

Hotel

A Victorian splendour

The trouble with luxury is that there's never enough time to enjoy all of its trappings, **Briar Jensen** writes.

AM IN a quandary; there's little time before cocktail hour and I can't decide what to do. I'd love to stroll around the manicured lawns and sniff the iceberg roses, yet I should be working, which I could do on the cosy window seat cushions. But the king-size bed with plush pillows and snugly throws is luring me for a nap. And when am I going to luxuriate in the aromatherapy products in the huge spa bath?

That's the trouble with five-star hotels; you need more than one night to lap up the luxury.

I'm staying at the historic Charlotte Jane, a Victorian-era boutique hotel in Christchurch, New Zealand. From the outside the two-storey building is all ivory and white weatherboard trimmed with green. Inside it's high ceilings, polished timber, tiled fireplaces and plush furnishings, giving a rich, homely warmth. It's like some distant (wealthy) relative's 19th-century residence – you can even smell the furniture polish. Staff are unobtrusively efficient and the hotel immaculately presented.

The building, constructed in 1891,

was originally a private school for young ladies, and was also known as Rangi Ruru, Maori for "wide sky shelter". After extensive restoration and renovations it reopened in 1997 as the Charlotte Jane, named after one of the first ships to bring English settlers to Lyttelton Port.

Located in Merivale, it's within walking distance of the city centre and only a short stroll from expansive Hagley Park and the beautiful botanic gardens surrounding the Avon River.

There are just 12 suites, each individually decorated. The

It's like some distant relative's residence

honeymoon suite, up the grand staircase, features a mahogany four-poster bed and claw-foot bathtub. My suite is elegant, luxurious and huge – I could easily host a cocktail party. There's a gas fireplace, lots of embroidered organza runners, fresh flowers and a selection of current

magazines. Large sash windows, wide open when I arrive, overlook the English-style garden. The absence of screens allows a few flies and one very rowdy blowfly to intrude.

The white tiled bathroom, highlighted with blue, is large, and along with all modern conveniences features white embroidered cotton doilies and a tissue box cover of the kind our great-grandmothers used to make.

There are complimentary juice boxes on the desk, but no mini-bar or tea-making facilities. You help yourself in the well-stocked kitchen down the hall, just like home – OK if you don't mind facing the world in a robe and no make-up for an early morning cuppa, but not very

convenient for desperate middle-of-the-night urges for chilled water after a few too many wines.

I squeeze in a quick tour of the tranquil gardens and some scribbled notes before adjourning to the bar, a joinery masterpiece in rimu that exudes a glowing ambience. It opens



onto a veranda, where I opt to take my complimentary wine and canapes on this warm evening. Framed by wisteria above and white roses below, the veranda overlooks a shady paved courtyard dotted with statues, water features and cosy sitting nooks.

Across the courtyard is 1930s Henderson House, once home to New Zealand painter Dame Louise Henderson, now the hotel's restaurant and conference facilities. The intimate Alexander Lawrence restaurant, named after the captain



of the Charlotte Jane, is housed in a gorgeous glass conservatory and during summer extends outside to the adjacent vine-covered pergola, where I decide to dine after a far-too-quick spa bath. Lit by candles and warmed by an open stone fireplace,



it's a romantic setting for dinner. Executive chef Nico Fini combines the freshest New Zealand produce with French influences. While I was tempted by the escargot and variety of seafood dishes, I chose a hare and pistachio terrine, followed by rack of venison drizzled with blackcurrant sauce. The hotel has its own cellar so there's an extensive choice of local and foreign wines.

Back in my room the curtains are drawn, the bed turned down and the

blowfly gone. There are also two notes; one with tomorrow's weather forecast and the other saying as I was leaving so early the next morning (probably before the chef is out of bed) there would be a breakfast pack waiting for me in the kitchen. A thoughtful and much appreciated gesture in keeping with this esteemed establishment.

The writer was a guest of Christchurch & Canterbury Tourism.



ELEGANT SURROUNDINGS: (from left) A luxury suite in the Charlotte Jane; the Victorian-era exterior; the hotel's extensive cellar.

Exterior picture: BRIAR JENSEN

► TRIP NOTES

- The Charlotte Jane, 110 Papanui Road, Christchurch, New Zealand, phone +3 355 1028 or see www.charlotte-jane.co.nz.
- Luxury suites \$NZ395 (\$347) per night, super luxury suites \$NZ495 per night. Includes New Zealand wines and canapes during cocktail hour, port and sherry after dinner and full gourmet breakfast, as well as free non-alcoholic beverages during reception hours.
- All rooms have TVs and VCRs and there's a cosy library/den housing books and videos as well as a computer, on a kauri desk, with free internet access.