

Otahuna Lodge

Text by Kate Bailey



It was only due to the diligence of Otahuna Lodge's concierge Tim that Greg and I managed to arrive for our overnight stay at all - which we would have been immensely sad to miss, as our visit was pure pleasure from start to finish.

Neither of us had thought to check the exact directions to our weekend retreat. Thankfully, as we made ready our departure, Tim from Otahuna Lodge rang Greg to confirm details on how to get there. Embarrassment and unnecessary finger pointing had been averted.

Suffice to say, we did arrive at Otahuna, which is conveniently situated in Tai Tapu, a mere 20 minutes from central Christchurch. The crisp twilight saw us pull up outside the gates, which opened

once contact was made with the Lodge via telephone system. As we meandered up the long driveway, we spotted the first signs of daffodils sprinkled throughout the parkland that surrounds the Lodge.

The Lodge itself is a strikingly lavish Queen Anne-styled white mansion. Formerly the abode of local dignitary Sir Heaton Rhodes, Otahuna is still the largest private historic residence in New Zealand and regarded as one of Australasia's most distinguished examples of this wonderfully detailed architectural style. Built in 1895 for Sir Heaton and his new wife Jessie, the house and 5,000 acre farm must have provided this colonial aristocrat with an enviable lifestyle, complete with at-home polo matches, a full-scale pond (with bridge, naturally), formal

dining and immense landscaped gardens to roam through.

Our hosts, Miles and Hall, greeted us; two youthful, almost Gatsby-like figures clad in utterly correct American country wear. Indeed, both Miles and Hall are American, having been seduced by New Zealand while visiting and deciding to emigrate here from the Eastern seaboard.

As we were graciously ushered inside and bags dispensed with, Greg and I marvelled at the cavernous and immaculate entrance hall. Crackling fires, oil paintings and distinguished furniture all worked to re-create a wonderful atmosphere of discreet privilege.

Upstairs, we were shown to the 'Rhodes' Suite, which was of

course formerly the bedroom of the master of the house. Sir Heaton evidently required quite a bit of space; entrance hall, bathroom, morning room and massive main chamber complete with covered balcony offering views to the Southern Alps across the front lawn and pond. He probably would have appreciated the thoughtful details that Miles and Hall have subsequently provided, like the crisply-sheeted king-size bed, the glossy New Zealand-themed reading matter and the Bose sound system.

Hall advised us to come downstairs at our convenience to join them for a pre-dinner drink and then disappeared, leaving us to survey our domain. We decided to wallow in the tile-surrounded bathtub and



The following frost-tipped morning, after a luxurious shower in the double-headed compartment, Greg and I headed downstairs for a wonderful breakfast. Created by Jimmy to suit even the most exacting requirements, we ate our fill of oven-roasted tomatoes, mushrooms and perfectly-cooked eggs then skipped off for our full tour around the house and gardens. Inside, Miles led us through the public areas of The Lodge and the lavishly-appointed two master suites and five suites that comprise Otahuna's guest accommodation, complete with library, 15 working open fireplaces, grand piano, hand-carved Kauri staircase and rimu panelling. A range of 'new' features, like a spa treatment room and on-site gymnasium training area, now complements the 'old'.

We then headed outdoors, noting with approval the heated pool and summer barbeque facilities, Jacuzzi and tennis court. Miles thoughtfully provided us with 'guest gumboots', as the going was to get a little damp in places.

As we strode through Otahuna's 20 acres of gardens (which in addition to the pond and polo lawn, feature a 'Dutch' garden, a frog pond, forested trails, orchards and cultivated areas), we marvelled at what an excellent job Miles and Hall have done in restoring Otahuna to its zenith of authenticity and beauty. The painstakingly collected artefacts, fabrics and furnishings all form a tribute to the tireless enthusiasm and dedication of these two firm fans of historical New Zealand.

Naturally, it was with reluctance that we left Otahuna and prepared to return to our own far more utilitarian abode. Greg has visions of installing a bell on his side of the bed, hoping upon hope that he'll receive the royal treatment that Sir Heaton so obviously enjoyed. I have news for him - he'll have to go back to Otahuna Lodge for that sort of attentiveness. ■

make use of the sumptuous toiletries that were laid out, before heading down to the drawing room below.

There we were joined by John Nielsen from Kiwi Collection and proceeded to sample a selection of the lodge's fabulous wine collection, served to us by our aforementioned saviour, Tim. Of course, once I opted for Champenoise, everyone had to get in on the act and far from savouring the whole bottle myself, as I had privately hoped, I had to make do with a much more lady-like two glasses. Jimmy, the Lodge's Head Chef, made an appearance to whet our appetite for the splendours that were to follow. Both the salmon and prawn nibbles were sublimely delicious and prompted us all to traipse eagerly through to the dining room when summoned. This was a splendid room, still boasting the original gilded wallpaper which dates back to 1895, and warmed by the flickering of the glowing fire.

Conversation was lively but occasionally halted by our many exclamations of joyful appreciation as Jimmy and Tim continued to tirelessly serve and talk us through each course and the accompanying New Zealand wine choices. From a striking half-and-half-coloured Sweetcorn and Green Tomato soup, we moved to a melt-in-the-mouth Duck Tart with Red Onion Jam; then Eye Fillet and Oxtail with Winter Vegetables plus Truffle Ravioli...then managed to wedge in the Peppermint and Vanilla Bean Pannacotta. One of the loveliest things about eating at Otahuna (apart from our urbane hosts and the wonderful Jimmy) is that much of the food, including eggs and preserves, is actually produced on the estate, thus achieving the utmost freshness and flavour.

After a final bout of gastronomic delight in the form of Blue Cheese and Nashi Pears, we retired to the drawing room once more for hot drinks, before opting for an early night. Once upstairs, we found that the fire had been lit and handmade chocolates awaited us, along with a "bedtime story" – little anecdotes about the house and its former owners, presented to guests each evening.

