

Reflections on a Hotel in Omarama

Peter Dale 2007

[Author's Note: I wrote this a few years ago but the humour of the experience is still there. Judging by reviews nothing has changed.]

Travellers could be forgiven for thinking Omarama was a flyshit speck on a map. Its existence owes to the junction of the highway through the Mackenzie Country and the highway from Lindis Pass to Oamaru. It is a convenient first, or last, stop for bus tour groups from Christchurch Airport to Queenstown. The Heritage Hotel has sufficient rooms for three tour bus loads. Passengers stay for one long night.

I am staying here because it is the only place available. I am here for three nights.

I am given Room 108. I go up the stairs and enter the room. It is already occupied. There are wine bottles. The bed has been in recent use. I retire and request another room. Unfazed, Sharlene gives me the room next door. Big mistake, which will unfold.

'By the way, if you want dinner you will have to be there before nine o'clock. Want me to book you in?'

Here is what is in Room 107.

- A bed, with clean but tired sheets, stained pillow-cases.
- A Formica side table with two steel legged chairs.
- A clean bathroom, with clean ancient towels. A rubber mat for the bath. A pathetic shower over the bath.
- A large shelf for luggage with anodised aluminium strips around the carpeting, very much the worse for wear.
- Two Arcolite glass mugs upside down on the wooden shelf. Two teaspoons alongside.
- Four 15ml sachets of UHT milk in the fridge. A kettle. Tea and coffee of an unknown brand. Recommend two teabags per Arcolite mug. Use the other for dead tea bags. The mugs are unbreakable.
- A TV, old.
- A grey telephone on the wall.
- A plastic covered letter from Ian Clark, the Manager, fulsomely welcoming me to his hotel. If there is anything we can do for you our helpful team will be only too happy to help you. Just call them.

'Can I help you?'

'Hello, I am in Room 107. I don't seem to be able to find Sky and I am seriously keen on watching the tennis.'

'Oh, sorry we don't have Sky. The owner pulled it out because it was too expensive.'
Country candid.

'Where do you think there might be Sky?'

'The Bar might be showing it.'

I go down to the Restaurant, Bistro and Bar. It has a name something like The Willows, or The Three Petals. It is large. I note there is no Drivers Corner in the Restaurant, but not sufficiently to spark memory of being a driver once myself. Never eat where there are no drivers.

'I was told that Sharlene would book me in for dinner.'

'Yeah, but you'll have to have it in the bar. We're closing. Menu is exactly the same 'cept you can only have the grills on this side of the Menu.'

Fair enough. I go to the bar. It is seeded with Central Europeans. The women are stout and short and are drinking glasses of Guinness. The men are short and balding with pointed noses and are drinking glasses of white wine. They are having an animated time recounting their day's travel in an East European language. I do not know it but they are also talking about their meals. We pay each other no attention. I go to the bar and ask for a menu.

'A menu? It's five to nine!'

'Doris, over in the restaurant said I could order from here.'

Gordon, by his name tag, reluctantly gets me a menu. Points to the right hand side.

'Only those grills. Nothing else.'

'Can I get a beer as well?'

'What sort?'

'Do you have a local beer?'

'There is only one local beer. It's called Speights!' Smirks.

'I guess I will have that then.'

'Nine dollars,' sliding the beer towards me. Nine dollars!

'What about the meal order?'

'Whaddaya fancy?'

'I'll reluctantly have the scotch fillet with garlic butter, and salad.'

'Doris'll bring it to ya. Here's your number.'

I take my number five and my nine dollar beer to the table and have another look at the menu. The steak is \$29.50. Holy shit! It's actual, and it's certainly necessary, but is it reasonable? I'll never get reimbursed for that.

I look around for the Sky TV in anticipation of the Australian Open. No Sky.

Doris brings me my steak, all smiles, a sticking plaster on the thumb she holds my plate with. In her other hand is a steak knife.

'There you go. Want tomato sauce with that?'

I look at my meal.

Earlier in the day the prep team arrived to prepare approximately 120 meals. Here are their three recipes for you to follow to cook scotch fillet, garden fresh salad, garlic butter and chips.

Scotch Fillet

Purchase two dozen scotch fillets from the freezing works. Specify boner beef. The stuff that goes for hamburger meat or cheap mince.

Chill the beef whole.

Slice the meat with a band saw into ¼ inch widths. Put into twenty-kilo bags and place in fridge to thaw.

When grilling, heat meat until edges curl up. This is called rare. For well done heat until meat curls over.

Ensure there is a good glob of fat in the middle of each steak.

Garlic Butter Patties.

Clarify 10 kilos of butter. Drop in 2 litres of crushed garlic (Pak n Save \$3.99)

Mix with wooden ladle that has been used to stir fish soup. While still warm, pour into cake-icing squeezers. Before serving, squeeze a dollop of mix onto middle of steak. Preferably alongside glob of fat.

Garden Salad.

Into a fifty-litre plastic rubbish bin, throw a dozen limp lettuces, washed with plenty of water left on them. Add eighty tomatoes whole. Grate 10 kilos of carrots and throw them in. Slice one onion and throw that in. Toss in a few peas, a tin of beetroot and a leaf of red cabbage for colour.

Get out your burley muncher and stamp the shit out of the mixture until it is chopped into 4mm squares. Set aside by 11 am and leave it whimpering. In the sun is fine.

Chips

On arrival for the day's work deep fry 40kg of Talley's precooked chips. Set aside under the heat lamps. Ensure this is done by midday.

Dressing

Buy 20 litre pack of salad dressing. Dilute with 20 litres of water. Squirt some on the salad at 11am.

Serving

Plonk the steak on a small dinner plate. Squirt some garlic butter in the middle alongside the glob of fat. Heap salad on one side. Cover the rest, including the steak, with a generous helping of chips from the heat lamp area.

Leave for ten minutes.

Serve.

The steak knife is one of those Ginsu Knives you see on daytime television when you have got the 'flu. 'But wait! There's more! Buy now and we will give you two dozen Ginsu Knives for the price of a single knife.' That sort of thing.

This steak knife arrived at the Hotel in 1978, the year the place was built and the last time the rooms were painted. It has a saw action but no cutting power. No matter, as the steak is so thin it pulls apart.

I retire to my room in defeat.

I had forgotten just how banal TV1/2 is. I try to read. Clean teeth and go to bed. The extractor fan in the loo carries on for 22 minutes.

Giggles from next door at 108. Clink of glasses. Oohs and Aahs. Sound of rising passion. Unrestrained. Beyond that.

Not wishing to be a voyeur, I close the window. It is at least 27 degrees and there is, of course, no air conditioning.

After a marathon effort the passion dissipates. I open the window, go to the bathroom for a glass of water, and forgetfully turn on the light. The extractor fan comes on.

Back to bed and wait for it to stop.

Petal, next door, has a shower. She sings. The water drains into a sump outside my window for long after she has gone, hopefully exhausted, to bed.

At 2.23am I get up to go to the loo. Remembering not to turn on the light, thus the fan, I gark my leg on the anodised aluminium luggage shelf on the way. I turn on the light to see if there is any blood. The fan comes on.

Petal wakes up. I close the window again.

At 4.57am the buses start up outside and the drivers bring them to the hard stand to wash them down. The hard stand is outside my window. Passengers are rising, preparing for Friday which must mean Milford Sound.

At 5.13am, Petal is aroused yet again.

A dog barks, roosters crow. At least this bit is like home which suddenly I miss terribly.

Naturally I skip breakfast.

I ask the price of the room. It is \$186. Is this for the three nights? No it is per night. I say this cannot be right. Sharlene checks and comes back. The boss has allowed the gliding people to have the bus rate of \$123. Am I a gliding person? I get the rate.

I have stayed in worse hotels. Oh yes! I have stayed in more expensive hotels. I have stayed in worse and more expensive hotels in Central London and downtown Guangzhou, and Johannesburg (but that included a guard outside my door at night.)

Here is my TripAdvisor rating for the Heritage Hotel Omarama:

Service	nil
Food	rien
Room	nada
Value for money	zero

The Heritage Hotel Omarama is a flyshit speck on a map. It has no redeeming features. I am moving out. Anywhere.

I urge travellers to follow WB Yeats epitaph which is on a lonely road in Connemara. I have seen it. It reads:

‘Cast a cold eye on life: on death. Horsemen pass by.’

Postscript

The nearest accommodation available is in Queenstown. The hotel is the same chain as this one. Stick with the devil you know. At least Petal has moved out.

Omarama is in a very beautiful part of the country. Take my advice, keep looking at it as you pass through. Do not stop.