



PHOTOS: SUIRE PRITCHARD

Otahuna Lodge



Meat curing



The opulent dining room

Country rose

Chris Pritchard finds perfection in the seven-suite Otahuna Lodge in Canterbury, New Zealand

The timber-panelled Garret Suite, perched atop what's commonly called New Zealand's grandest accommodation, doesn't disappoint.

Steamship-era décor includes old luggage and antiquarian books. Emphasis on history co-exists at seven-suite Otahuna Lodge with contemporary electronic gadgetry. My splendid bathroom makes no concessions to the past.

I sweep down an imposing staircase to explore this rambling country house, awash in art and antiques. Oozing refinement, it shuns stuffiness. Built in 1895 as residence for a local bigwig, Otahuna subsequently housed Catholic brothers before becoming a hippie commune. It slid into decline until New Yorkers Hall Cannon and Miles Refo bought it. Tasteful restoration preceded rebirth three years ago as a stylish abode.

Lawns slope to giant oaks beneath which mushrooms thrive. Food is important at Otahuna where celebrated chef Jimmy McIntyre holds court. I join him taking guests mushroom-foraging before touring organic gardens supplying his kitchen. Head gardener

Steve Marcham guides me through 12.12ha of century-old gardens, overgrown until he recreated their glory.

Days are tailor-made for taking it easy: books, tennis, swimming, easy walks along trails (or, alternatively, cycling and horse-riding), driving through Canterbury region's rolling sheep-and-cattle country to cool-climate wineries. (In southern hemisphere winters, some guests beeline it to nearby ski fields.)

Though seemingly far from urban hubub, Otahuna is a 20-minute drive to Christchurch, the South Island's main metropolis. Hugging its own River Avon, Christchurch styles itself "the most English city outside England".

I spend a day wandering through galleries and museums radiating from Cathedral Square before lunching at one of many casual cafés.

Next day, I hit back roads on foot, strolling in a 5km rural loop and returning to Otahuna after Devonshire tea at delightful Raspberry Café – conveniently close to Otahuna's long driveway.

Otahuna's heavy emphasis on cuisine is highlighted at dinner. An elegant dining room, with guests at a communal table, is alive with stimulating conversation (inevitably skewed toward travels). McIntyre's mouth-watering creations showcase fresh produce from his garden, combining with the best of New Zealand's seafood, lamb and beef. ■



FACT FILE

Getting there: Otahuna Lodge, tel 64 3 329 6333, www.otahuna.co.nz. From NZ\$700 (US\$515) per person, double occupancy, including breakfast, pre-dinner cocktails and five-course dinner with matched wines and activities.