



Yesterday was all adventure, exploring the beauty of the Banks Peninsula, near Christchurch on the South Island of New Zealand. Today will be total relaxation, cocooned in my exquisite lodgings, Otahuna, discovering the stories of this property, which is celebrating its 125th anniversary. Because we are in the east coast region named after the great English cathedral city, let's call them the Canterbury Tales.

There are stories of love, tragedy, the pursuit of dreams, earthquakes, hippies and royalty ... maybe nothing as raunchy as Chaucer's Miller's Tale, but who can tell? Otahuna Lodge is the soul of discretion. Owners Hall Cannon and Miles Reffo know their place has a formal bearing — listed by the NZ Historic Places Trust — which makes it their job to create an informality that gives guests the warmth and privacy of their own homes.

Otahuna, on 12ha of manicured gardens and rambling semi-woodlands, was built in 1895 by (later Sir) Heaton Rhodes as a wedding gift to his Melbourne-born love, Jessie Clark. It was a latter-day Taj Mahal, at the time the largest private residence in NZ and a flight of fancy in Queen Anne style.

Stand at the foot of the Great Lawn and look up to the timber gem, painted crisp white, with grey tiled roof. It has been described as an "idiosyncratic hybrid" and symmetry is certainly out the window, as it were. Here a touch of Tudor, there Jacobean, stained-glass windows with nouveau motifs, carved veranda rails, turned posts, native timbers used in welcoming interior spaces, even a pagoda-style turret, inspired by Heaton and Jessie's honeymoon in Japan. Architect Frederick Strouts incorporated his client's vision and his own.

Heaton was a man of means, a farmer and stock breeder (he introduced red poll cattle to NZ) who set up Otahuna ("little hill among the hills") for a gentleman's life on English lines. He served in the Boer War, was elected to parliament and took on various ministries, including defence. He was also postmaster-general and built a worthy stamp collection, donated to the Canterbury Museum. Too much of a gentleman perhaps, he was not great in the cut and thrust of politics but, as a worker not a talker, was a solid local member and benefactor in his community of Tai Tapu.

Jessie and Heaton planned for children but were unable to have them. Jessie suffered severe depression and their estate lost its role as

PRIDE OF PLACE

Luxuriate in a NZ lodge with a romantic history

GRAHAM ERBACHER



a social hub. She died of a stroke in 1929 after collapsing while preparing for afternoon tea with the vicar and his wife. Heaton died peacefully in his house in 1956, whereupon all his letters, diaries, photographs and personal items, even hats and gloves, were thrown on a bonfire. Secrets? Maybe, or perhaps just the mode of the times, making the task difficult for his biographer, Charles W. Rice, down the track. Not all was lost. In the library, I turn the pages of an old stock-sale receipt book and, more movingly, Jessie's sketchbook.

After Heaton, the property was a Christian Brothers establishment, then returned to private hands and was a hippy commune and a guesthouse. By the early 2000s Otahuna was an ageing lady down on her luck.

Enter two young Americans, Hall and Miles. Hall, of Southern stock, grew up in Memphis; Miles is Boston-born. With liberal arts degrees from Haverford College in Philadelphia, they moved to New York and loved it. But the city that never sleeps can tire if you're a person who likes to sleep. So they set out with a vision, open-minded about where it might be realised; the yellow brick road led to

NZ and Otahuna. They bought their new home in 2006 and, with Auckland heritage interior designer Stephen Cashmore, set about the reimagining of a house with history as a luxury lodge with seven suites, now part of the Relais & Chateaux portfolio.

Take a look at a photograph of the old Otahuna, its interior cluttered with potted palms, heavy furniture and deer heads on the walls. Look around now. The wonderful woodwork is intact, even the original sideboard is in place in the dining room, along with the classified pressed and gilt Japanese wallpaper. So too the fireplaces with their inglenooks to snuggle in. But the overall effect is comfortable, country style.

The reception lounge is papered in dark green, the drawing room in pale blue with bursts of wisteria. The library is in deep red and well-stocked, although books, many on local subjects, are on tables alongside sink-in furniture throughout. On the walls is a collection of commissioned works by NZ artists, including a portrait of Rewi Maniapoto, a legendary Maori war hero. It dramatically conveys a sense of place.

IN THE KNOW

Fly from east coast capitals to Christchurch in about three hours; Otahuna Lodge is a 20-minute drive from the airport.

Suite rates from \$1400 a night for two (low season, May-September). Gather friends for a Lord of the Manor experience, which includes exclusive use of the lodge and meals; \$6495 for 10 guests (low season). Check the website for details of the new Winemaker's Dinner Series.

For the Love of a Place: The stories and cuisine of Otahuna (Penguin Random House New Zealand; \$95).

■ otahuna.co.nz
■ canterburyguides.com

The tranquillity that had been created was shattered by the earthquake of September 2010. Otahuna's 11 brick chimneys came crashing down, piercing the roof and causing considerable damage. The lodge was closed, but the staff kept on (there's strong loyalty here between staff and owners) and a rebuild with state-of-the-art quake-proofing was achieved in four months. Otahuna fared better in the second quake of February 2011, which devastated Christchurch.

At the rear of the lodge there is a contemporary kitchen with courtyard outlook, just the place for breakfast, which brings us to the tale of Jimmy McIntyre, executive chef. Fine dining is at the heart of the lodge experience and Jimmy and his team serve it up. He's been here since 2003 in its not-so-glam guesthouse days. With the freedom he has in menus using the choicest produce from Otahuna's gardens and local suppliers, and the connections he makes with guests, "Why would I want to be anywhere else?", he asks.

Settle in for a nightly five-course dinner. Otahuna lamb rack with kale puree, garden vegetables and braised shallots, perhaps. Or



Otahuna Lodge, main; cosy living room, above left; suite veranda, above right; village of Akaroa, below left

porchetta with onion, celeriac and fennel puree and cabbage, melted leek, apple and horseradish. Leave room for the apricot curd dumplings, with cinnamon breadcrumbs, caramel and vanilla bean ice cream. Cleverly matched local wines accompany each course.

What's on the menu is determined by what is ready to pick from the kitchen, or potager, garden, and that's the job of Steve Marcham, a son of the Cotswolds and another person who has found his dream at Otahuna. Head gardener Steve is up at 6am to harvest. About 120 varieties of fruits, vegetables, herbs and mushrooms are under organic cultivation in the garden beds and orchard. Taste the heirloom tomatoes and your faith in flavour is restored. Think, also, cherry, peach, apricot, plum, fig and apple trees. Then there are the beds of flowers around which the bees buzz.

Their honey is delicious and the vases inside are never without colourful displays. Steve and his team restored to magnificence Otahuna's grounds, which include a Dutch

garden, trees that date back to Heaton, and more recent additions of a pool deck and spa, and croquet lawn. The Woodland Massage Studio offers blissful treatments to complement the splendid views.

We are staying in the Veranda Suite, opening to a covered outdoor area with views across the Great Lawn and lake to the Southern Alps. How extra-lovely it would be when the daffodils bloom in September. The suite is comfortable, with fireplaces in the bedroom, and ensuite, which has a shower, tub and Penhaligon's Quercus products. Lunch on the veranda or lazing on the sun lounges is a joy and the beds are dream weavers. It is believed Heaton hosted the Duke and Duchess of York (later King George VI and Queen Elizabeth) in this room, and Charles and Camilla stayed last year. I have watched Downton Abbey, the movie, on my flight to Christchurch, which is about a royal visit during which our plucky downstairs staff are replaced by haughty palace hacks (fret not, it

ends well). How close was this to the C&C experience, I ask. And this is where the discretion kicks in, but I learn that all went well.

Fiona Newsome, of Canterbury Guiding Co, is the storyteller when we take a bespoke Banks Peninsula day trip. Fiona works with Otahuna on guest experiences and is a Cantabrian with deep local knowledge who knows how to tailor an anecdote to fit her audience. We visit the French-settled Akaroa and move on to two majestic private gardens open to the public. Jill Simpson's "obsession" with horticulture has yielded a masterpiece that rolls down a hill to Fishermans Bay. It is no surprise she is an artist as well. This is a perfect place for a picnic prepared by the lodge. Ohinetahi is a garden, park and art gallery created around the home of architect Sir Miles Warren in Governors Bay, Christchurch. Amble here and appreciate a lifetime dedicated to the creation of beauty.

We are greeted on return to the lodge, as always, by staff and are just in time for pre-

MORE TO THE STORY

Jimmy McIntyre, executive chef, has hypnotic hands. They move with quiet craftsmanship somehow medieval, no feverish thumping or vacuous chatter here. I am on his turf, in his kitchen. The glass of NZ chardonnay kicks in and dissolves initial misgivings about a cooking class. I get to stand and observe a master at work. Right now it's salmon ceviche appetisers. The ingredients are strewn across the marble benchtop, fragrant and dazzling, but I don't have to remember everything as Jimmy promises me the recipe. (The book, *For the Love of a Place: The stories and cuisine of Otahuna*, has a good bunch more, all with mercifully accessible ingredients.) Jimmy tells of his apprenticeship in the classic schools: "A fine-dining restaurant was French, so that's what you did. That's what the benchmark was at the time."

The knife flashes, the room is all light and space, and I glimpse another way of life, a calling.

ALAN FRENCH

dinner drinks (make mine a kiwi negroni) and canapes. It's a chance to meet fellow guests, who tonight are a mix of North Americans and Britons. But it's also another opportunity to engage with staff, mostly locals who have their own quake stories and feel empathy for Australians battling the bushfires of summer. Smoke from the fires drifted across to Christchurch so they appreciate the enormity of the disaster. I'm among friends.

Graham Erbacher was a guest of Otahuna Lodge.

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