



ESCAPE

A city reborn, a journey remembered – discovering south island sophistication in Christchurch

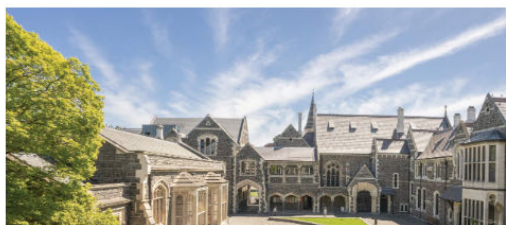
6.00

By Caroline Phillips

Christchurch is still being rebuilt after the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes – the vast new stadium that now dominates the skyline only opened this year – but far from feeling like a city in recovery, it pulses with a vibrancy that belies its population of under half a million. Compact enough to explore on foot (a rarity worth celebrating), it packs in serious culture, the wild green expanse of Canterbury on its doorstep, and other must-see landscapes within an hour or two's drive. Think of it as New Zealand's great urban surprise.

WHERE TO STAY:

Christchurch has become rather adept at resurrection. Nowhere is that more evident than at The Observatory Hotel, the design-led boutique property tucked inside the restored Gothic Revival buildings of the city's celebrated Arts Centre, Te Matatiki Toi Ora. This was the only building in the entire precinct to collapse completely in the city's devastating earthquake in February 2011. Reopened four years ago after a decade-long, £125 million-ish restoration of the whole complex, it has emerged as one of Christchurch's chicest addresses.





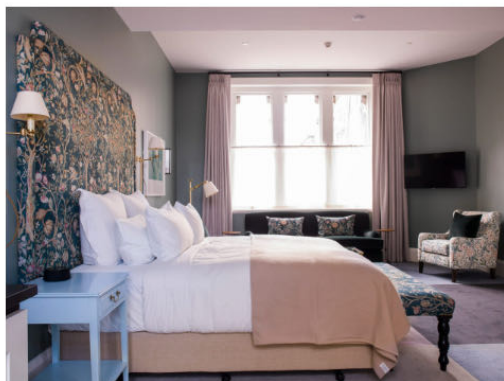
The hotel occupies the former Physics and Observatory buildings of what was once Canterbury College – the very corridors where a young Ernest Rutherford pottered about before going off to split the atom. (He's on the hundred dollar bill here. Of course he is). Its location is part of the appeal: a short stroll from Hagley Park – Christchurch's vast Victorian green lung, famed for its Botanic Gardens, Avon River punts, and distinctly English atmosphere – as well as the city's best galleries, restaurants and cultural attractions.

Guests enter via stone steps to the glorious sound of grand pianos drifting across the quadrangle: University of Canterbury music students practising in subterranean rooms. Once inside, the mood shifts to one of calm.



Philip Aldridge is the head honcho of The Arts Centre and made many of the decorative decisions for the hotel, working alongside local designer Jessica Close. She created interiors that channel Soho House meets Kit Kemp with a New Zealand accent. William Morris wallpapers have been recoloured by Ben Pentreath (of Dumfries House renown) in combinations that would make Morris himself either faint or applaud. (The palette is Resene – the Kiwi answer to Farrow & Ball – applied in vivid shades of malachite, smoky green and clementine orange). The 33 bedrooms are individually designed, each boasting works by New Zealand artists. (Scan the accompanying QR code to buy, natch). The bespoke patchwork Axminster carpets, pieced together like modern textile art, are a stroke of genius. Then there are the oversized upholstered bedheads, lacquered bedside tables, and other locally crafted furniture: everything made by Canterbury artisans.

The effect is part private members' club, and part Oxbridge college, made comfortable with an added sprinkling of eccentric aristocratic townhouse. Service has the sort of warmth that elevates a stay. The Observatory feels symbolic of modern Christchurch: creative, resilient and unexpectedly sophisticated.



WHAT TO SEE AND DO:

You don't really need to leave the immediate vicinity of the hotel – and that's not laziness; it's geography. The School of Music and the Tece Museum of Classical Antiquities are seconds away, while the hotel's own Observatory Tower houses a museum dedicated to the creation story of Ngāi Tahu, the Māori iwi of the South Island. Just outside the hotel entrance stands architect Benjamin Mountfort's 19th century Clock Tower, the first building completed at Canterbury College, and the one that established the Gothic Revival character of the whole site. Think Pugin with a pioneer spirit.

All of this sits within Te Matatiki Toi Ora, The Arts Centre. It deserves a good gawp. A charitable organisation occupying New Zealand's largest collection of heritage buildings, it's home to galleries showcasing local work, boutique artisan retailers, and a gloriously Art Deco-themed cinema that scooped best in Australasia and landed on Time Out's world list – the sort of place that makes you want to see anything, just to sit in the room. Meanwhile, nearby is the Canterbury Museum; a short stroll takes you to Hagley Park, its Botanic Gardens and the willow-draped Avon River.



Christchurch wears its earthquake story openly but without self-pity. Quake City, a compact museum recording the seismic events of 2010 and 2011, balances the science with stories of heroism and hope. Christ Church Cathedral was left abandoned for a decade – 2.5 tonnes of pigeon poop had to be shovelled out before anyone could assess the damage – and is still awaiting funds for reconstruction, propped up by steel supports like a grand old dame in a surgical brace. At the Christchurch Art Gallery, which served as the city's civil defence centre in the aftermath, the words "Everything Is Going to Be Alright" now blaze in neon across its façade. It's the city's defiant full stop.

New Zealanders are big readers, and Tūranga, the central library by Schmidt Hammer Lassen, is proof of civic ambition: you can play an electric piano silently while wearing headphones, have a game of chess, or lose yourself in a brilliantly interactive digital wall charting the city's history. Nearby, The Court Theatre (the country's largest theatre company) and the Isaac Theatre Royal – the latter retaining its original façade post-quake, and looking all the more poignant for it – anchor a theatre scene that punches well above its weight.



For a taste of Little England, there are the clubs. The Canterbury Club, originally opened in late 1872, was the departure point for Antarctic expeditions – Shackleton dined here and signed his menu; Scott passed through too. A clock stopped by the February 2011 earthquake remains frozen at 12.51. Officers' Club medals are displayed in the lobby, and they sell jams made from members' fruit – which is about as perfectly provincial as it gets. Then there's the Christchurch Club – billiards room, everything named after the Old Country. Canterbury is twinned with its own nostalgia.

Grab a walk along The Strip beside the Avon for eels in the water, punting on it, and birds on the banks. Then take a tram along Worcester Boulevard for wood-clad 1870s houses in picture-postcard

colours, with a museum at one end and the cathedral at the other. Whatever you do, you're never far from The Observatory Hotel's door.



Head further afield – use the hotel as base camp and strike out. Ōhinetahi in Governors Bay makes for a gentle first outing: a homestead with 19th century colonial charm, a garden that reminds you why gardens make people happy, plus sculptures and a woodland trail. Akaroa and Banks Peninsula, just 26 miles away, is nature's playground: a peninsula formed by the eruption of the Akaroa volcano, reached via a gorgeous drive that follows a river, meanders up to the crater rim for the view, then drops you back down to the harbour.

Arthur's Pass National Park, 68 miles out, serves up snow-capped peaks. Hanmer Springs, at 71 miles, is a beautiful alpine village surrounded by exotic forest. Kaikōura – a 95-mile adventure – is an idyllic seaside township where the mountains meet the Pacific, with whales and dolphins to prove it. Go further still and there's Aoraki Mount Cook for glaciers, blue ice, and the thrill of landing on one in a little plane.



Then there's the train. Not just any old train. *The Train*. Consider doing the great traverse of the Southern Alps: the TranzAlpine links Christchurch on the Pacific with Greymouth on the Tasman Sea in a spectacular four-and-a-half-hour crossing. After the alluvial Canterbury Plains, the track rises steadily, hugging river valleys and crossing dramatic Arthur's Pass before descending through podocarp forest and past Lake Brunner to the western coast.

Keep your eyes peeled for the kea – the world's only alpine parrot, famously cheeky and alarmingly clever. If you're feeling flush, opt for a 17-day journey combining the Northern Explorer, Coastal Pacific and TranzAlpine. Otherwise take the Coastal Pacific. It's one of the greatest train journeys in the world, and offers quite enough gob-smacking scenery for several lifetimes.





WHAT TO BUY:

You'd be hard-pressed to find a better chocolate store than She Chocolaterie at Riverside Market with its heroes' gallery of awards lining the wall and handcrafted choccies. Don't leave without an open sesame baton and choc-rolled cacao beans, and, and, and... You may even get a taster of their (sooo decadent) hot chocolate, for which it's worth crossing the ocean.

Go to Shopology in Riverside for NZ products including Untouched World for its merino-mink, merino-possum and silk knitwear – worn by Clinton, Obama and Prince Harry. Then there's Cashel Street, regarded by many in the city as the smartest road in Christchurch, which boasts Ballantynes, the country's last great department store and privately owned by the Ballantyne family.



WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK:

It's a hop and a skip from The Observatory Hotel to the Quad Eatery for classroom chairs and sparrows hopping through the windows to inspect your crumbs, plus great matcha, smiley service and delicious scrambled eggs and smoked salmon. (Breakfast can also be delivered to your hotel room). The Arts Centre's Cellar Door – named Australasia's Best Wine Bar by World of Fine Wine – is reason alone to linger in the quad past sundown.

Just a stroll away, The Church is a converted 1875 Trinity Congregational church turned buzzy pub, organ pipes intact behind the bar. Next door, Paddy McNaughton's occupies the historic Shand's Emporium, a wooden building physically relocated after the quake and reborn as a proper Irish ale house. Riverside Market gathers Vietnamese, Argentine and boysenberry ice-cream under one artisanal roof.

You may bump into The Arts Centre's aforementioned Philip Aldridge at any of these places, but most likely at the Quad Eatery. A former actor, he first earned his stripes resurrecting Christchurch's cultural life as head of The Court Theatre in the grim post-earthquake years, while everyone else was clearing rubble and dealing with sewage. He may regale you with stories of his encounters with the likes of Miriam Margolyes and JP Donleavy – and what could make a meal more fun?



HOW TO GET AROUND

HOW TO GET AROUND:

Road-tripping across Aotearoa may appeal to your inner hippy, but if the reality of a campervan – and emptying a mobile loo, plus steep fines for parking wherever you fancy – is too much, just drive a car. Book one from Omega Rental Cars, an independent Kiwi-owned company that's been at it since 1992. Think unlimited mileage, 24-hour roadside assistance and free additional drivers.

Omega has motorsport in its DNA: founders Andrew Brown and Simon Sceats originally bought the business from Scott Dixon's father, who needed the funds to back his son's nascent racing career. (Dixon went on to become a six-time IndyCar champ). Sceats, a two-time NZ Production Car Champion who remains as managing director, has since watched his own son Liam win the New Zealand Grand Prix and head Stateside to race Indy NXT. The company is now owned by former Black Cap Adam Parore, and it shows – honest, reliable and not a whiff of corporate rental-car dreariness. Vroom, vroom.



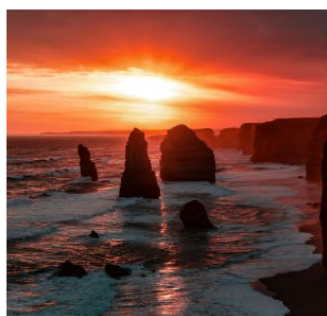
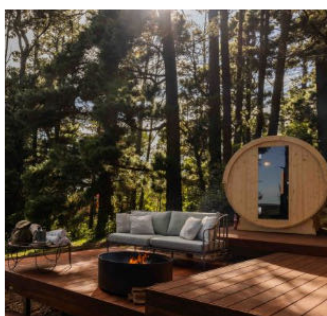
FURTHER INFORMATION:

To make a reservation at the Observatory Hotel, go to: www.observatoryhotel.co.nz. For more information about how to travel by rail, go to: www.greatjourneysnz.com. To find out more about She Chocolaterie, go to: www.sheuniverse.co.nz. To book a rental car, go to: www.omegarentalcars.com.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

[CHRISTCHURCH](#)[GOVERNORS BAY](#)[NEW ZEALAND](#)[PARROTS](#)[TRAVEL](#)[WILDLIFE](#)

Ready for more?





ESCAPE 2 . 30

Escape to Osborn House – the coveted countryside retreat in Australia redefining boutique luxury



WELLBEING 2 . 00

Why following your travel bucket list should be a yearly goal



CULTURE NATURAL ELEMENTS 4 . 39

Join David Yarrow for a journey to the edge of the world



EPICUREAN 25 . 24

Delve into the seductive world of all things chocolate

Subscribe for More

ENTER YOUR FIRST NAME

