

INSIDE NZ

Capital flair

Peter Calder finds a haven in Wellington.



The view from Ohtel shows how Wellingtonians make the most of their surroundings.

A COUPLE OF days in Wellington always lifts this Aucklanders' spirits. I don't much care if the weather is lousy, since you're never more than a few metres from a cosy cafe or a well-appointed bookstore.

And the place feels like a city rather than a large carpark with houses around the edges, which is what traffic-choked Auckland often seems like. The scale of streetscapes is smaller and more human and the larger new buildings — that unfortunate Te Papa notwithstanding — are nicely integrated with the older ones.

But the visitor with leisure in mind faces the problem that many of Wellington's hotels are aimed at the business market: their bland livery and interior design are the same worldwide. Worse, you're trapped in the canyons of the CBD.

In the capital to catch the superb Rita Angus exhibition, which will be slimmed down by the time it reaches Auckland next year, we booked in to the oddly named and oddly shaped Ohtel, which is tucked in between two of the heritage

wooden houses at the beginning of Oriental Parade.

With a view over the smart Waitangi Park development — they don't make skateboarders criminals here, they make them a feature — and the harbour, it has to be one of the best spots in Wellington to lay your head. Ohtel is a boutique hotel with a difference: the owner designed it, inside and out. And if the building itself — a defiantly asymmetrical assemblage of geometric shapes which gives even the people in some back rooms a piece of the view — doesn't impress you, the interior will.

Alan Blundell, a designer who is new to the hospitality business, is a man of impeccable taste and the detailing of the rooms and the public areas is a delight.

Much of the furniture is by iconic designers — chairs by legendary Danes such as Arne Jacobsen and Finn Juhl are in some rooms and there's a heartbreakingly beautiful bentwood elm dining suite by Ercol in the intimate and comfortable foyer; when you make yourself a cup of tea in your room, you use

60s crockery by Crown Lynn; cushion covers and handsome bed runners are by Rona Ngahuia Osborne, whose Maori-meets-Pakeha designs are part of funky Kingsland design group Native Agent's catalogue.

"I started collecting stuff up a couple of years ago," Blundell says. "I was looking for new furniture and found that it was either pretty crappy or bad copies of older stuff, so it seemed to make sense to get good stuff."

The room designs make the bathrooms part of the space, rather than an adjunct facility. A curtain can close the whole place off if discretion is required but in each, big spa baths are backdropped by wall-size photographs, many by Blundell himself, of unusual but immediately recognisable New Zealand scenes: wharf piles silhouetted against a sunset rather than Mitre Peak.

Ohtel has a commendably green focus: there are separate rubbish and recycling bins in rooms, the water is solar-heated, and double glazing saves energy while



Asymmetrical shapes give you a view even if you're in a back room.

completely muffling traffic noise.

The place's odd name comes from a desire to make a brand that instantly identified the business — no easy task in a field where all the obvious names have long since been snapped up.

The "O" has nautical echoes appropriate to the seaside position — and perhaps to Oriental Parade as well — and the place has already become a familiar part of the cityscape.

Business has been growing steadily since Ohtel opened six months ago. Blundell hasn't made much of an inroad into the business market, and says: "We are aiming more at the leisure market that is looking for a classy boutique sort of experience." Amen to that.

— Peter Calder received a discounted rate at Ohtel, where tariffs start at \$255. Ohtel, 66 Oriental Parade, Wellington, Ph: (04) 803 0600, www.ohtel.com

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