

Otahuna

Monique Farmer leaves behind the children and enjoys the charms of a historic Canterbury lodge.

There are more than 120 types of fruit and vegetables grown for the lodge's kitchen, all labelled for the benefit of guests, and the vegetable gardener takes a big tray to the kitchen daily.

The lodge's dining room.



Saturday, 9am: The house is too quiet. It doesn't sound right without squealing and squabbling. Our kids have headed out the door with friends without a backward glance, and for the first time in three years we're off on a weekend for two. The mother guilt starts to ease the minute we leave for Auckland airport.

12.15pm: From Christchurch airport we are whisked towards the Port Hills by Range Rover. Twenty-five minutes of pretty countryside later, we sweep up the gravel driveway to a grand old country home called Otahuna Lodge, where Hall Cannon and Miles Refo greet us like lords of the manor. The young Americans have owned this beautiful building (Queen Anne style for architecture buffs) for about three years. It was built in 1895 as the home of NZ parliamentarian Sir Heaton Rhodes and was later a Christian Brothers' monastery, a commune and a family home, before Cannon and Refo restored it to its present glory. They have done an impeccable job: every room is sumptuously decorated yet not stuffy, and every whim is anticipated.

1pm: We take advantage of the head gardener being on duty on a Saturday to have a guided tour. Steve Marchan shows off his hard work to guests about three times a week and it's a delightful hour thanks to his contagious enthusiasm. Marchan shares some of Otahuna's history as we stroll in the afternoon sunshine. In the first two years Rhodes' gardeners planted 20,000 trees on 1215ha, largely English-style oak, pine and cedar. These days, nine hectares are garden and 4.5 are paddocks, housing sheep and cattle in the lodge's efforts at self sufficiency. We admire the formal "Dutch gardens", bordered by hedges in a windmill pattern, the organic orchard where trees are laden with pears and apples, and a vast, stonewalled vegetable garden, which would make any home cook green with envy. There are more than 120 types of fruit and vegetables grown for the lodge's



Bucolic bliss: Reflecting on Otahuna.

kitchen, all labelled for the benefit of guests, and the vegetable gardener takes a big tray to the kitchen daily.

2pm: A table for two is set in the drawing room turret, overlooking a rose garden and beyond to the pool and spa. Executive chef Jimmy McIntyre serves us a light salad of locally smoked salmon and fresh vegetables from the garden, with a glass of Huia sauvignon blanc.

3.15pm: Refo offers to take the lid off the spa and by the time we change, the water is bubbling away at 38°C, two towels placed nearby. The pool is equally irresistible on such a lovely early autumn day.

6.30pm: Dining at Otahuna Lodge is communal and served in the opulent dining room but if you crave privacy you can elect to dine a deux in the drawing room, or cellar, or pretty much anywhere you want. We meet our fellow travellers in the drawing room for cocktails and canapes, where Cannon introduces everyone and gets the conversations rolling. Otahuna has seven guest suites and tonight four are occupied. Our fellow guests are two American couples and a couple from Switzerland. The majority of Otahuna's guests are Americans and Europeans; New Zealanders and Australians are more likely to stay over winter when the tariffs are lower.

7.30pm: It's a sign of how well we're all getting on that chef McIntyre has to politely tap a glass to get our attention as he introduces each course. It is a five-course feast, each dish accompanied by a different local

wine. The sweetcorn in the soup (served with avocado, lime and tiger prawns) is from Otahuna's garden, ditto the summer vegetables with the free-range organic chicken and red onion tart, and the nectarines and peaches that accompany the lemoncake semifreddo. The Americans agree that it is the best meal they've had in New Zealand.

11pm: Thoughtfully, there is a copy of the menu awaiting in our suite, which has been transformed in our absence: fluffy white rugs on each side of the bed, handmade truffles, carafes of iced water, plush curtains drawn.

Sunday, 9am: The dining room is perfect for a lavish dinner but would feel too formal for breakfast. The nearby breakfast kitchen is a sunny and welcoming room with a long table in its centre. The kitchen bench is covered with bowls of cereal, fruit salad and yoghurts. The juicer soon whirs into action as guest host Emma Fergusson loads it with oranges and carrots then works the high-tech coffee machine with the flair of an Italian barista. Meanwhile, breakfast chef Adrian Harrison is whipping up a smoked salmon omelette for me and bacon and eggs for my husband.

10.45am: It's been at least 20 years since I last rode a bike, and I'm a little nervous. My feet could reach the ground on my last bicycle and I don't recall that crossbar being quite so high. Refo has given us directions for a 6km circuit of the surrounding countryside and as I zoom off between Otahuna's trees towards the front gate, I hope I look more in control than I feel. But the

Fact file:

Where to stay:

Otahuna Lodge is at Tai Tapu, about 25 minutes drive from Christchurch. High-season tariffs (October-April inclusive) for two guests start from \$1500+GST, or from \$1100 from May-September. This includes pre-dinner drinks and canapes, a five-course degustation dinner with matching wine, cooked and/or continental breakfast and use of all lodge facilities. Ph (03) 329-6333, www.otahuna.co.nz

What to do:

At Otahuna Lodge – private garden tours, cooking classes, cycling in the grounds or surrounding area, relax poolside or in the hot tub. The lodge can arrange horseback riding, golf, fishing, hunting, wine tours, helicopter trips to the Southern Alps and excursions to Akaroa. In spring, Otahuna has an open day – Daffodil Day – which last year saw 2500 visitors enjoy the one million bulbs planted in the lawn. Groups of 15 or more can enjoy a guided tour of the lodge gardens with advance reservations.



wobbling soon passes and we spend 90 enjoyable minutes exploring quiet, poplar-lined roads, passing English-style manors and deer farms. At the Raspberry Farm cafe down the road from Otahuna I buy a big box of strawberries for the kids to assuage the mother guilt. **1.20pm:** We reluctantly head back to Christchurch airport, thinking how nice it would be to talk about the day's events with our new friends over dinner. But that would mean another 10km bike ride to work off all that fabulous food.

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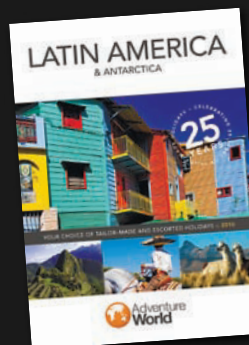
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TERMS & CONDITIONS: *Prices are correct as of 15 MAR 2010 and are subject to change without notice. Prices shown are based on low season per person twin share and do not include airfares.