

# Touring the scenic south island

By *Caroline Tapp-McDougall*

## Otuhuna Lodge

On a fly-drive tour of New Zealand's South Island, we found three distinctly different places to hang our hats. The most formal, Otuhuna Lodge, is a British colonial estate that's been lovingly restored by its new owners to its former grandeur, paying homage to the past in a traditional way. Blanket Bay, on the other hand, is a remote timber lodge, built from scratch on the shore of Lake Wakatipu by the Tusher family. It boasts dark log beams, reclaimed mat-

erials and the solitude and natural beauty of mountain peaks and nearby sheep farms. Matakauri Lodge is fresh and chic, oozing with natural light, modern furnishings and bold, bright colours. Closer to town, it's the stylish urban dwellers' version of a country escape.

### Otuhuna Lodge

In 2005, two big-city Americans, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, were looking for a dramatic lifestyle change. In

Otuhuna Lodge, they found just what they were after. The lodge, one of New Zealand's largest and most historically significant residences, needed some tender loving care but the pair were, it seems, up for the challenge.

#### A storied past

Built in the late 1800s, the lodge was originally the much-coveted home of politician and philanthropist Sir Heaton Rhodes, who lived there for more than 60 years. After his death,





however, the lodge experienced a myriad of unfortunate owners and became, we understand, in dire need of extensive structural and cosmetic renovations. When Cannon and Refo acquired the building in the mid 2000s, there was, according to the pair, lots to be done both inside and out.

#### A labour of love

The duo took up residence and worked at the grand old lodge for six months to get the lay of the land. They then

commissioned respected New Zealand interior designer Stephen Cashmore to restore the estate's seven suites and common areas in the spirit of its unique British colonial heritage.

Once 5,000 acres, the Cannon-Refo estate now sits on a still-respectable 30 acres, where more than 20,000 trees and thousands upon thousands of daffodils have been planted. Head gardener Steve Macham was hired by the new owners and tasked with rebuilding the ornamental lake, replanting hundreds

of plants and fruit trees, and overseeing the transformation of the once-fragrant gardens to their former glory.

#### Cloistered in comfort

Inspired by the native flora, the soothing mint-green Botanical Suite, where we are happily ensconced for a few nights, has a lovely high ceiling, a wood-burning fireplace with gingerbread woodwork and an elaborately carved bay window overlooking the lush gardens.





Photo: Otahuna Lodge

The to-die-for bathroom just across the wardrobed hall is worth the price of an overnight stay all on its own. Who would want to leave a sumptuous soaker tub like this? (Perhaps “breakfast in the bath” might be in order.) An exterior door that leads to the pool and gardens makes the suite even more private.

### Starring Chef Jimmy

It's quickly clear that food and wine take centre stage at Otahuna, with Chef Jimmy McIntyre drawing on the lodge's heritage as a farm-to-fork self-sustaining estate. His uncluttered, honest flavours and unique seasonal pairings pay homage to the 120 varieties of organic estate-grown fruits and vegetables. Even the eggs come from an onsite chicken coup.

Delightful house-made preserves, fresh-baked bread and pastries make even breakfast a celebration. The setting is itself a cause for joy, with the

meal served family-style at a lavishly long table buffet in the sunny kitchen.

And, each evening, following cocktails in the drawing room, we're invited to join the lodge's other guests in the baronial grandeur of the rich, dark-wood-panelled dining room, which seats 16. We can also dine alone in the library, wine cellar or octagonal turret, but meeting the other residents is half the fun.

### Unique pairings

Each night of our stay this past October, Chef Jimmy's menu consisted of five small, exquisitely interesting courses matched with the finest New Zealand wines as recommended by a local wine expert...nothing short of spectacular. The dinner menu one evening, for example, gave us the chance to taste and enjoy: A smooth green-pea soup with hot smoked salmon, slow-roasted tomato and mint paired with a Milton

Opou Riesling. He followed that with Otahuna's very own prosciutto with buffalo mozzarella, pear and asparagus, paired with a Hawke's Bay 2011 Clearview Pinot Gris. That night's main—an estate lamb served with gratin potato, spring vegetables and tapenade salsa—came with a 2011 Wooing Tree “Beetle Juice” Pinot Noir from Central Otago.

Dessert, a light and flakey Granny Smith apple strudel with sorbet and a homemade wafer, was paired with a Marlborough Fromm Spätlese Riesling from 2011. And, not to be forgotten, a grand finale of local OMG brie with apple jelly.

### Even better than before?

Wandering through the glorious gardens, rambling rhododendron woodlands and pastoral glades beyond the frog pond, sheep and potager garden, it's hard to imagine anything but perfection here. The grace of yesteryear, the stately yet relaxing charm of the owners and the pleasures of the present come together beautifully to create a new oasis of tranquility that truly deserves the coveted, modern-day Relais & Chateau designation.

Otahuna Lodge is located in Canterbury at the head of a secluded valley on New Zealand's South Island, a 25-minute drive from Christchurch International Airport (CHC). Heli-transfers can take you back and forth to the airport, and you can leave directly from the lawns for an extraordinary helicopter excursion into the Southern Alps.

[www.otahuna.co.nz](http://www.otahuna.co.nz)

## Blanket Bay

Blanket Bay takes its name from the pioneer farmers who, a century ago, sheared their sheep on the shores of the bay under rough shelters made of blankets.

### A haven of solitude

It's just 12 minutes by helicopter from the airport—or, for us, 25 long but spectacular miles by road—before we reach Blanket Bay Lodge. This particular piece of paradise is owned by Tom and



Photo: Otahuna Lodge



Pauline Tusher; the couple bought the perfectly positioned plot on the shores of Lake Wakatipu in 1972, when they were based in Australia for business.

Over the years, the Tushers tell us, they thought a lot about building an awe-inspiring guest lodge and private residence beside the lake. It wasn't until 1997, however, when the last leg of the Queenstown–Glenorchy road was completed, that their dream began to take shape under the direction of American architect Jim McLaughlin. (The New Zealand firm Archimedia designed the chalets and the owners' residence.)



Photo: Matakauri Lodge



Photo: Blanket Bay Lodge

### Recycling, NZ style

Concerned with the impact of the construction on the pristine piece of land, which boasts stellar views of the surrounding mountains, the Tushers decided to use local and reclaimed materials and pay careful attention to sustainable development practices. They tell stories of rescuing the lodge's beams (made of jarrah, an Australian hardwood brought into New Zealand in the mid 1800s) from retired train bridges throughout the South Island. The rafters were once sections of a wharf on the Brisbane River, and the floors are New Zealand



Photo: Blanket Bay Lodge

hardwood planks that started out as old woodsheds. The rest of the timber is Tasmanian oak.

Over cocktails, there are further tales of how more than 2000 tons of local schist rock was transported and crafted by 12 stone masons during the two and a half years it took to build the amazing complex.

Today, but a few years later, the award-winning lodge is one of the most in-demand "once in a lifetime" places to stay in New Zealand. The five sumptuously furnished rooms and seven private chalet suites have super-king beds, oversized sink-into sofas and chairs, massive bathrooms and, best of all, lovely walk-out patios with breathtaking views. Public areas are designed on a grand scale, but we feel like we have the place to ourselves. Reading by the picture windows in the Great Room or dining à la carte by the fireplace are extremely pleasant ways to enjoy a stormy NZ day.

[www.blanketbay.com](http://www.blanketbay.com)

## Matakauri Lodge

Matakauri Lodge, on New Zealand's South Island, is the newest sister property to Kauri Cliffs and The Farm at Cape Kidnappers. Like Blanket Bay, Matakauri is perfectly situated on Lake Wakatipu with equally remarkable views of the mountain range, but it's a tad closer to civilization and the local airport.

A small, elegant hotel with fresh and light interiors by acclaimed designer Victoria Fisher, Matakauri was re-designed and re-opened in 2010.



Photo: Matakauri Lodge

Our spacious accommodations are bold, contemporary and unlike either of the other properties we've stayed at on our New Zealand tour. Our suite in the main lodge is bright, open and colourful, and comes with an open fireplace and decent-size private porch. A separate hallway leads to the dressing room, walk-in closet and bathroom, which showcases the view with floor-to-ceiling windows beside a fabulous soaker tub. The main lodge has just three suites. Other accommodations are in a few charming outlying cottages and, new this year, the Owner's Cottage.

Boasting fine food and wine, with several options for either cozy indoor or refreshing outdoor dining, this special Relais & Chateau property attracts both locals and resident guests for dinner.

Off-site adventure specialists provide the opportunity to hike, fish, jet boat or heli-ski, which nicely complement time spent at Matakauri's mini day spa and gym. The refreshing views, comfortable lounge areas and swimming pool make for a relaxing afternoon before we head home. ■

[www.matakauri.co.nz](http://www.matakauri.co.nz)