

# the great alone

Heavenly views, fine food, luxury accommodation and a peninsula to roam is all part of the Annandale experience, just over an hour from Christchurch.

Words Yvonne Martin







The charming Shepherd's Cottage

Christchurch is cloaked in a foggy grey trench coat as we leave the city limits and join the conga line of traffic heading to the genteel French calm of Akaroa.

Although well past noon, the Little River Cafe is frenetic as we slide into one of the last tables to enjoy sausage rolls and samosas. The art gallery next door, a popular stop on the drive to Akaroa, is as busy as a suburban mall on a wet Sunday.

On this day, we're saying "non" to Akaroa and "oui" to a short break in the relatively obscure Pigeon Bay. We turn off at Hilltop, and enjoy the meandering rural road through uncharted territory, with sweeping views of Banks Peninsula's farmland and harbours.

The small coastal enclave of Pigeon Bay is abuzz today, with the local boating club running a regatta in the superbly sheltered harbour. A flotilla of mixed sailboats is battling it out on the water. It looks happily haphazard to the untrained eye, but we get swept up in the bonhomie of the enthusiastic supporters on the jetty as if we're in San Diego or San Francisco.

Just a few metres along the shoreline are the Annandale homestead and farm, our destination for the night. The property's luxury villa accommodation has graced many global travel and architectural

magazines, but we are staying in the more modest Shepherd's Cottage, poised high on a hill overlooking the ocean.

Annandale's general manager Lyndsay Jobin welcomes and escorts us along a gravel track with a steep drop-off to the turquoise waters of Pigeon Bay. Annandale's guests often arrive by helicopter or are driven to their accommodation in the farm's four-wheel-drive vehicle. Our battered Toyota Surf is up to the job, but Lyndsay stops at one of the farm gates en route to gauge the state of our nerves. We give her the thumbs up.

Being the passenger gives me a chance to survey the bone-dry savannah, coastal walk tracks and the way the land plummets into the bay, allowing partner Neill to focus on keeping us topside.

It takes a good half-hour to reach the charming cottage, drop off our bags, and pile into Lyndsay's vehicle to visit the neighbouring villas, far grander in scale, location and, it follows, price.

The genius eye of Auckland architect Andrew Patterson, known for creating some of the country's sharpest contemporary buildings, has nailed this piece of peninsula paradise. After restoring the 1884 Annandale homestead – a former hotel originally built by the Hay family – he went on to outdo himself with buildings on

the northern reaches of the 1600-hectare property.

A 10-minute drive from the cottage, Seascape is an ultra-modern concrete and glass hideaway set into a hillside, with a turf roof for camouflage and a cinematic view of Whitehead Bay. It feels slightly surreal that a place of such cutting-edge architecture, with a hot tub and outdoor gas fireplace on the deck, exists in splendid isolation. It is the honeymoon suite, but for me, personally, it is more razor-sharp than cosy. Privacy, it has in hectares.

Dropping down the hill into neighbouring Scrubby Bay, the home of the same name blends beautifully into its stark location. It is two gabled forms, side by side, wrapped in a cedar skin, with a pool on one side and a swimming beach on the other. There are wafts from the home's macrocarpa linings as we enter the cathedral-like lounge, which has at its centre a fireplace and chimney made of stone from the farm. Sliding walls there and in the bedrooms can be rolled back on a sizzling Canterbury day, so the house becomes a giant tent for the up to three families who can stay here. Rugs at both villas are made from Annandale wool.

Mark Palmer, a Kiwi property developer based in the United States, bought





Annandale in 2005 and set about restoring and improving the property as an escape for his family and others. He splits his time between Texas and his Banks Peninsula haven. So, where does he choose to stay on his visits, I ask?

"Wherever he likes," Lyndsay says.

Back at the one-bedroom cottage, we soak up the rustic and homely ambience while enjoying welcome snacks of kumara chips, toasted brazil nuts, blue cheese on crackers and Central Otago dried apricots.

The pitched roof was raised to convert the century-old cottage into a double-storey building, with a bedroom in the rafters and living quarters downstairs. Despite luxury new touches, it retains the spirit of a shepherd's cottage.

Shepherds' names carved on the fireplace and marks on the floorboards are part of the patina of the cottage's early life. Mod cons, such as the fridge and dishwasher, have been hidden behind wooden facades. Pleasingly, at least for one of us, no TV is to be found. The wooden furniture is chunky and full of character, with soft, cream wool throws and cushions. An outdoor clawfoot bath, complete with a pottle of pink bath salts, is calling my name.

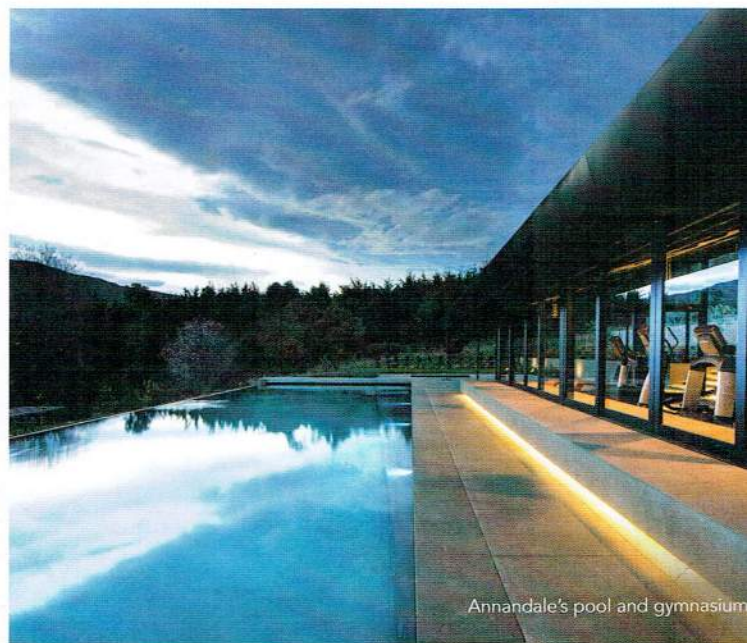
I momentarily question the wisdom of leaving behind the understated luxury of the cottage to go riding the mountainbikes

we have carted from home. But my partner is not wired to be still, we could do with some exercise to build up an appetite for a special dinner tonight, and a vast, idyllic property is ours to explore.

We jump on the bikes and enjoy the freedom of roaming the property at will. The only instructions we have are to avoid the bulls (fortunately, they stand out in a herd) and leave all gates as they're found. By the time we've whizzed downhill to Scrubby Bay and I've tacked my way back up the zig-zag track, an hour and a half has passed. Guests can also do farm tours, nature cruises, fishing charters, cooking classes and sea kayaking, but we're loving doing very little.

Back at the cottage, Neill's steamy shower sets off the smoke alarm. The wailing makes it hard to think, but we block our ears and search desperately for the alarm. We eventually spy it, painted dark brown to blend with the wooden ceiling, and switch it off. Relief – now we can get on with the business of relaxing and eating.

"We create, you serve" is a concept that works brilliantly, considering the cottage is half an hour from Annandale's headquarters. It means food is pre-cooked by the experts (Lyndsay's husband Paul is the private chef) and placed in the







A luxury villa at scenic Scrubby Bay.

fridge. That leaves guests to do some basic re-heating and assembly (even the sauce bottles come with instructions) and voila, a five-star dinner.

For me, whose favourite appliance is a toastie maker, this is home cooking at its best and as convenient as takeaways. I heat through the beetroot and shallot tarts (still managing to burn the tops) and serve them on Temuka plates with spheres of goat cheese coated in crispy quinoa, beetroot chips, wild watercress and a salad of fresh peas and broad beans from Annandale's heritage garden. Neill, busy relaxing elsewhere, hasn't seen how quickly this entree is pulled together, so I take the credit and slip out the side door to enjoy the outdoor tub between courses.

The main course is a master stroke, if I say so myself. Annandale 30-hour cooked lamb shoulder (warmed in 15 minutes) and roasted jersey benne potatoes (warmed in the final five minutes), served with carrot ginger puree (warmed and smeared on the side of the dish as suggested) and two salads. I'm tossing around the matching vinaigrettes and jus like a pro – it's the closest I'll ever come to a Michelin star. It's fun and, with few other distractions, there is time to faff around in the kitchen. My roasted pumpkin terrine is assembled just as easily.

We wash the dishes in the sink, as using the dishwasher doesn't seem right. Later, a coconut milk panna cotta and lychee sorbet dessert, which only needs a drizzle of lemongrass syrup, completes our meal.

We relax into sad, middle-age pursuits; Neill plays electronic scrabble on his phone (there's Spark service but no wi-fi), while, from a library of books, I read about the history of Annandale. As far back as the 1840s, Annandale – situated on what was the main overland track from Akaroa to Lyttelton – was rarely without guests. Up to eight schooners were often anchored in the bay, so the Hays, a hardy Scots family, built a guesthouse to accommodate the growing number of tourists.

It's eerily quiet and dark outside; the kind of dark you only

get in the country, but clouds obscure what promises to be a bright starry sky. The closest we get is seeing the lights blazing on a ship waiting to enter Lyttelton Harbour. We climb the steps to the bedroom in the eaves and fall into a deep sleep, only mildly conscious of possum calls and the occasional thud on the roof.

Next morning, we wake to the "ardle wardle doodle" of magpies and a peep of the Kaikoura Ranges crowning tawny paddocks and a French grey ocean. Gentle rain on the roof washes away any ambitions of a second ride or a run, and we head downstairs to breakfast, which is a smorgasbord of meats, eggs, spinach, breads, muesli and fresh fruit. Neill fires up the fry pan and opts for full English, while I choose grains and fruit, with delicious homemade yoghurt and black boy peach preserve from Annandale's heritage orchard. We make the effort to crank up the espresso machine.

Stepping outside, we find a furry night visitor has been busy while we slept. It has trashed the artistic wood pile on the veranda and tried its best to break into and eat the pink grapefruit and rose bath crystals. We tidy up so our hosts don't think it was us.

On the return journey to the Annandale homestead, it feels as though we have stayed for several days, not just an overnighter. We take a quick tour of the gracious homestead, which is impossibly elegant, yet has a relaxed formality.

Sprawling lawns beneath an old elm tree, an old rock fernery, heritage trees, a lily pond and a large edible garden extend from the homestead. A modern gymnasium and pool complete the mix of old and new. For those hiring the homestead, all these facilities are theirs for the time they are in residence.

For us, time in the Shepherd's Cottage on the tussocky knoll overlooking the sea, with fine food, an outdoor bath and only a wayward possum for company, has been luxury enough. *A*

*Yvonne's stay was hosted by Annandale.*