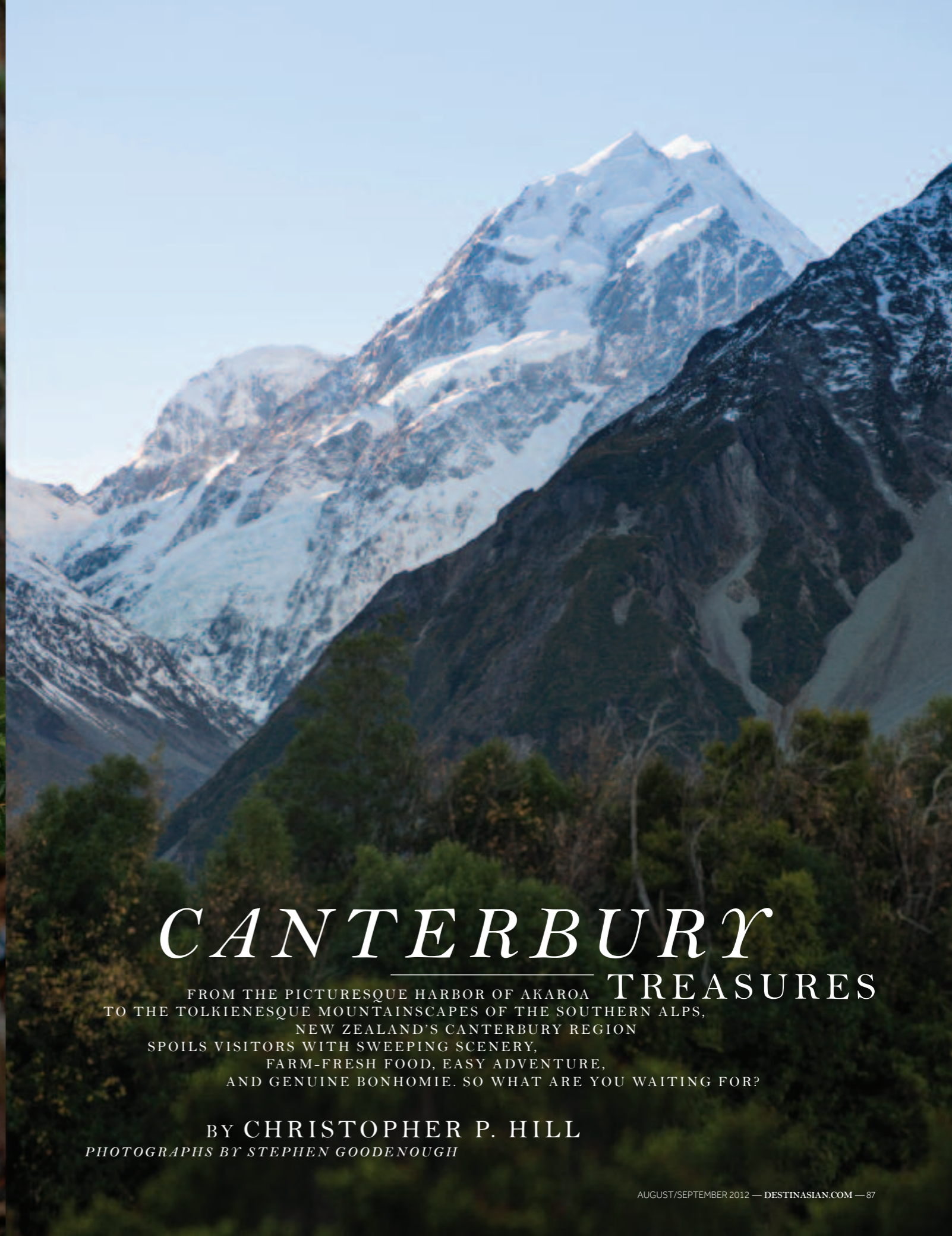


VEGGING OUT

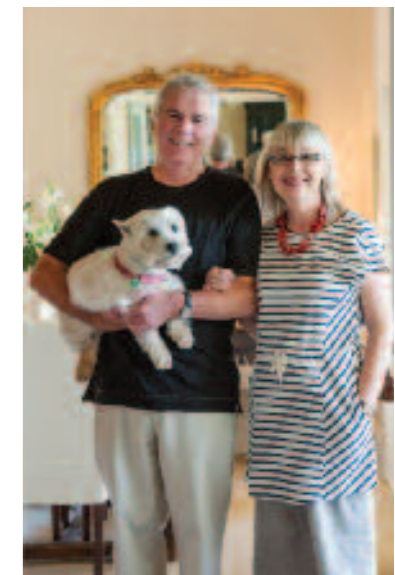
Fresh produce from the potager-style kitchen garden at Otahuna Lodge. Opposite: A view from The Hermitage hotel toward Aoraki Mount Cook, New Zealand's highest peak.



CANTERBURY TREASURES

FROM THE PICTURESQUE HARBOR OF AKAROA TO THE TOLKIENESQUE MOUNTAINSCAPES OF THE SOUTHERN ALPS, NEW ZEALAND'S CANTERBURY REGION SPOILS VISITORS WITH SWEEPING SCENERY, FARM-FRESH FOOD, EASY ADVENTURE, AND GENUINE BONHOMIE. SO WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

BY CHRISTOPHER P. HILL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN GOODENOUGH



My week in New Zealand's Canterbury

region began in Christchurch, on the central east coast of the South Island. But I won't talk about that just yet: a city still reeling from a series of devastating earthquakes is hardly the best place to kick off a travel article.

Shall I entice you instead with sightings of adorable Hector's dolphins in the great volcanic bowl of Akaroa Harbour? Or with a ski-plane landing on the ancient ice of the Tasman Glacier, high in the Southern Alps? No—let us begin at the end of my trip, gazing up at the night sky above Lake Tekapo, a firmament so thick with stars that it glowed like silver filigree. This was atop the tussocky rise of Mount John, whose bland name does nothing to suggest that it is home to New Zealand's premier planet-hunting facility, an astronomical observatory run by the University of Canterbury. It's also the centerpiece of one of only four dark-sky reserves on the planet, a designation conferred on places where the quality of stargazing is, well, out of this world, thanks to few clouds and virtually no light pollution. (Even the bus that took us to Mount John's summit was obliged to switch off its headlights before reaching the top, so as not to interfere with the observatory's sensitive research equipment. It made for a few nail-biting moments.)

Had I known any of this before signing up for the Earth & Sky stargazing tour—there's precious little else to do in the tiny township of Lake Tekapo on a chilly mid-autumn night—I might not have been quite so dumbstruck by that vast star-studded skyscape, though I did join in the chorus of oohs and aahs as our guide used his laser pointer to walk us through the heavens. We could not see a cloud because, as Lewis Carroll once pointed out, no

CANTERBURY TALES
This spread, clockwise from top left: Boat sheds in Akaroa; overlooking the north end of Akaroa Harbour; Re:START, a pop-up mall made of shipping containers, has brought business back to downtown Christchurch; the nautically themed Boathouse suite at Maison de la Mer in Akaroa; Christchurch's Cargo Bar; the Canterbury Museum; owners Bruce and Carol Hyland at Maison de la Mer.

cloud was in the sky. But we did see the Magellanic Clouds—two galaxies that orbit our own at a distance of tens of thousands of light years—and the entire arc of the Milky Way, called Te Ikaroa by the Maori, whose legends describe it as a great fish swimming across the sky. There was Orion to the west, and Scorpius rising in the east; the Southern Cross and a star cluster called the Jewel Box; gas clouds and nebulae; and Venus and Mars hanging somewhere overhead and clearly visible to the naked eye, once you knew what to look for.

By the time a round of hot chocolate was served I had a crick in my neck as bad as after my first visit to the Sistine Chapel. But the show wasn't over yet. Though we didn't have access to the observatory proper, we did have the use of a small observation dome housing a stubby but powerful telescope. What I saw through that was the last gift in a week that had unfolded like a well-wrapped present. It was Saturn, rings and all, a pale orb framed against the blackness of deep space. You could have knocked me over with a kiwi feather.

EYEBALLING THE COSMOS leaves you feeling small and insignificant. So it is with natural disasters.

In February 2011, Christchurch, New Zealand's most populous city after Auckland and the gateway to the South Island, was hit by a 6.3 magnitude earthquake that claimed 185 lives and caused billions of dollars in damage. This much I knew going in. What I wasn't prepared for was the extent of the devastation. While it's pretty much business as usual in the suburban malls of Merivale and Riccarton, more than 10 blocks of the city center—the so-called "red zone"—have been cordoned off with chain-link fencing, beyond which the deserted streets look like a scene from a post-apocalyptic sci-fi movie. Not that it's completely devoid of life: I could see work crews clearing away rubble, and

MORE THAN TWO DOZEN BUSINESSES HAVE RETURNED TO THE CASHEL STREET RETAIL PRECINCT, WHERE GUTTED BUILDINGS HAVE BEEN REPLACED BY A PEDESTRIAN SHOPPING MALL MADE FROM STACKED SHIPPING CONTAINERS

cranes and high-reach excavators bringing down dozens of condemned buildings. Among them, controversially, is Christchurch Cathedral, the iconic 19th-century Anglican church whose steeple collapsed in the quake.

During my visit this past April, local papers such as the *Central Canterbury News* were filled with heated opinion about Bishop Victoria Matthews's decision to deconstruct rather than rebuild the beloved landmark; her most outspoken opponent appeared to be the Wizard of New Zealand (this, improbably, is an official title), a Gandalfian character with a pointy hat and black robe who's delivered soapbox sermons in Cathedral Square for as long as anyone can remember. In one well-aimed barb, he called the bishop "seriously cracked." But for all those Canterburyans waiting for insurance money to rebuild their ruined homes or businesses, there are more pressing concerns, not the least of which has been a series of aftershocks that geologists predict will continue for decades to come.

As I said, pretty bleak stuff for a travel story.

And yet, it's hard not to be grimly fascinated by a place that, in the face of such devastation, has pulled itself up by its bootstraps.

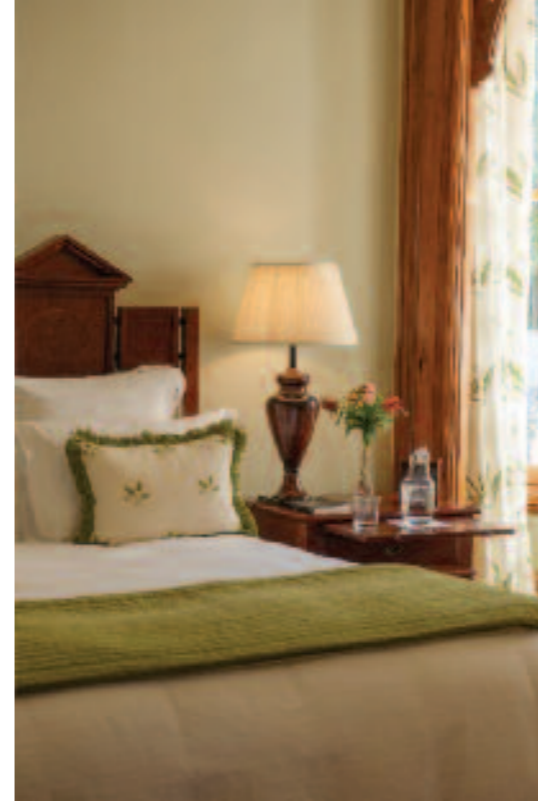
"There are so many good recovery stories here," said Kelly Stock of Christchurch and Canterbury Tourism, who last year left her job at the local Mercedes-Benz dealership to "do my part" by helping to

woo tourists back to the city. "Christchurch has always had strong people, a strong character, I suppose because so many of us are from tough farming stock. But the way the community has pulled together has been incredible. Before the quake, you might not have known your neighbors; now, you do, and we check in on each other, helping out where we can. It was a high price to pay, but the quake has taught us that we're capable of so much more than we thought."

One hears about the student army of thousands of young volunteers who helped to provide meals and drinking water to elderly residents, and to clear away the 360,000 tons of silt and sludge forced up through the ground by a seismic phenomenon known as liquefaction. One reads encomiums to Mayor Bob Parker, whose leadership throughout the disaster has been likened to that of post-9/11 New York's Rudy Giuliani. And one sees signs of recovery everywhere, from the new 17,000-seat rugby stadium to the former grain warehouse that



MUCH OF OTAHUNA LODGE'S ORIGINAL DETAILING—GLEAMING KAURI WOOD PANELING, EMBOSSED WILLIAM MORRIS WALLPAPER—HAS BEEN PAINSTAKINGLY RESTORED, AS HAVE ITS SWEEPING EDWARDIAN GARDENS



now serves as the temporary home of the Court Theatre, one of the country's top theater companies. Then there are the repurposed shipping containers: lots and lots of them.

Two, painted a russet hue, bookend a converted car wash now occupied by Cargo Bar, in the emerging business hub of Addington. Owner Henare "H" Akuhata-Brown opened the venue last August, just months after his popular city-center Lyme Bar was shuttered following the February earthquake. "The first question my partner Angelique and I asked ourselves was whether we even wanted to stay in Christchurch," says H, who is originally from Hawke's Bay. "We did—it's a very special place, and we want to be part of the rebuilding process."

That process is expected to take at least 15 years, but when it's complete, city planners hope to have reinvented Canterbury's regional capital as a smart, sustainable 21st-century city. In the meantime, more than two dozen businesses have returned to the Cashel Street retail precinct, right on the edge of the red zone, where gutted buildings have been replaced by a pedestrian shopping mall made from stacked shipping containers. Called Re:START, the makeshift complex has brought a measure of buzz back to the downtown area, too, with clothing outlets and cafés doing a brisk trade. I picked up a fleece for my next day's drive into the Canterbury high country, thumbed through photo books about the city's quake-ruined architecture (one particularly poignant volume was titled *All Fall Down: Christchurch's Lost Chimneys*), and, take-out latte—they call them flat whites here—in hand, stood among a knot of other tourists watching as a monster-jawed excavator chewed through a 10-story building on the other side of the cordon. At one point, a huge slab of concrete and twisted rebar toppled 30 meters to the ground. I felt a tremor through the pavement.

"What are you looking at?" chided a passing teenager, clearly put off by our rubbernecking. "They've torn down hundreds of buildings already. What's the big deal?"

Duly chastised, I followed the now-silent tramline toward the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. First planted in 1863, at about the same time that the prolific Victorian architect George Gilbert Scott was pol-

ishing off his design for Christchurch Cathedral, the gardens today are more of a refuge than ever. Amid the stands of century-old "exotic" (which is to say, imported) trees like beech and yew and oak, and native plantings of fern and eucalyptus, there's little to remind you of the city's troubles. Nor could there be a more idyllic scene than boatmen from the old Antigua Boat Sheds poling Cambridge-style punts down the willow-draped Avon River on its looping course through the park.

With its punts and its tearooms and its peppering of Gothic Revival architecture, Christchurch has traditionally regarded itself as the most English of New Zealand cities. I headed to the Canterbury Museum to learn something about its history. Instead, I found myself

back in the present, or at least the very recent past. The Canterbury Quakes exhibition presented an overview of the area's seismic scars, beginning with the nonfatal but powerful earthquake of September 2010, which was for many Canterburyans the first they learned that they were living on a fault line. But most of the displays had to do with the February quake of the following year. Among the most poignant artifacts was the cross from the fallen spire of Christchurch Cathedral—three meters of crumpled copper sheathing and splintered wood.

KIWI COMFORTS

Above, from left: One of the seven suites at Otahuna Lodge, a historic property in Tai Tapu, outside Christchurch; pan-roasted breast and confit leg of duck with estate-grown vegetables and quince, in the dining room at Otahuna; alpine memorabilia covers the walls of the Old Mountaineers Café in Mount Cook Village. Opposite: A view of Otahuna Lodge from the surrounding gardens.

ROOMS WITH A VIEW
Situating amid the alpine
splendor of Aoraki
Mount Cook National
Park, The Hermitage
overlooks glacial valleys
and the snow-capped
peaks of the Southern
Alps. Opposite: A punter
at Christchurch's
Antigua Boat Sheds.



FROM AN AIRFIELD JUST OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE, I WAS WHISKED SKYWARD IN A CROWDED EIGHT-SEAT TURBOPROP, SOARING UP THROUGH A DEEP VALLEY ALONG A WALL OF MOUNTAINS TOWARD THE HEAD OF THE TASMAN GLACIER



NO TRAVELER TO NEW ZEALAND should pass up the opportunity to stay at one of the country's great lodges. Fortunately for me, there was one near at hand: Otahuna, an 1895 Queen Ann-style mansion in the countryside of Tai Tapu, 20 minutes by car from Christchurch. Set on a knoll at the neck of a valley that opens onto the fertile Canterbury Plains, it's a gorgeous spot, with views of the Southern Alps from the verandas of its top-floor suites. My room was also incredibly plush, credit for which goes to the lodge's current owners, American partners Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, who bought the rundown estate in 2007 and overhauled it to the tune of about US\$10 million.

Much of Otahuna's original detailing—gleaming kauri wood paneling, embossed William Morris wallpaper—has been painstakingly restored, as have the sweeping Edwardian gardens and woodlands that surround it. On a walk around the 12-hectare grounds, I bumped into one of the lodge's gardeners, her arms filled with vegetables plucked from an organic potager; there's also an orchard of apple and quince trees and a root cellar for growing mushrooms.

After freshening up, I joined Hall and Miles for dinner in the formal dining room. Over salmon sevrice

MOUNTAIN MAGIC
Above, from left: The aptly named Panorama Room at The Hermitage hotel offers diners both exquisite meals and picture-perfect views; at the same restaurant, a dessert platter of Valrhona chocolate, poached baby pear, mint jelly, orange curd, and spun sugar; on the Tasman Glacier with Mount Cook Ski Planes. Opposite: Driving past Akaroa's 19th-century lighthouse.

with estate-grown almonds and a sirloin of locally raised beef, they tell me a little of the property's history—the Duke of York, later King George VI, stayed here in 1927, since which time it's served as everything from a seminary to a commune to a B&B—and a lot about their own trajectory from the world of New York real estate and marketing. “We wanted to change our lives, to manage an upscale retreat in a completely different part of the world,” Hall said.

“It came down to New Zealand or British Columbia,” Miles added. “We went for New Zealand.”

When I mentioned that I was originally from Vancouver Island, off the west coast of Canada, Hall said, “Yes! We looked there too. It was either Vancouver Island or here, but Vancouver Island just seemed a little too remote.”

“We really ended up with best of both worlds,” chimed in Miles. “This amazing location, but also easy access to the city.” He paused. “Of course, that was before the earthquake.”

After a quick rundown of the lodge's relatively light quake damage—they had to replace all 11 of its chimneys, but were able to salvage the bricks to make a patio off the kitchen—Hall asked me where I was headed to next. I told him Akaroa, to a bed-and-breakfast called Maison de la Mer.

He nodded. “We stayed when we were scouting locations for our project. You'll like it there. Lovely people.”

And he was right. After about an hour's drive along the hair-pin turns of the Banks Peninsula, I arrived at Akaroa, a tiny seaside village whose singular distinction—apart from its gob-smackingly beautiful setting—is that, for a nanosecond in the mid-19th century, it was almost a French colony. But when Gallic settlers dropped anchor in 1840—*sacre bleu!*—they found the British flag already flying above their new home. They stayed regardless, and their legacy lingers in street names like Rue Lavaud and Rue Benoit, and in flapping French tricolors raised for the benefit of Akaroa's tourist trade.

Maison de la Mer leaves such pretensions at its doorstep. Overlooking the boat-filled harbor, the house is owned and run by Bruce and Carol Hyland—he originally from

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NEW ZEALAND

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Toronto, she from Auckland—and proved the perfect base for exploring the galleries and gift shops of Akaroa, which you can traverse by foot in half an hour. My room was done up in a cozy Provençal style, with a jar of cookies waiting in the attached sunroom. And the Hylands were ideal hosts, discreet or chatty as the occasion required. Over wine in front of their crackling fireplace, they shared stories of their family sailing trips around the world, and pointed me toward Akaroa's best bet for dinner. That turned out to be a quaint clapboard cottage called the Little Bistro, where I washed down a meal of braised ox cheek with a bottle of Christchurch-brewed Wilgram golden ale.

The next morning, I discovered two things. One, that Carol bakes the most amazing croissants; and two, that a big breakfast with the Hylands is perhaps not the best preamble to a dolphin-watching tour. It gets pretty choppy out there on the water where the sheltering volcanic cliffs of Akaroa Harbour give way to the Pacific. But it was worth it: not only did we spot basking fur seals, roosting cormorants, and a little blue penguin, but also a friendly pod of Hector's dolphins, an endemic species that ranks among the world's smallest cetaceans. They struck me as the ultimate Akaroa mascot: cute as a button and easy to love.

THE CANTERBURY REGION is big—it accounts for a quarter of the South Island—and varied, ranging from the snow-dusted peaks of the Southern Alps to shimmering shores of the Pacific. The road from Akaroa to Mount Cook Village took me though endless kilometers of flat farming country before heading inland and upward through rolling pastureland and finally into the high country of the MacKenzie Basin, a vast, wind-scoured landscape of tussock grasslands. I made a pit stop at Lake Tekapo to admire an old stone

church before pushing on to Aoraki Mount Cook National Park, whose eponymous peak (the Maori half of its name means “cloud piercer”) is the tallest in New Zealand.

This, I learned at The Hermitage in Mount Cook Village, was where Sir Edmund Hillary began training for his ascent of Mount Everest; the hotel hosts an education center dedicated to the legendary New Zealander, including a replica of the snow tractor he used for his 1958 South Pole expedition.

The Hermitage is something of a legend, too. Opened in 1884, it was rebuilt on higher ground after being destroyed by a flood, and rebuilt once again when a fire gutted it in the 1950s. The wing where I stayed was just a decade old, but the views were timeless: from my window, I could look straight up the Hooker Valley to the craggy 3,754-meter summit of Aoraki Mount Cook, framed against a crisp blue autumn sky.

Before dinner—bluff oysters and mussels; lamb with feta-stuffed kumara (the local sweet potato)—I had just enough time to make my flight with Mount Cook Ski Planes. Like jet boats and bungee cords, ski planes, which carry retractable skis on their landing gear, are a Kiwi invention. You've got to admire their pluck. From an airfield outside the village, I was whisked skyward in a crowded eight-seat turboprop, soaring up through a deep valley along a wall of mountains toward the head of the Tasman Glacier. The scenery was thrilling, and so was our landing, which sent up a spray of ice as the plane skidded to a stop. Then we all got out and stood for photo ops amid the blinding whiteness.

I had one last look at the glacier the next morning. This time it was from the vantage of a tour boat on the Tasman's terminal lake, a milky green expanse that we hiked to across a landscape of thorny matagari bushes and rocky moraine. On the far side of the water was the ominous-looking rampart of the glacier wall. Our boat kept to the lake's other end, where a scattering of icebergs glinted and dripped in the slanting sunlight. “You're lucky,” our guide said. “Ten million tons of ice calved off the glacier two weeks ago—that's what you're looking at. If you had come before then, you wouldn't have seen a single iceberg.”

And the adventure didn't end there. On my drive back to Lake Tekapo and a night of stargazing, I got stuck in a herd of maybe 1,000 bleating merino sheep, mindlessly crisscrossing the road on their way to some distant pasture. This constitutes a traffic jam in New Zealand. And sure, it's a cliché. But can there be a more quintessentially Kiwi moment? ☺



THE DETAILS CANTERBURY

—GETTING THERE
Singapore Airlines (singaporeair.com) flies daily to Christchurch from Singapore; from Hong Kong, there's a daily connection to the city via Sydney on **Qantas** (qantas.com).

—WHERE TO STAY
Though most of Christchurch's city-center hotels are out of commission, there's still some good accommodation available. On

the outskirts of town, **Peppers Clearwater** (Clearwater Ave., Northwood; 64-3/360-1000; doubles from US\$206) is a golf resort with waterside villas and suites overlooking a duck-filled lake. Closer to the action, the **Classic Villa** (17 Worcester Blvd.; 64-3/377-7905; theclassicvilla.co.nz; doubles from US\$150) is an upscale B&B within an easy stroll of the botanic gardens and the Canterbury Museum; it occupies a

historic house with 15 rooms decorated in a period style. Or base yourself at **Otahuna Lodge** (224 Rhodes Rd., Tai Tapu; 64-3/329-6333; otahuna.co.nz; doubles from US\$876, all-inclusive, except lunch), a 20-minute drive from town.

Akaroa's most charming billet is **Maison de la Mer** (1 Rue Benoit; 64-3/304-8907; maisondelamer.co.nz; doubles from US\$298, including breakfast), while in Lake Tekapo, your best bet is **Peppers Bluewater Resort** (State Highway 8; 64-3/680-7000; doubles from US\$195). Travelers wanting to break their trip into the Canterbury high country with a round of golf—or a seriously meaty dinner at Hunter's Steakhouse—should aim for **Terrace Downs** (Coleridge Rd., Wind-whistle; 64-3/318-6943; doubles from US\$294), which overlooks Mount Hutt and Rakaia Gorge. In Aoraki

Park, it's all about **The Hermitage** (Mount Cook Village; 64-3/435-1809; hermitage.co.nz; doubles from US\$135).

—WHAT TO DO

Canterbury is at its most thrilling amid the alpine wilderness of Aoraki Mount Cook National Park, where you can land on the Tasman Glacier with **Mount Cook Ski Planes** (64-3/430-8034; skiplanes.co.nz; flights from US\$322 per person) or explore the glacier's terminal lake with **Glacier Explorers** (64-3/435-1641; mount-cook.com; tours from US\$115 per person). That said, few things could be more pleasant than a morning on the water with **Akaroa Dolphins** (64-3/304-7866; akaroadolphins.co.nz; day cruises from US\$70 per person), or a night of stargazing in Lake Tekapo with **Earth and Sky** (64-3/680-6960; earthandskynz.com; US\$83 per person). —CPH