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Restored glory

Knocked about but back up again, Canterbury's illustrious Otahuna Lodge has reopened for business after a major restoration project, writes Lois Cairns.

Saturday, 1.30pm: We all need to recharge our batteries every now and then, and I can think of no nicer way to do that than by spending a night cocooned in luxury. So I happily kiss my husband goodbye, throw my bag in the car and head just 20 minutes down the road for what promises to be 24 hours of pampering.

2pm: As I turn up the long winding gravel drive that leads to Otahuna, a blaze of yellow greets me – Otahuna's famous daffodil fields are in full bloom and the estate is looking picture-postcard perfect.

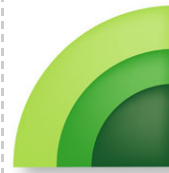
As I draw closer the full grandeur of the historic homestead reveals itself. Otahuna was commissioned by Sir Heaton Rhodes in 1894 as the largest private residence in New Zealand and is now listed as a Category 1 National Historic Places Trust "icon". It is regarded as the finest example of Queen Anne architecture in Australasia and as I gaze up at the crisp white exterior it's easy to understand why so many people have waxed lyrical about the homestead's beauty. It is a case of love at first

sight, and I furiously try to think up a way I could become queen of all I survey. I've got 24 hours to come up with a plan, and I resolve to keep working on it. Standing at the foot of the steps to greet me with a welcoming smile is Jimmy McIntyre, the lodge's executive chef. He promises to take care of my luggage and my car before handing me over to the care of Emma, who shows me into the house. Otahuna is grandness personified, but despite the palatial proportions of the rooms and ornate furnishings it has a warm, welcoming feel that immediately puts you at ease. Emma gives me a tour of the sumptuously appointed downstairs rooms before leading me up the hand-carved kauri staircase to the Verandah Suite, where I will be spending the night. I almost squeal with delight. Not only do I have a lavishly appointed bedroom and a bathroom that is almost bigger than my living room at home and comes with its own fireplace, I have a private 10m balcony which looks over the gardens of Otahuna, across the Canterbury Plains, to the snow-capped

Southern Alps.

2.30pm: Ahead of me lies an afternoon of uninterrupted leisure. Apart from a date with Jimmy, who is going to teach me one of his signature dishes, I'm free to do whatever my heart desires. I could play tennis or croquet, borrow one of the lodge's bikes to explore the quiet country roads, or I could hide away in the lodge's library and lose myself in a book. In the end the thought of an hour or two spent lounging on my balcony in the sun with a book proves irresistible and I enjoy some quiet "me time" before taking a relaxing stroll around Otahuna's extensive gardens.

5pm: It's time to meet Jimmy and get my private cooking demonstration. Jimmy loves sharing his passion for food and regularly does individual cooking demonstrations for guests. Today he's going to show me how to make salmon ceviche. Many of the ingredients he uses come from Otahuna's own grounds – the estate has its own hens and pigs, vegetable, mushroom and herb gardens, as well as an orchard with a variety of fruit and nut trees.



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6pm: Cooking lesson over, I head back to my suite to freshen up before meeting the lodge's only other guests tonight – a British couple in New Zealand for the Rugby World Cup – for pre-dinner canapes in the drawing room.

7.30pm: After swapping stories about our day's activities and wolfing down salmon ceviche and other culinary delights, we're ushered through to the opulent dining room for a five-course degustation menu. The ornate gilded wallpaper in the dining room is the original wallpaper chosen by Sir Heaton Rhodes' wife and is complemented by rich dark wood panelling that lends the room a magnificent formality. After a magnificent feast we move back to the drawing room for one last drink before bidding each other good night.

I retire to my suite where my bed has been turned down, a chocolate and a carafe of water placed on my bedside table, and a sheepskin rug laid beside my bed so that my feet will be nice and warm when I get up in the morning. Oh why oh why can't I live like this all the time?

Sunday, 8.30am: After a great night's sleep and the best shower ever, I find myself back in Jimmy's kitchen, this time for breakfast. I could ask Jimmy to cook for me – he's standing at the stove at the ready – but the array of freshly baked breads, homemade muesli and fruit salad look more than adequate for my purposes and should provide enough fuel for this morning's activities.

10am: It's time to meet Dave Kilday, the estate manager, who's going to give me a tour of the lodge's expansive grounds. Nineteen of the 30 acres that Otahuna sits on are devoted to gardens and much effort in recent years has gone into restoring them to their former glory (in

their heyday, the gardens at Otahuna were the envy of all New Zealand). Dotted throughout the gardens are artworks and peaceful enclaves where you can sit and while away the hours.

11am: The real world beckons and it's time for me to leave Otahuna. I don't want to go; I don't want this to be a one-night stand. Of course, I'm not the first person to fall in love with Otahuna. The lodge's current owners, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, are Americans who gave up successful careers in Manhattan to run Otahuna after falling under its spell in 2006. They've transformed the lodge from a run-down estate to a luxurious reminder of times-gone-by and in doing so, preserved a rich part of Canterbury's heritage. And they've done it in the face of Mother Nature, who has thrown two major earthquakes in their path.

When the September 4 earthquake hit, all of the homestead's chimneys toppled – although none penetrated the roof. The damage was widespread and it took months to get the homestead restored and open again for business. It had been open for just 46 days when the February 22 quake struck, causing fresh damage and forcing it to close its doors once more.

After a five-month restoration project, Otahuna now is stronger than it has ever been and shows no sign of the seismic upheaval it has faced in the past 12 months. It is truly a special place; a place steeped in history and with heart and soul. It's a place where you feel privileged to stay and sad to leave.

Fact file:

Where: Otahuna Lodge, 224 Rhodes Rd, Tai Tapu, Christchurch.
www.otahuna.co.nz

What's on:

Hagley Park Fanzone: Anika Moa and The Thomas Oliver Band

Acclaimed Kiwi artists Anika Moa and The Thomas Oliver Band will perform live at Canterbury's Hagley Park Fanzone ahead of the final of Rugby World Cup 2011. The Thomas Oliver Band go on-stage at 5.45pm followed by Anika Moa at 6.45pm. The performances will be followed by a live screening of the final.

When: October 23, Hagley Park, Christchurch.

French Festival 2011

What: Immerse yourself in French culture, entertainment and romance at the Akaroa French Festival. The festival begins with a street party on the Friday night, followed by an all-day market and other activities on Saturday. On Sunday, look forward to some cricket action on the Green with some well-known cricket celebrities.

When: October 28 to 30, Akaroa.

Hard on the Heels: Peter Bush Capturing the All Blacks

What: The *Hard on the Heels* exhibition in Canterbury is drawn from rugby photographer Bush's vast library including personal favourites and the controversial and candid behind-the-scenes shots.

When: To January 29, Robert McDougall Gallery at Canterbury Museum, Rolleston Ave, Christchurch.



Despite the palatial proportions of the rooms and ornate furnishings, Otahuna has a warm, welcoming feel.



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Jimmy McIntyre's salmon ceviche

400g salmon fillet, skinless and pin bones removed, diced
1T capers
1T raisins or currants
1T pickled ginger, shredded, with a little juice
1/4C skinless roasted almonds
1/4C roasted pinenuts
Zest, segments and juice of one orange, one lime and one lemon
3T of roughly chopped Italian parsley, coriander and basil
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste



Gently mix all ingredients together in a bowl and refrigerate for a maximum of four hours. Gently mix again after an hour or so. Season with flaky sea salt and freshly ground black pepper if required. Serves four as an entree.



Landmark: Otahuna was restored by its American owners, repaired after the September earthquake and repaired again after the February one.