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# Life & Leisure

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## This swim with dolphins is worth more than a three-hour flight

*“Christchurch? Why would you go there?” ask those who prefer Queenstown and Auckland. Here’s a drawcard that can be found underwater.*

**Lucas Baird** [[/by/lucas-baird-h18hts](#)] *Reporter*

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I can't, at first, make out the blur that speeds past me beneath the surf. Then it's gone. Whatever it was, it would have been no more than five metres away, but in the hazy ocean water south of Kaikōura – an idyllic coastal town two hours north of Christchurch in New Zealand – all I had made out was a white strip running the full six-foot length of the creature's underside.

Suddenly, it swims past again, closer this time, revealing itself as a dusky dolphin – one of almost 300 in Gooch Bay on this early spring morning (or so our tour guide estimates).



Nothing beats swimming with hundreds of dolphins in Gooch Bay, off Kaikōura.

The half-dozen people still on the small double-decker boat behind me are gasping; the other 15, including me, are still finding our bearings underwater.

The playful animal circles and eyes me curiously; it's close enough to touch now, though we have been drilled not to do that.

"That one's on staff," our boat guide said earlier, as a sleek dolphin flung itself in the air for an acrobatic display. "Just please don't touch them – they're wild, and their skin is really soft. As soft as the human eye, so we need to protect them."

Dusky dolphins are a breed unique to the coastal waters of the Southern Hemisphere, and are mainly found around New Zealand, Southern Australia, south-western Africa and South America. Slightly shorter than a common dolphin, they weigh in at about 85 kilograms and get their name from the dim patterning atop their bodies.



Dolphin-watching is a photographer's dream, should you not wish to explore beneath the waves.

The experience is the most magical of my 3½-day whirlwind visit to New Zealand's South Island – a trip sponsored by Emirates to spruik the return of its [Sydney-Christchurch direct route](https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5e3l1) earlier this year, [\[https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5e3l1\]](https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5e3l1) so the itinerary centres on the offerings of Christchurch and the broader Canterbury region. "Why go to Christchurch?" my colleagues had chorused beforehand. Many might say, fair call.

It seems Emirates asked the same question: the itinerary it put together is a knock-out, with stays at Flock Hill Lodge, a lunch and garden tour at Otahuna Lodge, and air boating in the shallow depths of the Waimakariri River. Meals are mostly private affairs with specialist chefs at our lodges, but there's also a trip down Christchurch's trendy Regent Street for dinner and drinks at one of the city's most popular restaurants, Twenty Seven Steps. There are wineries, vineyards and a chilled-out punting tour along the city's Avon River.

Christchurch has long been overshadowed by its more tourism-attractive cousins, Auckland and Queenstown. But after my relaxing stay here –

finishing with the spectacular experience at Kaikōura, where the water surface is two kilometres above the floor of a deep-sea canyon that holds one of the world's most productive ecosystems – I return to flood my cynical colleagues with photos of my trip. Nothing like proving the naysayers wrong.



Orcas take the cake on a perfect morning.

My mini-break began earlier this month with a morning departure from Sydney on Emirates' EK412 service from Dubai.

Flying into Christchurch is something of a novelty on a huge Airbus A380, where there is no such thing as a highrise – the height of new buildings was capped at five storeys post the deadly 2010 earthquake. The town is now home to more than 389,300 people, and much of it has been rebuilt [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/the-second-coming-of-christchurch-20221031-p5budo>] over the intervening 20 years.

A scenic 75-minute drive takes me to my accommodation for the first night – the glitzy Flock Hill Station Lodge [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/this-remote-14-6m-nz-lodge-is-a-magnet-for-celebrities-20230418-p5dlhg>] amid the Southern Alps range (you can also travel by chopper). The drive takes in agrarian fields dotted with farm animals and crops, rolling green hills, rocky outcrops, and magnificent mountain passes.



Flock Hill Lodge includes a heated lap pool with views of the Southern Alps. **Dean MacKenzie**

Soon enough, the climb to the lodge yields a stunning view of Lake Pearson, glistening blue in a valley between two mountain peaks. Sheep and cattle pepper its 14,570 hectares which, along with the lodge, will soon house a restaurant and a set of lakeside lodges for cosy couple stays. Although Flock Hill opened earlier this year, these lodges and the restaurant are due for completion in 2024.

My room is in the main four-bedroom hillside homestead. The north-facing side of the building is all windows, boasting a panoramic view of the valley below, while a white-tiled deck includes a fire pit, hot spa and pool.



Chef Craig Martin preparing meals at Flock Hill Lodge in New Zealand. **Dean MacKenzie**

The interior goes heavy on pine; the ceilings are high, and the bedrooms spacious, all with en-suites. As well as the guest rooms, dining room and kitchen, there are two separate entertainment areas for watching movies, reading, or just gazing at that view.

After lunch – a rack of station-grown lamb, local fish and beef, all cooked by the on-site chef – I hop into one of the worker's utes for a ride to the

shallow river that snakes through the property, its grassy banks glowing in the orange sunset hue. Even the chilly gusts of a South Island spring wind aren't enough to break the trance induced by the Alpine scenery.



NZ greenlipped mussels, Wakame, and ponzu at Flock Hill, cooked by Craig Martin.

The next morning marks a return to Christchurch for the second night, stopping along the way at the colonial estate of Otahuna Lodge, where then Prince Charles and Camilla stayed in 2019. Owners Miles Refo and Hall Cannon have ensured it has a suitably regal feel.

Built in 1895, its interior features pale brown carpeting paired with darkly lacquered woodwork on the stairs and support beams, offset with walls papered in green. A media colleague jokes that it feels like a recreation of Thrushcross Grange, the Yorkshire farmhouse in *Wuthering Heights*.



Otahuna is fit for royalty – just ask King Charles.

It's a relatively quiet second night at the Mayfair in central Christchurch. The city has plenty to offer – alive as it is with galleries, fine dining, plus a vibrant café culture. But we turn in early because, well, this is New Zealand: it's invariably an early start for bike tours, boat rides, and the drive to Kaikōura for our third and final night (in a Sudima hotel).



Kaikōura is an idyllic setting for relaxation, walking or swimming with dolphins.

The full-monty adventure tourist might find this region a tad mellow. Bungy jumping isn't on our itinerary, nor white-water rafting. But for anyone who loves the outdoors and alpine splendour, it's the perfect place for unwinding.

And when you're ready for adventure, just dive into the sea with 300 dolphins.

*The writer travelled courtesy of Emirates.*

## Need to know

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- ◆ Encounter Kaikōura | Offers whale-watching flights, albatross encounters, and dolphin-watching/swimming tours; +64 3 319 6777, or [dolphinencounter.co.nz](https://www.dolphinencounter.co.nz) [<https://www.dolphinencounter.co.nz>]. Dolphin swims cost \$NZ230 (\$212) for an adult.
- ◆ Flock Hill Lodge | Offers hikes, caving, stargazing and other outdoor activities; for lodge reservations email Andrew Cullen on [acullen@flockhillnz.com](mailto:acullen@flockhillnz.com); [<mailto:acullen@flockhillnz.com>] a stay at the four-bedroom lodge for up to eight people costs from \$NZ9200 to \$NZ22,425 (\$8466 to \$20,636) depending on the season.
- ◆ Otahuna | A 25-minute drive from Christchurch. Stay includes breakfast, a four-course dinner and canapés.
- ◆ Accommodation in the manor starts at \$NZ2300 a night, but Otahuna also offers three-day inclusive packages from \$NZ9400.
- ◆ Fly | Emirates flight EK413 flies to Christchurch from Sydney once a day, seven days a week. Premium economy priced from about \$959 return. Those up the front can enjoy the Manaia Lounge on the way home – open to Qantas, Emirates, Fiji Airways, China Southern Airlines, Cathay Pacific and Jetstar passengers at Christchurch Airport.

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- ◆ **Try a \$14,385 helicopter trip at Queenstown's latest luxury lodge** [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/try-a-14-385-helicopter-trip-at-queenstown-s-latest-luxury-lodge-20230711-p5dnh7>] The team at Lodge Lorient offers a series of top-drawer adventures that make the most of a ruggedly beautiful part of the world.
- ◆ **\$780 for a round of golf? You'll certainly never forget it** [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/780-for-a-round-of-golf-you-ll-certainly-never-forget-it-20221222-p5c8ee>] New Zealand has so many fabulous golf courses, it could be referred to as the land of the long white bunker. And in fact not all of them are pricey. Here are eight of the best.
- ◆ **New Byron Bay resort a lesson in how to do hippie luxe well** [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/new-byron-bay-resort-a-lesson-in-how-to-do-hippie-luxe-well-20230905-p5e263>] A collective of friends from the design, fashion and hospitality worlds have created a "kind of nature-shrouded adult playground, with all the luxury touches".
- ◆ **An insider's guide to travelling in Greece** [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/an-insider-s-guide-to-travelling-in-greece-20230824-p5dz4b>] Athens born and bred orchestral conductor Zoe Zeniodi goes home whenever her schedule allows. Here are her personal favourite places to dine and explore.
- ◆ **The quick and the dead: a Botswana safari in the heart of the action** [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/this-botswana-safari-camp-offers-luxury-in-the-bush-20230719-p5dpl3>] A wildlife adventure in Africa's Okavango Delta combines all the action of an Attenborough documentary with a choice of bush-camp comforts.
- ◆ **For a dose of reality, take a walking tour in Israel** [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/for-a-dose-of-reality-take-a-walking-tour-in-israel-20230622-p5dimf>] A guided expedition helps to demystify this complex and fascinating part of the world.



**Lucas Baird**

*Reporter*

Lucas Baird is a journalist based in The Australian Financial Review's Sydney office. *Connect with Lucas on [Twitter](#). Email Lucas at [lucas.baird@afr.com](mailto:lucas.baird@afr.com)*