furniture, with fireplaces in both the bedroom and roomy bathroom. The Polo Suite's prime location at the front of the house overlooks a courtyard and the Great Lawn.

At 600 square feet, the Clark Suite dazzles with expansive stained-glass windows, Brunschwig & Fils fabric and original oil paintings, as well as its own spa tub. The Garret Suite, slightly more spacious with 800 square feet and tucked away up another flight of stairs in the former attic, houses evidence of Sir Rhodes' outdoor enthusiasms, with fishing and hunting memorabilia lining wood-paneled walls. Back down on the ground floor, the Botanical Suite offers direct garden access and, inside, touts a floor-to-ceiling mantle

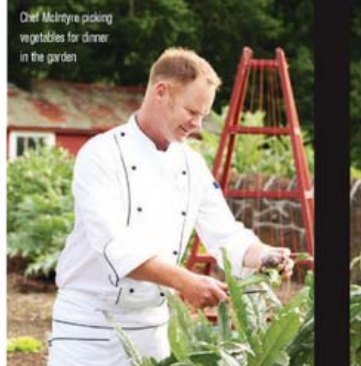


Otahutu Lodge owners Neil Cannon and Miles Reife during an outing to Mt. Somers Station via helicopter

made of gingerbread woodwork and a large bay window offering verdant vistas. Throughout all the guest rooms and common areas is the owners' private art collection, including major works from renowned New Zealand artists, making it the most important in the country.

FEAST FOR THE SENSES

Our inaugural evening meal—a daily five-course dinner that, along with breakfast, is included in the room rate—is a congenial affair, with first-name greetings all around. The routine this night, and for the few that follow, find us gathering for predinner canapés and drinks in the Drawing Room, before moving into the opulent formal dining room, replete with wood paneling, original wallpaper and a roaring fire. (A private table on the estate is often arranged for more intimate meals.) Atop the perfectly dressed table are wine glasses that will hold New Zealand wine pairings from the regions of Martinborough, Canterbury, Hawke's Bay, Central Otago and, my personal favorite, Marlborough. All are delicious, with delectable courses by Executive Chef Jimmy McIntyre.



Chief McIntyre picking vegetables for dinner in the garden



Beef carpaccio with microgreens and cheese sprinklings



The Akaroa waterfront



A lovely lunch at Mt. Somers Station featuring Sugar Loaf wine

Otahuna's culinary program utilizes what is grown on-property, plus sources from nearby farms—an ethos with a celebrated reputation furthered by pristine service. Highlights of this particular dinner include Denver leg of venison with potato fondant; Otahuna spring vegetables and peach chutney; and lime leaf, lemongrass, ginger and coconut pudding with passion-fruit sorbet and mango salad.

Beckoning us from bed each morning is a come-as-you-are



Fur seals perched on a crater

breakfast served family-style in the kitchen. Fresh baked breads, locally farmed yogurt, made-to-order eggs (from the coop out back), hand-cut bacon and house-cured prosciutto are enjoyed, along with specialty dishes and fresh brewed coffee.

All the while, staff master-crafts various once-in-a-lifetime experiences. For us, this means a cooking class with chef McIntyre. Trailing the toque to the garden, we handpick garden produce to use in a meal, for which the chef supplies step-by-step instructions, while we, wine in hand, of course, take mental notes.

DAY TRIPS

Off-property journeys are varied, but each avail insider's perspective courtesy of Otahuna's preferred partner, Canterbury Guiding Company (canterburyguides.com, @canterburyguide), and its proprietor, David Hiatt, also our ace tour guide. One of our excursions takes us an hour away



Up close with a Hector's dolphin

to the tiny waterfront village Akaroa, the only original French settlement in New Zealand. Here, we meet Craig Rhodes (and tour dog Murph), from Akaroa Dolphins (akaroadolphins.co.nz), for a private harbor cruise through the heart of an extinct volcano (its drowned crater, now called Akaroa Harbour, is one of two large craters making up Banks Peninsula in the South Island of New Zealand). Awed by the amazing sea life, we spot everything from the Hector's dolphins (the world's rarest type) swimming near our boat to sunbathing fur seals to petite blue penguins basking on crater walls. Also joining our flock are five species of birds.

Later Hiatt delivers us to Fishermans Bay Garden, a historical private residence of local artist Jill Simpson and her husband, Richard, open to visitors from November to April. Perched high above the Pacific Ocean, the views here, and in an impressive terraced garden filled with a variety of both native and imported plants, are unreal—as is Simpson's artwork,

which we glimpse before sitting down to lunch by chef McIntyre.

The next day our exploits continue though the view-laden heart of the Canterbury high country. Here is a profusion of sheep (New Zealand is home to approximately 60 million, making them a presence basically everywhere) at Mt. Somers Station, a 10,000-acre family-run sheep station. Owned by David and Kate Acland, it's one of the country's largest such enterprises. (Hiatt's longtime friendship with Mr. Acland scores us an invite.) Soon enough, we're touring the vast property via Jeeps, ogling upward of 20,000 lambs and 5,000 deer. As if we're old friends, the Aclands open the doors of their main home to us for another chef McIntyre-prepared lunch and wine pairings from Kate's winery, Sugar Loaf, in Rapaura, the heart of the Marlborough wine-growing region—exactly the type of experience exclusive to Canterbury Guiding Company and Otahuna.

Then, after a 40-minute helicopter ride over the snow-dusted Southern Alps, we're back at the lodge. I enter my suite to find the previous day's laundry cleaned, perfectly folded and wrapped in a basket. After today's excursion, those that preceded it and, now, this homecoming, the prospect of saying goodbye is a difficult one, but is soothed by farewell drinks and another fabulous dinner.

Come morning, we do say goodbye, but not without pondering how anything else could possibly compare.