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A slice of 'Downton Abbey' good life in New Zealand

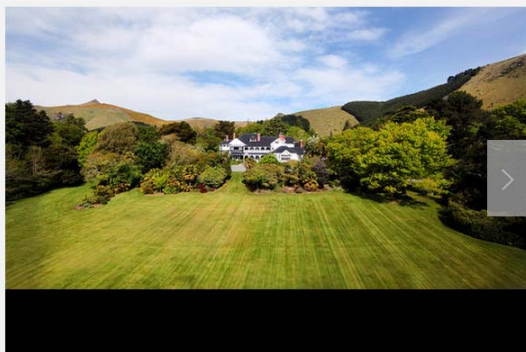
The attentive service at Otahuna Lodge in Tai Tapu, New Zealand, will have you feeling like you've stepped into 'Downton Abbey.'

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By Amanda Jones
October 13, 2013

TAI TAPU, New Zealand — Can you imagine a scene in which you turn into the oak-shaded driveway of a grand country estate, pull up outside the manor house and are greeted by a row of staff standing at attention? The car door is opened, bags and vehicle are whisked off by capable hands and the head steward asks, "Madam, may I draw you a bath?"

Of course you can, especially if you're a "Downton Abbey" devotee like me. You may not get blue-eyed Matthew fawning over you or have a lady's maid to up-do your hair, but a stay at New Zealand's five-star Otahuna Lodge will give you a tantalizing taste of landed gentry living.

FOR THE RECORD:

Otahuna Lodge: In the Oct. 13 Travel section, an article about Otahuna Lodge in New Zealand said that the Prince of Wales left behind a piano when he visited in 1920. The Duke of York, later King George VI, stayed at Otahuna in 1927 and left the piano.

In March, I traveled to Canterbury on New Zealand's South Island with my mother, whose quick wit and sarcasm resemble that of Violet Crawley, the dowager countess of Grantham. We spent three glorious nights at Otahuna having our baths drawn, being served tea and cake on the porch, swimming in a pool fit for an Evelyn Waugh novel and sipping Champagne promptly at 7 p.m. We also got to say things to the steward such as, "I'm off to dress, Ben. I'll be down for cocktails in time."

Although Otahuna is 120 years old — a figure at which Lord Grantham would sniff — it is one of New Zealand's oldest grand homes, built by the son of one of the country's earliest white settlers. In 1895, Heaton Rhodes, a distinguished lawyer and politician, built his home in Tai Tapu, a small farming village in what is now a 30-minute drive outside of Christchurch on New Zealand's South Island. Otahuna, meaning "little hill among the hills" in the native Maori language, was designed in the Queen Anne style, with pretty, mildly eccentric, meandering architecture, high ceilings and walls of the country's rich native timbers.

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In 2005, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, New Yorkers seeking a change of pace, were exploring the world looking for their next abode when they came across Otahuna. They'd fallen for the "grand and extraordinary beauty of New Zealand" and its "almost weirdly honest and easygoing people," as Cannon describes them, and the two decided to purchase the house, which had been languishing as a mid-range hotel. "The historic gardens were hopelessly overgrown, I mean lost completely in some cases," Refo said. "It was a crying shame. Not much had bloomed since the 1950s."

The two — Cannon's background is in Manhattan loft development and Refo's in marketing — had never considered hospitality, but the house "was crying out to be reawakened, brought back to its former glory and shared," Cannon said. They hired a local architect and remade the house into something fit for haute luxury. After a thumbs-up from Relais & Châteaux, an organization that sets standards for small luxury hotels, they opened the genteel doors in 2007, then closed them again after the devastating 2011 earthquake damaged several of the six chimneys. Repairs and upgrades were made, and the hotel reopened in 2012.

Now there are seven lavish suites, all with a roaring fireplace and paneled or wallpapered walls hung with original artwork. The dining room has been restored to its late 19th century glory, with the original European gilt wallpaper intact and a long table set with silver for elegant, amusing dinners with Cannon and Refo.

We spent an inordinate amount of time at this table eating what I consider the finest food in New Zealand, and I, a Kiwi, have tasted much of it. One of the most celebrated aspects of Otahuna is its chef, Jimmy McIntyre. McIntyre, who had traveled the world cooking in top-notch kitchens, missed home and returned to Canterbury, finding his way to the fertile, serene Otahuna Lodge.

Each night guests are served hors d'oeuvres in the living room beside a piano said to have been left by the Prince of Wales (who became King George VI, of "The King's Speech" repute) when he visited in 1920. Following, we are escorted to the candle-embazoned dining table and served a five-course degustation meal.

The menu is seasonal and farm-to-fork. Almost all vegetables are grown from heritage seeds on the property. McIntyre also cures his own prosciutto, makes his own sausage, raises hens for eggs and grows exotic mushrooms. Guests can wander the garden picking produce for the nightly gourmet extravaganza.

The once 5,000-acre estate now sits on a manageable 30 acres of reinvigorated formal hedgerow gardens, vegetable rows, an extensive potager, historic daffodil fields, native New Zealand trees, orchards and several outbuildings, including the old stable, the cheese house (now a gym), the game cellar (a wine cellar) and the mushroom house.

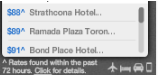
Between breakfast in the sunlit kitchen and dinner in the formal dining room, we ventured out to see the bucolic countryside of Canterbury, known as the bread basket of New Zealand. We had asked Otahuna to arrange these outings, and it had booked David Hiatt of Canterbury Guiding Co. Canterbury Guiding offers private activities such as wine and cheese tastings, helicopter tours, nature hikes, coastal trips and a tour of Christchurch (which is being rebuilt after the earthquake).

It also offers the chance to experience a high-country station, as they are known in Canterbury, a large and mildly alpine sheep or cattle ranch.

Hiatt arrived at 9 a.m., loaded McIntyre's lavishly packed picnic basket into the trunk and drove us for two hours through gorgeous rolling green countryside to High Peak Station. After meeting the Guilds, the sophisticated station owners, in their lovely homestead, my mother was driven, and I hiked, to the station's backcountry hut for lunch.

A classically Kiwi feature, these huts are built on large properties for overnight stays while droving or hunting. They are small, basic (no running water) and ridiculously romantic and cozy.

Simon Guild, son of the owners of the 5,000-acre station, takes two types of visitors onto the property: those wanting to experience New Zealand's famed rural life and serious hunters who fly in from all over the world to track deer, chamois, Arapawa sheep and wild boar in a private setting.



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While my mother and I sat sipping a crisp Marlborough Pinot Gris, Hiatt and Guild rustled up more additions to the picnic basket — local Akaroa salmon, homegrown salad greens and grilled cervena, or venison, raised on the station. It was a genuine experience, with no roughing it involved. It seems that even the farmers in Canterbury lead the landed gentry life.

The following day we were driven to the Banks Peninsula and the tiny coastal town of Akaroa. After wandering through its shops, we took an Akaroa Dolphins boat cruise on the harbor to see the rare, diminutive and exceedingly playful Hector's dolphins. The captain's second in command was literally a salty dog.

A Russell terrier, Murphy can hear the dolphins before humans can see them. If you follow his mad dashes around the boat and stand above him as he barks out to sea, you'll be on top of the pod when it arrives at the boat. If it didn't sound anthropomorphic, I'd swear he calls to them.

Returning to Otahuna at the gilded hour of sunset, I swept down the stairs and announced, "Ben, please let my mother know I'm going to walk the woodland trail. I'll be ready for canapés at 7."

I believe I might make an excellent Lady Mary Crawley.

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