

south of ordinary



Big landscapes and intimate lodges on New Zealand's South Island.



by kim brown seely photography by kieran scott

Seascape, one of Annandale's
four private villas.

*this is how you
rescue a “cast” sheep:*

Bend down, grab two fistfuls of wool, and lift. I know this because, during the 45 minutes it takes to drive my husband, Jeff, and me from the entrance of Annandale, a working sheep farm on New Zealand’s South Island, to our wildly secluded oceanfront retreat, we stop once or twice.

“You don’t mind helping, do you? The poor things’ll die if we don’t,” says lodge manager Lyndsay Jobin, who’s ferrying us along a rugged dirt road high above the ocean. Today’s first victim, an oatmeal-colored ewe, is sprawled on her back like a turtle, toothpick legs pawing the spring sky. Jeff and I have never heard of cast sheep, but here we are, leaping from a bright-white Toyota Land Cruiser and saving their furry lives.

“Why don’t they just roll over?” I ask.

“Yeese, well ...” Lyndsay replies cheerfully in her New Zealand drawl. “Because they’re cast.”

Jeff and I exchange glances. What the heck?

It’s a little unsettling to learn that a cast sheep is one that has lain down and can’t get up because its center of gravity is off. It’s like being told the only land mammals native to New Zealand are bats, or that no part of this antipodean country is more than 79 miles from the sea. But it turns out that once a sheep is supine, it can die within hours. Stand it up, though, and it bounces right back.

That’s the thing about New Zealand: It’s full of surprises.





FOUR THOUSAND ACRES OF ANNANDALE'S farmland stretched before us, ridiculously scenic pastures tumbling to the sea. On either side of us, week-old lambs gamboled in the grass. Navigating the final stretch of cliff road to Seascape, one of the lodge's four private villas, folded deep within the landscape, Lyndsay said, "Here at Annandale you get a whole lot of raw nature on a real working farm."

"And how do we get food?" my husband quipped, as we gaped at the radical remoteness.

Later that evening, we were warming up two of the elaborate gourmet meals Annandale's chef had stacked in the fridge (along with step-by-step instructions) and toasting the staggering view. Our ultramodern abode – a concrete, stone, and glass structure built into the grassy hillside – had an open-concept living room/kitchen/bedroom. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed a

patio fronting a rocky cove, which was ours alone. The wind was galloping across the water, kicking up whitecaps. I padded across concrete floors warmed by radiant heat, stepped onto the terrace, pushed a button, and *whoosh!* A rectangular metal hood rose up, igniting the gas fireplace beneath like something straight out of James Bond.

I stood in the wind and closed my eyes, listening to the sound of surf crunching pebbles on the shore. In an age of virtual everything, there's nothing like total immersion in new sensory experiences – whether waking to kaleidoscopic views of water and sky, or stepping into an oceanfront hot tub at night and gazing up at the glow of the Magellanic Clouds, sparked with mysterious star clusters you've never seen before. That day, with its woolly start and over-the-top finish at a glass house suspended beside the sea, would be one of the most outrageous of the trip. Heck – I'd call it one of the most outrageous of my life.

When Lyndsay drove out the next afternoon to check on us, she smiled. She just called it Tuesday.

EVERY DEDICATED TRAVELER keeps a mental wish list of pilgrimages, those iconic journeys that begin in the mind and, if you're exceedingly lucky, finish in the world: Hiking in Patagonia. Taking a tented safari in Tanzania. Watching the sunrise at Machu Picchu. In the last few years, a new trip has topped many of these lists: Exploring New Zealand. It pops up among the top five dream destinations in this magazine's Travel Dreams survey every year and ranks fourth overall in destination sales among Virtuoso travel agencies.

The reason is simple: Here, in a laid-back country smaller than Japan, are some of the planet's most breathtaking landscapes. Traveling through them, you have the feeling that there are potential adventures at every turn. Whether you choose to engage

Inside Annandale's Seascape villa and (left) a slice of the lodge's impressive acreage and its Scrubby Bay villa.



in them or not – fly-fishing, hiking, golfing, bungee jumping, jet boating, and more – what leaves you awestruck in New Zealand is nature itself, the overwhelming force of it. And recently, some of the world’s most rarefied lodges have opened here, putting all that extreme beauty within arm’s reach.

The challenge? Deciding which lodges to visit. I turned to Chicago-based travel advisor Miriam Geiser for insight. “New Zealand is incredibly remote and pristine,” she told me. “Although the South Island is relatively small, it has all these iconic landscapes – white-sand beaches, snowcapped mountains, deep fjords, untouched glaciers – within minutes of each other. It’s ideal if you’re looking for the next far-flung adventure.”

My husband and I were looking for the next far-flung adventure, so rather than take on the entire country, we decided to focus on the South Island – which suited us perfectly since it’s the larger but far less populated of New Zealand’s two main islands. Geiser worked with an on-site tour operator to map out a ten-day trip, starting in Christchurch and ending in Queenstown, with visits to five properties in between.

ANOTHER SURPRISING THING about New Zealand is how civilized the 13-hour transpacific flight from the States has become – and how many routes airlines have added this year. After dinner and a movie or two, recline your seat and wake up in Auckland jet-lag-free.

A driver met us after our connecting

Otahuna chef Jimmy McIntyre gathers ingredients for his kitchen. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Otahuna owners Hall Cannon (left) and Miles Refo, the lodge, home-cured prosciutto, local fauna, and an interior tableau.



That day, with its woolly start and over-the-top finish at a glass house suspended beside the sea, would be one of the most outrageous of my life.

flight to Christchurch, and we set out for the half-hour ride to our first stop: Otahuna Lodge, a nineteenth-century estate that has been transformed into the quintessential country-house hotel. As the Canterbury Plains’ long expanses of farmland flashed by, we learned that the South Island’s entire population is just over 1 million, and sheep still outnumber people by about ten to one.

Hall Cannon and Miles Refo – a charming, urbane pair who relocated to New Zealand from New York in 2006, bought Otahuna, and have since renovated it to a state of historical perfection – greeted us at the end of the lodge’s sweeping gravel drive.

“When we took over originally, the house was very cluttered, looking a bit like Downton Abbey,” Hall said, showing us upstairs

to our room (one of only seven), an enclave of comfort with an ornate fireplace, luxurious sitting area, and balcony opening onto a long view of verdant-striped lawn and 30 acres of formal gardens.

Lunch, a charcuterie, fruit, and cheese plate featuring Relais & Châteaux chef Jimmy McIntyre's own lardo, coppa, and pancetta, was served simply on the kitchen patio, as if we were houseguests – a nice touch. We took in the quiet and Otahuna's romantic Queen Anne exterior, with its white weatherboard siding, asymmetrical rooflines, and 11 brick chimneys.

After lunch we took a walk. Birds chirped in the trees and a light breeze blew. The weather was gorgeous: bright sunshine, warm but not too hot. The view was even better – from the rolling front lawn to the oversize trees, everything was green. Not just green, but GREEN!, a fertile, Granny Smith apple green that seemed to illuminate the landscape, lush fields dotted with fluffy white sheep. When I pulled out my phone to take a picture of a massive oak, I noticed I had no connection. For the first time in weeks, I felt at peace.

Otahuna's center, physically and metaphorically, is its formal dining room, where each night McIntyre pairs a five-course tasting menu with New Zealand wines. "Would you care to join our other guests for dinner?" Hall asked discreetly when we returned from our walk. We froze. It turned out they were just one other couple. Canadians.

"We'd love to," I said, but I wasn't so sure.

Determined to make Otahuna an example of twenty-first-century hospitality, Hall and Miles gather with guests for cocktails before dinner each night, then leave them to either eat together in the big dining room (the pair

often host this communal table), with its blazing fire and ornate gold-leaf Japanese wallpaper, or privately elsewhere. I gulped: What had we signed on for?

The Canadians (on a monthlong lodge-to-lodge road trip) turned out to not only be delightful, but also sailors, as Jeff and I are. By the end of the evening, we were swapping email addresses. The next night, sitting at the head of the table and announcing each course (which I'd helped cook for our new friends in a private class with the chef) – "Otahuna lamb trio with tortellino kumara puree!" and "Chocolate-almond torte with chocolate mousse and pear sorbet!" – it occurred to me that what Hall and Miles have managed to pull off at Otahuna is to make a grand estate feel intimate in a way that's also surprisingly of the moment.

"The other lodges I've stayed at are nice, but this one is different; you can feel it," said a just-arrived Chinese solo traveler to the other new arrivals, a rather stern-looking couple from Mumbai. Soon all seven of us, from four different countries, were comparing notes on our favorite places in New Zealand, then weighing in on global warming. *Can this conversation even be happening?* I wondered, as the gentleman from Mumbai suddenly chimed in, "I have a sailboat too!"

TWO DAYS LATER WE TOOK A ONE-hour flight to Queenstown, rented a car, and drove another hour to Blanket Bay lodge. The route was spectacular, the road snaking above the shores of Lake Wakatipu, which shone glacial blue beneath snowy peaks. This is *Lord of the Rings* country, where director and native son Peter Jackson filmed many of the trilogy's key scenes, and once you get the hang of hugging the left-hand side of the S-turns, it's exhilarating just driving through it.

Fifty-mile-long Lake Wakatipu, a Queenstown-area scene setter.



*The route was **spectacular**, the road snaking above
the shores of Lake Wakatipu,
which shone **glacial blue** beneath snowy peaks.*



I marveled as we reached the far end of the lake and turned in to Blanket Bay. The road curved down toward the water, and the setting, which evoked Wyoming or Patagonia, was wide open but also different from anyplace I'd ever been: raw and bucolic, lit up with the intensity of a Southern Hemisphere spring. Waking the next morning in one of the lodge's stone cottages, lighting a fire, then savoring the lake view backed by dramatic serrated peaks, I remembered that New Zealand was one of the last major land masses to be settled by humans.

You still feel this remoteness in the South Island's outer reaches, and it's lovely and surreal – whether you're hiking a segment of the Routeburn Track (one of New Zealand's five great walks, which starts just past the lodge), heli-fly-fishing for two-foot-long trout as we did another day, or exploring the Southern Alps with a helicopter flight over Milford Sound.

Most unreal of all? After breakfast the next morning, a sleek Eurocopter landed on the lodge's front lawn, picked us up with four other guests, and lifted off again with a smooth *thwop, thwop, thwop*. We soared over the Humboldt Mountains' crenellated peaks; threaded dark, jagged canyons; then rose higher past steep flanks of volcanic rock, finally hovering like a dragonfly over a single ridge iced in white.

"The light's a bit flat. I need a visual reference to land," the pilot said.

It's OK! I wanted to say. *Let's just look!* But then the light changed.

"We're in luck, mates!" he announced. I held my breath as we touched down on the frosting-white glacier.

Once my heart began beating normally again, we stepped out into ankle-deep

snow beneath a huge blue sky. I trekked up through a virgin snowfield where everything was still and white and quiet. There were no other footprints. When I turned and looked back, my tracks spooled behind me like two lines of type on a giant sheet of white paper leading to our group of six: a handful of humans dwarfed by vastness.

There I finally understood the wonder of New Zealand. A helicopter had just dropped us on a sunlit glacier at 6,500 feet. Below us stretched birch forests and braided ginclear rivers, a place where almost mythical beauty meets adrenaline. Beyond, the

snowy escarpments where Sir Edmund Hillary had trained to summit Everest rose above swirling mists to take a bow. It was all so achingly wild, it seemed impossible that in a few hours there would also be a rustic-elegant lodge waiting with a refined meal and table set for two.

In the midst of such grandeur, you are sometimes keenly grateful for other people. Even if only to shout: *What a crazy privilege to be standing on a snow glacier in the sky!* I took one last look at all that silent beauty, then walked back to the group, shocked at how full my heart was, elated to see them.

tip

"New Zealand is a great destination for foodies. The lodges have gourmet tasting menus paired with fantastic local wines. In Queenstown, a **private tasting** with local winemaker Duncan Forsyth at **Mount Edward** makes a fun stop – plus, it's just up the road from the original Kawarau Bridge Bungy."

– Miriam Geiser, Virtuoso travel advisor, Chicago



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A Blanket Bay perch and a local vintage.



south island essentials

How to make the most of a New Zealand adventure.

WHEN TO GO The best time to visit New Zealand's South Island is November to April. From LAX, **Air New Zealand** has one of the easiest 13-hour flights you'll ever take: Enjoy dinner, watch a few movies, then recline your seat and wake up in Auckland. From there, you can catch a connecting flight to Christchurch or Queenstown in time for lunch.

GO Our travel advisor coordinated our trip through Virtuoso's on-site tour operator, who met us at the airport with a **leather-bound itinerary**, domestic air vouchers, and instructions to call any time. The ten-day trip had us fly-fishing, winetasting, hiking, and exploring Milford Sound by helicopter.

STAY Among secluded **Annan-dale's** four private villas, located on the Banks Peninsula a little

over an hour's drive from Christchurch, Seascape and Shepherd's Cottage are ideal for couples seeking romance and utter privacy; **Scrubby Bay** (a showstopper located 45 minutes out on the property) and the more traditional Homestead are best suited for friends or families traveling together. *Villas from \$470, including breakfast provisions in villa and a \$100 dining credit. Two-night minimum stay.*

The owners of seven-suite **Otahuna Lodge** have revitalized this Victorian mansion outside Christchurch. Guests are welcomed with lunch served on the patio or breakfast in the kitchen, followed by cocktails in the drawing room and a five-course dinner with pairings of Canterbury and other New Zealand wines in the **opulent dining room**. Don't miss

a walking tour of the gardens or a cooking class with chef Jimmy McIntyre. *Suites from \$400 per person, including breakfast, dinner, and cocktail hour daily, plus a complimentary lunch or picnic.*

Travelers arriving at **Blanket Bay** outside Queenstown are rewarded with a spectacular spot on Lake Wakatipu's shore, with tables for two looking toward the **Humboldt Mountains**. The lodge is grand and intimate all at once, with soaring timbers but just 13 rooms (the stone cottages are particularly beguiling), and wonderful service. *Doubles from \$675, including breakfast, dinner, and cocktail hour daily, plus one lunch for two.*

With five apartment-size suites, four lakefront apartments, and a three-bedroom villa, **Eichardt's Private Hotel** has the feeling

of an insider's find and makes a perfect base from which to explore **Queenstown** (and recover from its high-octane activities). A bonus: the cozy, old-school bar serving breakfast and, in the evening, whiskey and wine. *Suites from \$610, including breakfast daily, a welcome cocktail, and a cocktail class or winetasting.*

Sister property to the country's famous Farm at Cape Kidnappers and Lodge at Kauri Cliffs, **Matakauri Lodge** has a clean, contemporary look, with 12 rooms and suites, plus an Owner's Cottage, set on the edge of **Lake Wakatipu** not far from Queenstown. Breakfast and dinner are served in the main building; breakfast is particularly lovely on the lakeside patio. *Doubles from \$450, including breakfast daily and a \$100 spa credit. VI.*