

PRODIGIOUS
PANORAMA
Lyttelton Harbour
from the top of the
Port Hills near
Christchurch

ABOVE, AND BEYOND

SPECTACULAR LANDSCAPES, ABUNDANT
ACTIVITIES, SATIATING CUISINE, FINE
WINE AND GRACIOUS, ENGAGING
HOSPITALITY MAKE NEW ZEALAND'S
SOUTH ISLAND A MUST-VISIT.

By Beth Weitzman | Photography by Sara Hanna

Given the distance between the United States and New Zealand—approximately 12 to 24 hours of travel time, depending on starting point, destination and layovers—everything about the island country, including a wide scope of adventurous sidelines, makes the journey to reach its stunning shores beyond worthy.

Because winter in the States is summer in New Zealand, the prospect of a sojourn to the Southern Hemisphere during our cold winter months is all that much more enticing. While I had heard that at least two weeks (or more) is needed to make the long haul worthwhile, photographer Sara Hanna and I are slated for an enjoyable seven nights in Christchurch and Queenstown, two South Island areas separated by a quick domestic flight.

Topping a long list of wonders is the landscape (astounding at every turn) and warm, genuine hospitality (the kindness of New Zealanders is like nothing I've previously experienced). Called Kiwis, they greatly respect their homeland (which explains why it is so clean and well cared for) and one another. They work hard to readily enjoy their free time, which includes nearly endless sporting and leisure pursuits, produced in part by an abundance of clean, fresh air. Warm days give way to winery tours; evening brings a sea of brilliant stars under which to laze and linger at a cafe, chatting up locals. And for foodies, especially lamb-lovers and locavores, the fare is tantalizing.

Stay longer if you can, but don't let the prospect of one week in New Zealand stop you from one of the most amazing vacations of your life. Go anyway.

DAYS 1 - 5

THE DESTINATION Canterbury, Christchurch and surrounding areas

THE HOTEL Otahuna Lodge, a Relais & Châteaux property, Christchurch, New Zealand

A CANTERBURY TALE

If you're familiar with Christchurch, it's likely you've either been there or know its name from the news, where it made headlines after devastating earthquakes (in September 2010 and February 2011) left New Zealand's second-largest city, and surrounding Canterbury Plains, in ruins and eternally transformed its landscape. But the disaster didn't shake the awe-inspiring Kiwis, whose passion and adoration for their home city has continued unabated. As soon as the dust settled, in fact, one of the largest urban rebuild projects undertaken in the country's history began—one involving radical new design plans, a church built from cardboard and Re:START (an award-winning, open-air city mall comprised of shops set inside overhauled shipping containers painted a bevy of bright colors).

About 20 minutes outside Christchurch, at the head of a secluded valley, is Otahuna Lodge (otahuna.co.nz), a Relais & Châteaux property offering a customized New Zealand lodge experience. Fully restored after receiving its fair share of the earthquake damage that rocked Christchurch, the historic property—originally built in 1895 as the private residence for New

Zealand politician and philanthropist Sir Heaton Rhodes—is now a luxury lodge an hour south of Waipara, one of the country's hottest wine regions, best known for its pinot noir and riesling. It is also the largest privately owned, heritage-listed house in New Zealand, widely celebrated for its Queen Anne architecture.

Scattered throughout Otahuna's 30 acres—pastoral surrounds against the fluted cone of an ancient volcano—are winding paths, the Great Lawn, large trees and woodlands, a daffodil field, a thriving half-acre vegetable and herb garden, and a fruit and nut tree orchard, as well as a greenhouse, lake, swimming pool and wine cellar. So magnificent is this sprawl, New Zealand Gardens Trust recognized it as A Garden of National Significance in 2010.

Otahuna owners Hall Cannon and Miles Refo greet us like old friends. On a visit to the area in 2005, these New Yorkers were so enamored with the property and its commanding views of the Southern Alps and Canterbury Plains, that they purchased the estate and began a multiyear process of restoring the century-old grounds.

Although a buyout of intimate Otahuna is an option, it's engaging to meet up with

other savvy travelers, their names etched in a guest book in the lobby, itself a beauty with hunter green walls, Rimu paneling, leather furnishings and a crackling fireplace (one of 15 wood-burning total chimney spots throughout). It all calls forth a refined sense of casually elegant ambience that pays homage to its rich history and founding owner.

ROOMS WITH A VIEW

A hand-carved Kauri staircase leads from the main level to the second floor, with five uniquely designed bedroom suites. Each boasts 19th century architectural details (such as original and ornate wood-burning fireplaces, carved inglenooks and stained-glass windows), as well as newer additions (sheepskin rugs, custom-made linens and Wi-Fi). Luck finds me luxuriating in the Rhodes Suite, the largest of the accommodations, and originally Sir Rhodes' bedroom. Spanning approximately 1,100 square feet, the resting spot is comprised of four

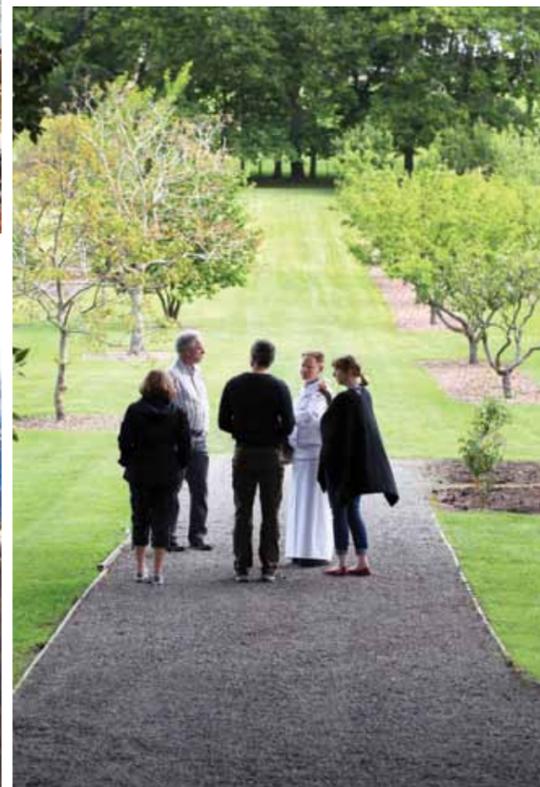


ONCE IN A LIFETIME

Clockwise from top left: Otahuna Lodge owners Hall Cannon and Miles Refo during an outing to Mt. Somers Station via helicopter; mushroom varieties are just some of the more than 100 herbs and vegetables grown at the lodge; view of the lodge on the helicopter's descent; chef McIntyre picking vegetables for dinner in the garden; the restored, but very authentic, dining room at the lodge; beef carpaccio with microgreens and cheese sprinklings.



AN EXPERIENCE LIKE NO OTHER Clockwise from left: Perfectly folded and wrapped clean laundry; Otahuna Lodge's entry hall and sitting area; the front of Otahuna Lodge; Executive Chef Jimmy McIntyre with guests entering the vast garden area; snow-dusted Southern Alps, as seen from the helicopter tour of the area.



rooms within. The grandiose bedroom flaunts a majestic Victorian fireplace with inglenook seating, while a separate octagonal sitting area is situated in the turret. These join a distinct, well-lit study, and a large white-tiled bathroom with a marble double vanity, dreamy spa tub and glass-enclosed rainhead showers. Just off the bedroom is a screened-in porch with table and chairs for sipping Champagne.

The 1,000-square-foot Verandah Suite features a 30-foot-long terrace with large white rocking chairs, fireplaces in both the bedroom and bathroom, and embroidered Colefax & Fowler draperies, adding romantic élan to Sir Rhodes' former guest room, believed to have hosted King George VI upon his visit to the property in 1927. Of the 700-square-foot options, the Butler Suite boasts original artwork with scenes from the Canterbury region in its separate bedroom and living areas, along with two bathrooms and a fireplace, while the Polo Suite is an ode to Sir Rhodes' passion for its namesake sport, playing out in classic leathers, houndstooth fabrics and oak furniture, with fireplaces in both the bedroom and roomy bathroom. The Polo Suite's prime location at the front of the house overlooks a courtyard and the Great Lawn.

At 600 square feet, the Clark Suite dazzles with expansive stained-glass windows,

Brunswick & Fils fabric and original oil paintings, as well as its own spa tub. The Garret Suite, slightly more spacious with 800 square feet and tucked away up another flight of stairs in the former attic, houses evidence of Sir Rhodes' outdoor enthusiasms, with fishing and hunting memorabilia lining wood-paneled walls. Back down on the ground floor, the Botanical Suite offers direct garden access and, inside, touts a floor-to-ceiling mantle made of gingerbread woodwork and a large bay window offering verdant vistas. Throughout all the guest rooms and common areas is the owners' private art collection, including major works from renowned New Zealand artists, making it the most important in the country.

FEAST FOR THE SENSES

Our inaugural evening meal—a daily five-course dinner that, along with breakfast, is included in the room rate—is a congenial affair, with first-name greetings all around. The routine this night, and for the few that follow, find us gathering for predinner canapés and drinks in the Drawing Room, before moving into the opulent formal dining room, replete with wood paneling, original wallpaper and a roaring fire. (A private table on the estate is often arranged for more intimate meals.) Atop the perfectly verdant table are wine

glasses that will hold New Zealand wine pairings from the regions of Martinborough, Canterbury, Hawke's Bay, Central Otago and, my personal favorite, Marlborough. All are delicious, with delectable courses by Executive Chef Jimmy McIntyre.

Otahuna's culinary program utilizes what is grown on-property, plus sources from nearby farms—an ethos with a celebrated reputation furthered by pristine service. Highlights of this particular dinner include Denver leg of venison with potato fondant; Otahuna spring vegetables and peach chutney; and lime leaf, lemongrass, ginger and coconut pudding with passion-fruit sorbet and mango salad.

Beckoning us from bed each morning is a come-as-you-are breakfast served family-style in the kitchen. Fresh baked breads, locally farmed yogurt, made-to-order eggs (from the coop out back), hand-cut bacon and house-cured prosciutto are enjoyed, along with specialty dishes and fresh brewed coffee.

All the while, staff master-crafts various once-in-a-lifetime experiences. For us, this means a cooking class with chef McIntyre. Trailing the toque to the garden, we handpick garden produce to use in a meal, for which the chef supplies step-by-step instructions, while we, wine in hand, of course, take mental notes.



DAY TRIPS

Off-property journeys are varied, but each avail insider's perspective courtesy of Otahuna's preferred partner, Canterbury Guiding Company (canterburyguides.com), and its proprietor, David Hiatt, also our ace tour guide. One of our excursions takes us an hour away to the tiny waterfront village Akaroa, the only original French settlement in New Zealand. Here, we meet Craig Rhodes (and tour dog Murph), from Akaroa Dolphins (akaroadolphins.co.nz), for a private harbor cruise through the heart of an extinct volcano (its drowned crater, now called Akaroa Harbour, is one of two large craters making up Banks Peninsula in the South Island of New Zealand). Awed by the amazing sea life, we spot everything from the Hector's dolphins (the world's rarest type) swimming near our boat to sunbathing fur seals to petite blue penguins basking on crater walls. Also joining our flock are five species of birds.

Later Hiatt delivers us to

Fishermen's Bay Garden, a historical private residence of local artist Jill Simpson and her husband, Richard, open to visitors from November to April. Perched high above the Pacific Ocean, the views here, and in an impressive terraced garden filled with a variety of both native and imported plants, are unreal—as is Simpson's artwork, which we glimpse before sitting down to lunch by chef McIntyre.

The next day our exploits continue though the view-laden heart of the Canterbury high country. Here is a profusion of sheep (New Zealand is home to approximately 60 million, making them a presence basically everywhere) at Mt. Somers Station, a 10,000-acre family-run sheep station. Owned by David and Kate Acland, it's one of the country's largest such enterprises. (Hiatt's longtime friendship with Mr. Acland scores us an invite.)

Soon enough, we're touring the vast property via Jeeps, ogling upward of 20,000 lambs and 5,000 deer. As if we're old friends, the Aclands open the doors of their main home to us for another chef McIntyre-prepared lunch and wine pairings from Kate's winery, Sugar Loaf, in Rapaura, the heart of the Marlborough wine-growing region—exactly the type of experience exclusive to Canterbury Guiding Company and Otahuna.

Then, after a 40-minute helicopter ride over the snow-dusted Southern Alps, we're back at the lodge. I enter my suite to find the previous day's laundry cleaned, perfectly folded and wrapped in a basket. After today's excursion, those that preceded it and, now, this homecoming, the prospect of saying goodbye is a difficult one, but is soothed by farewell drinks and another fabulous dinner.

Come morning, we do say goodbye, but not without pondering how anything else could possibly compare.

OUT AND ABOUT

Clockwise from top left: The Akaroa waterfront; Canterbury Guiding Company's proprietor, David Hiatt; part of the large craters that make up the Banks Peninsula; fresh salmon salad prepared by chef McIntyre; up close with a Hector's dolphin; tour dog Murph aboard Akaroa Dolphins; a lovely lunch at Mt. Somers Station featuring Sugar Loaf wine; fur seals perched on a crater; a mother lamb with its baby trotting around at Mt. Somers Station.

DAYS 5-8

THE DESTINATION Queenstown, New Zealand

THE HOTELS The Spire Hotel and Matakauri Lodge, a Relais & Châteaux property, Queenstown, New Zealand

Queenstown rates as one of the world's top destinations and after a quick flight delivers us here, it's obvious why. Beauty abounds, from gorgeous, spreading lakes to snow-crested mountains. Situated in the Southern Alps, on the shores of Lake Wakatipu, a vast assortment of attractions and activities, both audacious and mainstream, calls travelers year-round. Together with five-star accommodations, seemingly infinite shopping, award-winning food and wine, happening nightlife and always-affable hospitality, Queenstown is a royally good time.

NATURAL WONDER

Supporting all this adventure are enviable seasons—summer days are hot and dry; night brings bright skies. Queenstown's brilliant and much ballyhooed red and gold hues define autumn, while an expanse of crisp, clear-blue sky and powder-dusted peaks make winter here pleasurable. Spring, meanwhile, retains the snow, but arrives with longer, warmer days and bold blooms to alter the landscape.

Naturally, this gorgeous alpine backdrop has spawned a hotbed of active happenings among the boundless doings, all of which add to Queenstown's allure as the Birthplace of Adventure Tourism. Take part in scenic flights, tandem hang gliding and paragliding; various on-land undertakings, such as backcountry treks; and robust heart-racers, like heli-biking. These and other sporting outings (top-notch

golf is a headliner with many choice courses) join ever-popular commercial jet boating and bungee jumping (known as bungee stateside)—both birthed in Queenstown.

CROWNING GLORIES

Wanting to experience some of this for ourselves, we eagerly arrive at the center of Queenstown, a historic precinct hosting The Spire Hotel (thespirehotel.com), a boutique hotel doing its very best to impress. The family-owned operation, run by sisters Lucy and Amelia Gain, quickly delivers on service. Once warmly welcomed, we're ushered to an intimate lobby, featuring a reception/concierge desk and large living-room space spotlighting leather seating, a fireplace, and books and magazines for guest perusal.

But we don't stay. Soon, an elevator ride is whisking us to our rooms. All 10 of the hotel's stylishly spacious guest accommodations are contemporized with urbane flair and luxe touches, including ambient lighting and sumptuous linens. The surrounds, which include technological connectivity for today's family of

gadgets, highlight modernist decor, nice-size bathrooms with double vanities, stone-clad fireplaces and furnished balconies. For traveling families, four of the rooms are configurable with two twin beds, but all spaces can connect with at least one other room; some, to two.

Because of The Spire's middle-of-town status, no car is needed to access hundreds of nearby restos, bars and boutiques. These, plus the waterfront and loads of activities, are all within walking distance of its front doors.

Naturally, we take advantage, starting with a short saunter to the buzzed-about Botswana Butchery, a Good Group restaurant (goodgroup.co.nz) concept with dining room and alfresco seating facing the waterfront. The quirky, modern setting takes shape with interior and exterior wood-burning fireplaces; a large bar and lounge area; and an extensive menu offering a variety of meat, seafood and an array of unique salads, sandwiches and specialty dishes.

Our agenda then leads us to the Skyline Gondola (skyline.co.nz), where we reach Bob's Peak, its viewing deck revealing far-reaching panoramas. This entertainment center offers



LIVING IT UP

Clockwise from top left: Queenstown shines at night; a mod guest accommodation at The Spire Hotel; Leeston pork belly salad with chili mango sauce, cherry tomatoes, coriander, toasted coconut and spring onions at No5 Church Lane at The Spire; an overview shot of Queenstown; the Milford Sound; Cigar martini at No5; inside Seletti boutique.





HOW SWEET IT IS

Clockwise from top left: Carrick Pinot Noir; Chard Farm Vineyard's pet baby goat; Milford Sound; the Chard Farm Vineyard; a waterfront guest suite at Matakauri Lodge; wild Fiordland venison with dauphinoise potato, carrot, zucchini and water cress garnish prepared by Group Executive Chef Dale Gartland at Matakauri Lodge.

biking trails in the Queenstown Bike Park, Kiwi Haka Maori culture performances, stargazing and more. From here, we decide to scope the sartorially savvy shopping scene, steeped in both local and luxury labels—carried at the likes of Angel Divine (angeldivine.co.nz) and Seletti Boutique (selettiboutique.co).

Dinner is back at The Spire, home to the hip No5 Church Lane—itself something stylish. With innovative cocktails and an extensive wine list, the large bar serves as a gathering spot for locals and visitors alike, with a Thai fusion menu featuring favorites like classic tom yum soup and Leeston pork belly salad with chilli mango sauce, cherry tomatoes, coriander, toasted coconut and spring onions.

GRAND CENTRAL

More tastes are on the docket the next day, when a private insider's tour with high-end outfitter Black ZQN (blackzqn.com) taxis us through the stunning Central Otago wine region in a Mercedes sedan (its fleet also includes rides from Bentley, Range Rover and BMW). Our guide for the day, Grant Banhidi, not only knows his way around, but also the past and present lowdown on Queenstown. While the focus of the tour is wineries, we do stake temporary claims at the side of a bridge for a peek at the popular Shotover Jet, a thrilling boat ride

through the Shotover River canyons, and one of many bungy-jumping outlooks in these parts.

We soon arrive in Central Otago, the world's southernmost wine-growing region, at a latitude of 45 degrees south. Although most celebrated for its pinot noir, which accounts for approximately 70 percent of all plantings, varietals such as chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, riesling, gewürztraminer and pinot gris also have roots in the appellation. Seasons (hot, arid summers and cool autumns), in combination with shaly soil, make for exceptional grape-growing conditions that have resulted in winning vintages from 200 wineries. Included in these is the Central Otago Pinot Noir, now with a world-class rep.

Our first stop is Chard Farm Vineyard (chardfarm.co.nz). Offering an array of the region's varieties, Chard claims both vineyard and a farm, the latter of which started as a market garden for the Chard family in the 1860s. At Brennan Vineyards (brennanwines.com), which took home the 2013 Champion Red Wine award for its B2 Pinot Noir 2011 at the International Wine Challenge, we sample more tastings, before landing at Carrick winery and terrace restaurant (carrick.co.nz). Here, a lovely cheese platter with honeycomb, semidried nectarine and fig precedes entrees of potato gnocchi with roast

beetroot, vineyard herbs and goat cheese, and a duck duo on sauteed potatoes, all washed down with Carrick Sauvignon Blanc.

TASTE BUDS

A quick swing back to The Spire, and there is just a short time before we're all eating again—this time at Rātā (ratadining.co.nz), launched by partners Josh Emmett, a Michelin star-rated chef, and Fleur Caulton, a highly regarded local restaurateur. Taking inspiration from the southern landscape and that which encapsulates New Zealand, the cuisine is high-quality and innovative, complemented by impeccable service in a relaxed, neighborhood atmosphere. Comprised of an open dining room, bar and patio, the design perfectly epitomizes the owners' vision. Light-wooded tables and chairs, along with oversize Otago greenery on the back wall and locally polished stone accents, provide an earthy feel that meshes well with modern industrial components of concrete, glass and steel.

The environs are the perfect counterpart for Emmett's slow-cooked dishes and robust flavors. The Southland cheese roll with truffle and burnt onion salt proves a delicious starter, as does the seared Northland kingfish with daikon, saffron and mussels. The main courses—Havoc pork cheeks and roasted belly

with cauliflower and cider apple, and green pea risotto—are sheer perfection. The same can be said of the wine, a varied list of highly regarded and little-known gems showcasing the Otago region, greater New Zealand and beyond.

SKY HIGHS

Perhaps because “beyond” is clearly on the horizon, the thought of our upcoming escapade—a flyover to cruise the iconic Milford Sound the next day—thrills us all. After arriving at the small local airport for our flight, with both ground and air transportation provided by Milford Sound Scenic Flight Ltd. (milfordflights.co.nz), the flight between Queenstown and Milford is simply stunning, with the landscape a haven of glacial lakes, waterfalls, deep valleys and cloud-piercing summits. At Milford Sound, we board a spacious boat and take in with equal amazement the cascades of falling water and dramatic Mitre Peak. We also see seals and penguins, but no dolphins this time, though sightings of the creatures are common.

BOUTIQUE CHIC

We spend our last day in Queenstown at the magnificent Matakauri

Lodge (matakauri.co.nz), another Relais & Châteaux property with popular sister hotels in Kauri Cliffs and Cape Kidnappers, and a dream location right on Lake Wakatipu. Facing the Cecil and Walter Peak mountain ranges, its orientation provides unsurpassed points of observation, and the same can be said of the hospitality and cuisine, which is absolutely top-notch.

Completely renovated in 2010 by acclaimed New Zealand interior designer Virginia Fisher, Matakauri has us on the guest register for just one night, so we waste no time exploring the remarkable boutique hotel, with only four luxury suites, seven villas and one guest room. Ensnconed in one of the suites peppered along the water, the natural light-filled space makes the lakes and peaks within its sight range all the more eye-popping when viewed through floor-to-ceiling glass. A private porch, bedroom with sitting area and crackling fireplace elicits even more reaction, and the bathroom is also pretty remarkable, with skylights suspended overhead, a sizable tub (with more views, naturally) and glass-enclosed shower. All suites have the comforts of home, including high-speed wireless Internet and related connectivity, along with a complimentary (excluding beer and wine) fully stocked minibar. With the room rate

also comes breakfast, predinner drinks with hors d'oeuvres, and a three-course a la carte dinner.

Nesting in any point of refuge here is sublime, but coming in 2014 is another fine option in the four-bedroom Matakauri Owner's Cottage. Accommodating up to eight guests (and rentable as a two- or four-bedroom space), it is designed with families and groups in mind, dazzling all occupants with uninterrupted

water and mountain vistas, while coddling them with a spacious living room, kitchen, dining room and study. Outside these quarters will be a courtyard area with barbecue and cooking facilities, should a private chef be called upon to helm dine-in services.

The main lodge, meanwhile, is poised to remain a popular gathering place for guests. Located inside are a bar, and a living and library area for a relaxing pre- and post-meal lounge; indoor, outdoor and private dining options; and customary, but never ordinary, outlooks. And, just off this main lodge is the infinity pool area and full-service luxury spa. We settle in rather quickly with cocktails in the living room, before sitting down to dinner in the main dining room. While it's not at all stuffy, men are asked to don jackets, a request which sets a nice tone for Group Executive Chef Dale Gartland's elegant and delicious modern New Zealand cuisine. Three meals are served here, but the dinner menu rotates daily and is always a showcase of the latest in local seasonal produce and freshly caught fish. Favorites include the North Island snapper with braised fennel and snow peas, and the wild Fiordland venison with dauphinoise potato, carrot, zucchini and water cress garnish. Each course goes down smoothly, with a variety of local New Zealand wine pairings. A lovely cheese assortment with fruit and crackers is followed by an even sweeter finish of the Valrhona Chocolate tart with Hokey Pokey ice cream, salt caramel sauce and cocoa nib tuile. If that isn't enough, out comes a tray of petit fours to cap the entire meal.

After dinner, a walk is in order, and we're in the perfect spot to soak in everything in our midst—and appreciate all that we've seen. As the cover of nightfall finds us dipping in the pool under a blanket of illuminating stars, nothing, not even this night, or morning's delectable breakfast and bittersweet farewells, can outshine New Zealand—the brightest of all. ☒



NATURE AT ITS BEST

Clockwise from top left: The pool at Matakauri Lodge glows under the moonlight; cloud-piercing summits en route to the Milford Sound via plane; an epic morning at Matakauri Lodge; green pea risotto at Rātā; the dining room at Matakauri Lodge is perched over the water with surreal views.

