



# OTAHUNA LODGE

*Two nights in another time.*

**O**UR DRIVER SLOWED at an opening in the trees to give us our first view of the sweeping lawn leading to the white wood Queen Anne mansion that is Otahuna Lodge. As we crackled up the gravel driveway, we caught sight of several staff waiting at the entrance to greet us.

Hall Cannon and Miles Refo sought to leave New York in 2004, and were looking into businesses in New Zealand when they first encountered a down-on-her-luck home of the late Sir Heaton Rhodes. Otahuna was built in 1895, and was at the time the grandest resi-

dence in New Zealand. After Rhodes' death in 1956, it was a school, a commune, then a family home. It needed, as Refo put it, "a serious capital injection." They passed in 2004, but they returned in 2006 and were bewitched. There was no turning back.

The elaborate woodwork and fireplaces of the seven-suite lodge swept us into a bit of a Noel Coward fantasy. We were shown to the Verandah Suite, where a bathroom as large as the bedroom holds a stand-alone soaking tub facing a fireplace. French doors open onto a long verandah with views over the front lawn and English landscape garden, lounge chairs, and a dining table.

The Master Suite, next door to Verandah, has a balcony, an extra sitting room in the lodge's pagoda-

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inspired tower, a small study, and a jetted tub. Its theme is red; we preferred our yellow-themed Verandah Suite. Of the remaining, somewhat smaller keys, a hands-down favorite is the Polo Suite, a Ralph Lauren dream. Alone downstairs, the Botanic Suite has its own door to the garden and pool.

Otahuna Lodge is known for its food, and chef Jimmy McIntyre is the man responsible. Far too

humble for his level of cooking, he presents nightly tasting menus (or meals to order) with wine pairings, and the dishes would merit a stay even if the lodge weren't so stunning. The day chef, Nikki, creates wonderful breakfasts served communally in a sun-splashed room (of course, room service is available, but then you'd miss the buffet element). Jams are homemade from the lodge's gardens, and a professional espresso machine cuts out waits.

The grounds are worth a day's exploration. Aside from the extensive vegetable gardens and orchard, there are walks through a fern-lined natural forest and around the duck pond in the landscaped gardens to craftsman-style parterres. In the spring (September), a vast field crowned by a giant oak bursts into a yellow explosion of more than a million daffodils.

The stand-alone structure where meat was once aged is now the wine cellar. It's right off the kitchen, and a lovely spot for a private dinner, with an impressive collection of vintages. The lodge recently added a one-room wood-paneled spa tucked into the forest with a balcony where birds can sing you into relaxation. The long-enough-for-laps outdoor pool is heated, lined



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with chaises and ample towels, and the perfect spot for ordering one of Nikki's inventive salads.

Otahuna is in Tai Tapu, a half-hour drive south from Christchurch airport, and many guests spend the day exploring Christchurch, playing golf, or heading south to French-settled Akaroa, where the bay is home to the world's smallest dolphins.

In the evening, guests gather on the front porch

or in the great room for drinks and canapés, then disperse to one or another of the endless selection of private nooks for dinner. We dined once in the library, then in the many-windowed hexagonal tower room off the great room. The tables are always beautifully set, and the service is attentive, but due to Jimmy's love for personally introducing each dish, the wait between courses can be long. In the library, that was just fine, as we were soon rapt in the collection of garden, cooking, and design books.

The staff has a casual, "welcome to the family" attitude that can so lull you that you almost fail to register how efficient and thoughtful they are. There was never a moment when we felt anything less than honored, and we swallowed a tear when the time came to leave. ●●●

## DOS & DON'TS

**DO** take a cooking lesson with Jimmy. He can guide you through preparing anything from tortellini to a fantastic vegetable soup.

**DO** set aside a few hours for a guided tour of the gardens, which also features a history of the house. We were lucky enough to go with Miles, whose love for Otahuna is inspiring.

**DO** book massages in advance. We didn't have a chance, but we hear the Otahuna therapist is magic.

**DON'T** bring your Type A side to Otahuna. This is a place for slowing down and appreciating the beauty and detail of a landmark in New Zealand's Historic Places Trust.

### Otahuna Lodge

Christchurch, New Zealand  
 Managing Directors: Hall Cannon and Miles Refo  
 otahuna.co.nz  
 @otahunalodge