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Review: The Observatory Hotel in Christchurch

Three historic university buildings have been converted into an art-focused hotel after being badly damaged in the city's earthquakes.

By ALEXANDRA CARLTON

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Chic, modern hotels filled with wall-to-wall mod cons and luxuries will never lose their allure, but there's something a little more enriching, a touch more soulful, about staying in a converted heritage building that seamlessly draws you, literally and figuratively, into a destination's history.

There's a true sense of place when checking into Christchurch's [The Observatory Hotel](#), which opened in 2022 and links a trio of the [Arts Centre Te Matatiki Toi Ora's](#) original Gothic Revivalist university schools.

These are the observatory and biology buildings, which both date from 1896, and the physics building, which opened its doors in 1917. All were severely damaged in

the 2010-2011 [Christchurch](#) earthquakes and the decision was made not only to restore them to their former beauty, but to combine the three and create an art hotel to give the precinct a fresh purpose.

What's most striking when entering through The Observatory's grand wooden doors is how unlike a hotel it actually feels.

At the centre of The Lounge, a large library table is stacked with art books, while magenta and orange sofas and soft curtains give the feel of a rambling and stylish home. Artwork, which is all for sale, comes courtesy of some of New Zealand's most celebrated creatives, such as the neon pink Leigh Martin canvas in the drawing room and the Kirstin Carlin oils near the elevator.

"The buildings were constructed over the course of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Benjamin Mountfort (the original architect) was such a student of that era," says the hotel's interior designer, Jessica Close. "It was born out of a move away from the generic and towards a commitment to handmade."

It's an ethos she's honoured, even going so far as to create completely different colour and furnishing schemes for the 33 rooms and suites.

Each is washed in varying shades of pistachio, eggshell blue and pale pink. If you have a chance to look inside more than one, you'll discover that even the fabric headboards on each bed are unique, featuring revitalised prints from heritage London printmakers Morris & Co. Overall, the proportions of the guestrooms are on the smallish side, dictated by the buildings' architecture, but there are soaring ceilings.

Two Skylight Suites, the Verona and the Lapis, each provides the bonus of gazing up to the vast night sky. There's no proper restaurant on site, but a small anteroom and al fresco terrace have been converted into a brightly lit breakfast space that's laid out daily with a selection of local pastries, cereal and cheese.

The sensitivity to place goes beyond the interiors of the hotel. Entering the South Quad of Christchurch Arts Centre gives an immediate visual representation of the precinct's past, present and future.

The quad is anchored by a giant-girthed copper beech tree, which has stood in its place since at least the early 20th century. Maori artists have used stonework to

create works resembling the welcome mats placed outside marae, or meeting places, to greet honoured guests.

And at the Quad's entrance, a 2.4m-high pyramid of carved Oamaru stone, known as Mason's Cairn, is a tribute to the dozens of local and international masons who worked to restore the precinct after the quakes. It's tempting, too, to delay hotel check-in time and get diverted by many of the Arts Centre's modern businesses tucked into basalt and limestone buildings. There's a cinema, cellar door, cafes and several museums, including the Teece Museum of Classical Antiquities, which is home to a remarkable display of Greek, Roman and Egyptian artefacts.

But perhaps most intriguing of all, be sure to wander the hotel's narrow Axminster carpet-clad hallways and find the winding wooden staircase that leads to the top of the Observatory Tower and its crowning jewel, the Townsend Teece Telescope.

Built in 1864, it fell from its position at the top of the tower during the 2011 quake, but somehow its lens escaped damage.

A team from the University of Canterbury has spent three years on repairs and it's now fully operational again. On clear Friday nights in winter, members of the public can join a stargazing tour hosted by astronomers from the university.

There are also plans to convert an unused room towards the rear of the hotel into an exhibition space that tells the creation story of the Ng i T huriri people of the South Island, a tribe that draws many of its legends from the stars.

There's no question you could stay at more refined and well-appointed hotels in the South Island, perhaps ones that have a better-equipped gym (The Observatory's is tiny and tucked away in a dark lower room) or offer elaborate room service or minibars. The Observatory Hotel is for those who prefer their holidays with heritage and history at their heart.

In the know

Rooms at [The Observatory Hotel](#) from \$NZ259 (\$243) a night. Wi-fi is complimentary and guestrooms are serviced daily. There is no restaurant on site; eateries in the [Arts Centre](#) include Bunsen Cafe, plus Cellar Door for wine tastings.

Alexandra Carlton was a guest of Christchurch NZ.

ALEXANDRA CARLTON, JOURNALIST



Alexandra Carlton has been a journalist for almost 20 years, beginning her career as a news reporter for Who Weekly and going on to feature writing and editing roles at Madison, Marie Claire, Grazia and Kidspot. Sh... [Read more](#)

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