

NEW ZEALAND

THE MANOR REBORN

LUXURY AND OLD WORLD CHARM MELD IN THE RESTORED 114-YEAR-OLD
NEW ZEALAND MANOR HOUSE KNOWN AS OTAHUNA LODGE.

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THE ROOM PULSES AS GLOBES IN THE ornate antique fitting above flare and dim in response to the storm-induced electrical surges. I'm reaching across glistening silverware for my glass of slightly-warmed Amisfield Pinot Noir when a falling tree several kilometres down the road takes down a powerline and removes us from the grid for several hours.

While my hosts seem slightly anxious by the inconvenience, I couldn't be happier.

Under the flicker of candlelight, with a roaring fire at my back and in these exquisite surrounds I am treated to an evening at New Zealand's luxurious Otahuna Lodge, as it might have been 114 years ago.

Steeped in history, the splendid formal dining room is both spectacular and yet intimate. We are halfway through Otahuna's legendary five-course degustation menu (perfectly matched to a flight of New Zealand's best wines), which celebrates the best of the region's produce, and, as luck would have it, the last of the courses requiring the assistance of electricity.

The Canterbury duck leg braised with onions and cranberries teamed with celeriac puree, slow-cooked fennel and chopped olives offers a wonderful play with its sweet and salty tastes. Paired with the warmed velvety pinot, releasing a heady bouquet and delightful berry characteristics, it provides the perfect evening's accompaniment.

As chilling Canterbury winds drive icy rain against leadlight windows, wine and conversation flows as the change in lighting breathes an ever-changing ambience into ►



Previous spread: Otahuna Lodge offers a warm welcome. From far left: The lavish Rhodes Suite; and the Verandah Suite's private balcony. Below: The dining room takes fine dining to the next level. Following page: A grand entrance.

the lodge's magnificent formal dining room. Shadows dance across the 18-seat dining table and blend into the rich dark native-wood panelling as the pressed and gilded original wallpaper undulates under the ebb and flow of the candlelight.

It's the kind of setting that wouldn't be out of place in a Bram Stoker novel – stormy weather, an exclusive and exquisite remote setting, the lone traveller and a sprawling candlelit dinner table. And while it's every bit as thrilling, and my hosts every bit as charming as Stoker's most famous character, there's also a genuine welcome behind their smiles.

Often when you're told to 'make yourself at home' the sincerity behind the remark doesn't quite ring true or, try as you might, the destination is just that little bit too sterile, stuffy or fussy to allow it.

Not so Otahuna Lodge. The four-month-long, NZ\$10 million (approx A\$8 million), restoration at the hands of Americans, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, has recaptured and revitalised the heart and soul of this stunning Victorian manor house.

Built in 1895 by renowned New Zealand parliamentarian, philanthropist and horticulturalist, Sir Heaton Rhodes, for his young wife Jessie; Rhodes succeeded in not only creating Australasia's finest example

of Queen Anne architecture, but also a spectacularly warm and inviting home.

Glimpsed through a well-manicured garden, the three-storey white mansion cuts an imposing presence as you wind your way under the gnarled branches of one-hundred-year-old oaks lining its driveway, passing lush rolling green fields (come spring the lower field will be ablaze with thousands of daffodils in bloom) and a sizeable pond.

Perched atop a small hill among the picturesque rocky outcrops of Banks Peninsula in Christchurch, the lodge's exotic name is no longer a mystery when you learn Otahuna is the Maori word for 'little hill among the hills'.

As the lodge reveals itself on my approach, it's easy to see why Otahuna is considered an iconic New Zealand property and one of a handful of residences to receive a Category 1 listing with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. Grand in scale and vision, and set on a 12-hectare property, this sweeping architectural accomplishment reflecting the finest Victorian elements is a beacon of luxury and privacy from a bygone era.

Indeed, given its privacy and the addition of helicopter landing capabilities on the front lawn, it's very likely Otahuna Lodge tops many a celebrity list as the ultimate getaway. Awestruck as I am, I'm surprised to learn

that Cannon and Refo were not as similarly impressed when they first saw the property.

"You have to understand," says Cannon earlier that evening, from the comfort of a perfectly stuffed armchair in the drawing room, enjoying what is known at Otahuna as pre-dinner 'cocktails and canapes' "that Otahuna didn't look like it does today."

The lodge, home to Rhodes for more than 60 years, had been somewhat neglected over the years during its incarnations as a Catholic monastery, a commune and a guesthouse, before emerging in 2007 as one of the country's, and world's, top luxury lodges.

"It really was quite a 'project', and much bigger than anything we were interested in taking on."

However, with the shine waning on their adopted Big Apple home, a second visit, after much arm twisting, sealed their fate.

"We both took a lot of convincing," says proud RX 350 owner Refo. "But on the second visit we started to see the potential and what a wonderful opportunity this really was."

Returning the lodge to its former glory, the pair enlisted Auckland interior designer and historic property specialist Stephen Cashmore to work his magic and the results are spectacular. Entering the lodge is like walking in the footsteps of Sir Heaton Rhodes ▷



himself. Immediately, I want to touch every wonderfully tactile surface, from the delicate raised wallpapers, well-oiled rimu-panelled walls and highly polished surfaces of the sweeping kauri staircase, to the soft leathers and woollen fabrics covering the period furniture pieces.

Presided over by the stern eye of legendary Māori war hero Rewi Maniapoto, one of the 28 pieces of New Zealand art specially commissioned to grace Otahuna's walls, the expansive green-toned entrance blends a classic atmosphere with opulent contemporary luxury. It also sets an exquisite standard that is maintained throughout the lodge's seven themed suites, drawing room, voluminous library, ballroom, and dining room.

Taking up residence in the master suite, named after Rhodes, I'm expecting to be suitably impressed. However, I'm not quite prepared for what's on the other side of the door. Spread over four rooms and the size of a large apartment, this spectacular 100-square-metre-plus palatial suite features a grand ensuite boasting a twin shower and large spa tub offering views of the native woodlands. In addition there is an office, enormous bedroom complete with Victorian-detailed fireplace (one of 15 in the lodge) and inglenook seating, expansive bed, octagonal sitting room, and private balcony offering stunning vistas of Otahuna's gardens and beyond to the South Island's majestic Southern Alps.

Little touches, such as the bedside jar of delicious freshly-baked cookies restocked daily, pristine billowy sheepskin rugs on either side of the bed to cushion your first steps of the morning, and the nightly *Stories of the House* placed on the pillows at turn down make the visit even more memorable.

Those having trouble sleeping can leaf through a copy of *A Short History of Sheep in New Zealand*, thoughtfully left by the bedside, and count the flocks within.

I'm greeted the next morning by blackbirds and thrushes, no doubt at home in the Victorian garden, hopping around under a concrete-coloured sky, while the calls of some of the more timid native birds fill the surrounding woodlands, as I venture out for a tour of the gardens with Cannon.

Once in excess of 2,000 hectares, Otahuna's grounds have since been trimmed back; but even so, Rhodes' 110-year-old gardens are still



among his greatest legacies. A constant work-in-progress, Cannon and Refo have returned order to the once overgrown rambling woodlands where an inquisitive fantail darts about our feet, eager to collect any insects we disturb, as we make our way through the carpet of fallen leaves. Similarly the old-world charm of the rose garden and meandering Dutch Garden are proudly displayed.

But it's the ample orchard and stone-walled 0.2 hectare potager, once housing Rhodes' prized stallions, that really connects the lodge to the land. Much of what comes out of the Otahuna kitchen is grown in the restored 19th century organic vegetable garden and bountiful orchards producing 95 different vegetables (many of which are heirloom), 25 types of fruit, 20 herbs, and three nut varieties.

And it's not just the gardens and lodge being revived and reused. Small bricked storerooms, dotted around the grounds, house porcini and other mushroom variety trials bound for the kitchen, while the old game house has been converted into a cellar harbouring an extensive selection of some of New Zealand's finest wines and, in warmer weather, is available for those seeking a more intimate dining experience.

At Otahuna, the journey from garden to plate is less than a two-minute walk, a walk

I take with sous-chef Jeremy Scheiblaue to collect carrots, broad beans and rocket for that evening's dinner.

Scheiblaue brings new meaning to the Slow Food movement, often dropping the oven's temperature and increasing a dish's cooking time – with delicious results.

"I think the flavours really come into their own when you slow down the cooking process," he says. Having sampled his previous night's creations, I'm happy to agree.

While a visit to Otahuna Lodge in spring or summer would not be without its obvious charms and delights, during this wilder autumnal weather, seated rather grandly in the imposing candle-lit dining room with a puree of Otahuna garden carrot soup and salted proper tortellini before me, a chilled glass of Pegasus Bay Riesling in hand, there's no place I'd rather be. ☺

SOURCE NOTES

Otahuna Lodge www.otahuna.co.nz
 Air New Zealand flies daily services from Sydney to Christchurch. Fares start from \$219 one way, including taxes.
 For more information please visit www.airnewzealand.com.au.