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# The best of New Zealand

The fares cost next to nothing, travel time is about three hours from the east coast and the exchange rate still cuts an attractive figure. Once there, the land of the long white cloud has a slew of grand lodges and designer-dressed cottages by lakes, plunging waterfalls and the coast. All offer seamless service and exemplary food and wine, in settings where rivers often run through and the mountains are never far away. All of which makes it easy to see why New Zealand is attracting the most discerning international travellers

Story **Susan Kurosawa** and **David Meagher**

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A long and meandering drive leads to Otahuna Lodge (opposite), just north of Christchurch. The stately Queen Anne-style homestead is one of New Zealand's finest and there are extensive grounds (above), just perfect for a post-prandial stroll.



## Otahuna Lodge Canterbury, South Island

It's not often that you meet two early 30-somethings who've ditched their high-flying city lives and opted for a treechange. Rarer still to find they've swapped the busy streets of Manhattan for the green, green grass of New Zealand. But that's exactly what Hall Cannon and Miles Refo did in 2005 when they were both just 30 years old.

Cannon and Refo decided they'd had enough of the Big Apple and wanted to "do something else, but had no clear goals", says Cannon, who worked in property development in New York, specialising in the conversion of commercial spaces to residential lofts. Refo, on the other hand, worked in marketing for a publishing company.

After making the decision to leave their jobs, they travelled the world in search of somewhere to live and something to do. They visited the west coasts of both the US and Canada and then wandered far south to New Zealand, driving from the top of the North Island to the very bottom of the South, staying at many of the luxury lodges the country has to offer. That was when they stumbled on Otahuna, a historic Queen Anne-style homestead near Christchurch. It was originally designed for New Zealand parliamentarian Sir Heaton Rhodes, who lived in the house for more than 60 years.

At the time, the lodge was in receivership after two years of ownership by English couple, Greg and Julie Leniston. According to Christchurch's newspaper *The Press*, the Lenistons paid \$NZ4.3 million [\$3.4 million] for the property in 2003 and spent at least \$NZ2.5 million transforming it from a private residence into a luxury lodge. By the time Cannon and Refo discovered Otahuna in May 2005, it was lumbered with debts and there were no buyers on the horizon. Being smart operators, the pair took their time and finally purchased the property in August 2006.

The Lenistons had done all the hard work of the renovation (new wiring, plumbing and a

new roof), which meant the building was in good condition, though it lacked the sort of interior Cannon and Refo were looking for. "The structural components were essentially all new, but the lodge needed some commercial additions, like a better kitchen and laundry. Some of the bathrooms needed to be bigger; and generally, it needed better decorative enhancements," Cannon explains. So they commissioned Auckland-based interior designer Stephen Cashmore, who specialises in historic house renovations, to give the property much-needed character in a renovation costing more than \$NZ10 million.

Cashmore's design for the house, which has a Category 1 listing from the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, involved the use of local materials and craftsmen, where possible, in a scheme that remained true to the original designer's intentions. Cashmore's solution, however, is also comfortable and contemporary enough for the exacting standards that guests to New Zealand's luxury lodges now expect. Incorporated into the scheme are 28 major works by well-known New Zealand artists and 30 original photographs illustrating the property's impressive history.

Otahuna has seven guest rooms, each with its own unique character and name. They range in size and all have spacious bathrooms with a huge tub. Six of the seven have wood-burning fireplaces and two have fireplaces in their bathrooms. The palatial Rhodes Suite, which is the largest, was once Sir Heaton's room; the Verandah Suite is so named because of its 9m-long private verandah; and the Polo Suite pays tribute to Heaton Rhodes's favourite sport, once played by clusters of elegant folk on the front lawn.

The suites at Otahuna are so comfortable you might not want to venture too far from the lodge, particularly if it's relaxation you're after. After all, Otahuna sits on 12ha of land, half of which is devoted to gardens. The original gardens



● Otahuna's gracious drawing room (above) is a vision of carved wood and duck egg blue, set off by Cole & Son wallpaper. For fans of the game, the Polo Suite (right), features original accessories among the oak furniture and houndstooth fabric. Don't even think about underfloor heating – there's a fireplace in the bathroom.



were designed by A E Lowe, who trained at Kew Gardens in London. While at the lodge, it's worth checking out the Botanic Gardens in Christchurch, an easy 30-minute drive.

Otahuna is a fabled New Zealand property, in part because of its famous daffodil field in front of the house. Heaton Rhodes planted thousands of bulbs here, which have since naturalised and bloom each September. For years, he opened the gardens to the public on the first weekend of September (what became known as Daffodil Day), a tradition that's been reinstated.

Much of the garden was overgrown when Cannon and Refo purchased the property and it is now under the care of Steve Marcham, who is more than happy to take guests on a tour of his pride and joy. Otahuna has an impressive orchard and vegetable garden, growing more than 95 types of vegetables as well as fruits and herbs in an effort to make the property sustainable. Chef Jimmy McIntyre designs his menu each day with whatever looks good in the garden that morning.

Unlike some of the newer lodges, Otahuna has a large communal table in the dark wood-paneled dining room, where a lavish meal is served each night. Cashmore's design for the formal room has maintained the original embossed green and gold wallpaper, and with the fire roaring it's the perfect place to linger. Those not into group dining can choose to have their meal in a private setting somewhere else in the house. As Otahuna is the largest private historic residence in New Zealand, there are plenty of other options.

While Cannon and Refo lacked experience in the hospitality industry when they took over Otahuna Lodge, it doesn't show. The feeling you have when staying here is that it's more like a friend's luxurious country house than a five-star lodge. The fact that all food and beverage charges, as well as the laundry service, are included in the tariff just enhances that feeling. DM [www.otahuna.co.nz](http://www.otahuna.co.nz)



## BEST ON THE (NEW) BLOCK

**The Farm at Cape Kidnappers, Hawke's Bay, North Island** Perched on a 2430ha cliff-top estate in the southeast, this pastoral hideout comprises a cowhand-chic main lodge and line of 22 timber cottages as well as a four-bedroom owner's lodge. This may be a working farm but few have ever been this luxe. There's a championship golf course, heated pool, cute spa, glam interiors and a focus on the food and award-winning wine of the region. Be sure to take a 4WD tour of the rolling property. [www.capekidnappers.com](http://www.capekidnappers.com)

**Lake Okareka Lodge, Rotorua, North Island** This lakeside mansion, centrepiece of a gated estate, features three beautiful suites and is available as one booking only so it's ideal houseparty territory for up to nine guests. Leisure possibilities abound (there's a jetty and boathouse, private swimming beaches and access to brilliant trout fishing) but true lotus-eaters will instantly see that it's all about the designer-dressed house, from the outdoor spa tub to the on-call chef and state-of-the-art facilities. [www.okareka.co.nz](http://www.okareka.co.nz)

**Braemar Lodge, Braemar Springs, South Island** There are 24 open-plan suites with views of Hanmer Basin and snow-hatted alps at this super-comfortable property north of Christchurch. Opened in 2008, all the regulation requirements of the premium lodge-goer have been covered, with the bonus of an excellent spa. On the agenda are snow sports in season, hiking, fishing, horse-riding and golf. Then it's back to the lodge for a roaring fire and a river's worth of New Zealand wine. [www.selectbraemarlodge.co.nz](http://www.selectbraemarlodge.co.nz)

Where limes dance with river stones and passionfruit ask to cut in.



## Huka Lodge

Lake Taupo, North Island

New Zealand entrepreneur and businessman Alex van Heeren opened the born-again Huka Lodge in 1984. The original, a much more basic affair, was set up by an Irishman named Alan Pye in the 1920s.

Pye built four canvas huts within sight of thundering Huka Falls and serious trout anglers sought him out in the 1930s (including the Queen Mother, whose favourite fishing hole was called "The Duchess"). Van Heeren saw the potential for a luxury enclave for global sophisticates, where the history of Lake Taupo and its fabulous fishing could be enshrined.

These days, Huka Lodge presents an acknowledged template for how to get this lodge lark just right: on a fiercely groomed and thickly wooded 7ha estate, guests are accommodated in 20 cedar cabins (or the luxe Owner's Cottage or the amazing, new Alan Pye Cottage, the size of a suburban home) beside a rushing, peppermint-coloured river patrolled by groups of haughty ducks.

The scenery is utterly beautiful, the scale perfect, the setting one of New Zealand's pastoral best. Even travellers who would never consider

fishing seem to get hooked here. Ah, the poetry of casting, the silken lines and shiny hooks, the floating fly and the suddenly striking fish. I recommend it highly: if someone as clumsy as me can catch a portly rainbow trout in the Waikato River, anyone can. Expect tall tales of angling feats at pre-dinner cocktails, when guests meet and mingle in the main lodge. (My father was fond of asking: Are fishermen all liars? Or do only liars fish?)

Huka Lodge's locally sourced food is unambiguously contemporary (there was no trout carpaccio or salmon sashimi for tea in Pye's day, I warrant, nor free-range eggs and smoked fishcakes for breakfast). Huka Lodge used to promote communal dining but these days it's more flexible and there's dinner a deux at a variety of locales, including the club-style library, at the orangerie or a second-floor eyrie in the main lodge, even down in the well-stocked cellar or on the river-facing decks.

With the bonus of Virginia Fisher's country-house decor and stylish finishing touches, it's about as far from Pye's simple riverside camp as one could sensibly imagine. SK  
www.hukalodge.co.nz



## Kauri Cliffs

Bay of Islands, North Island

This 11-cottage property, senior sister to The Farm at Cape Kidnappers, is one of New Zealand's most lauded hideaways. With its championship golf course curving along a cliff-top plateau, it is definitely the lodge of choice for golfers. But loitering golf widows (and widowers) will find marvellous compensation in the newish spa.

Kauri Cliffs is unashamedly outdoorsy, with an infinity-edge pool, two tennis courts and a gym. The 263oha domain covers myriad zones of vegetation and curious micro-climates, including native forest, subtropical pockets, marked nature trails, waterfalls and plunging cliffs. There is a beach with a surface of scattered, pink-coloured shells and giant pohutukawa trees that flower in showers of scarlet from November to January. The oldest kauri tree on private land in New Zealand seems almost an anti-climax on such a woody estate.

Must-do activities include an excursion to historic Waitangi Treaty Ground (where the 1840 accord between the Maori people and British Crown was signed), boating, sea kayaking, game fishing and snorkelling. There's also diving on the 1985 wreck of the Rainbow Warrior.

The architecture of the main house suggests a Caribbean plantation home with a columned verandah and wide-planked timber floors; the snug cottages have been decorated by Virginia Fisher, the Auckland-based designer who also created the interiors at Huka Lodge. Her style is eclectic and organic, based on washed-out colours and with masses of friendly touches, such as fresh flowers and apposite bric-a-brac. It's all about a simplicity that doesn't try to compete with the views beyond: golf greens, smashing ocean and wide skies.

Guests gather for pre-dinner cocktails, as is the way in New Zealand lodges of this standard, before repairing for intimate meals that showcase the best New Zealand produce, including lamb from neighbouring Waiaua Bay and Hawke's Bay plus local crayfish and snapper.

Kauri Cliffs is owned by US hedge-fund billionaire Julian Robertson and his wife, Josie, and is at Matauri Bay in the Northland region on the northeast coast of the North Island. The Robertsons are passionate about New Zealand and their level of investment has helped to elevate the reputation of lodges here to world class. SK  
www.kauricliffs.com

● The plantation-style lodge at Kauri Cliffs (top left) sits on a vast property where activities are as diverse as golf and horseriding along the beach. More gentle exercise can be had in the infinity pool (centre left). Design-wise, the Owner's Cottage (below left) and a typical guest suite (below right) have a touch of the Hamptons about them.

● A pebble's throw from the falls, Huka Lodge's new Alan Pye Cottage (top right) gives guests every reason to gush. Inside is a light-filled living room with designer flourishes (right) and more intimate den (far right), complete with crackling fire and suitably large plasma TV.



Enjoy Responsibly



Where Secrets Live



SECRET STONE  
Sauvignon Blanc  
MARLBOROUGH · NEW ZEALAND



Enjoy Responsibly

Where limes dance with river stones and passionfruit ask to cut in.

**DO NOT USE**

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