

Sleeping overnight in the Dunedin Museum of Natural Mystery

Lying in bed at my Dunedin Airbnb, I'm faced with a dilemma that I haven't grappled with since childhood: should I risk walking to the bathroom in the dark? Or should I just give in to my fears and wet the bed?

The essence of my accommodation is pretty stock standard. There's a queen-sized bed, a television, and a bathroom with an Instagram-worthy claw-foot tub.

The problem is that just outside my room, there's also a collection of human skulls, cabinets full of bones, and a gurney from a mental asylum.

I'm spending the night at the Museum of Natural Mystery, a small privately-owned museum in Dunedin Central. Located in an unassuming 1880s Victorian villa, it houses an extensive collection of "biological curiosities, ethnological art, and unusual cultural artefacts."

Curated by artist Bruce Mahalski, it's part of a growing trend of small private museums opening worldwide. Although exact figures are difficult to come by, private museums are now believed to outnumber public institutions globally. According to Larry's List, an art market research company, the vast majority have opened in the last 20 years.

The idea may seem progressive, but its origins are in the 16th century's *Kunstkammer* or "cabinets of curiosities". These private museums were the norm until the 18th century when they were replaced with the public model we're now familiar with.

Mahalski's cabinets of curiosities spread out across three rooms, with a fourth space dedicated to his art. His beautifully intricate sculptures and masks are made, in part, of rabbit and wallaby bones collected from the Waimate Valley.

Bones dominate the other rooms too, but the museum is as much about Dunedin as it is about the artist's own history.

A heap of monarch butterflies from Dunedin butterfly breeder Judy Egerton fills one jar. Moa bones, excavated from a garden by a local homeowner, sit in a display case. A doll, found in Larnach Castle in the 1970s, leans against an Ouija board. Even the skull of Mahalski's "much loved" pet cat, Stockard, is on display.

What sets the museum apart — other than the obvious — is Mahalski's placards. Identifying each object, they're often personal and humorous in nature, particularly if your funny bone comes in a shade of black.

"I love things that look like nothing at all, but when you read the story behind them, they take on a whole new meaning," he says.

Airbnb guests have free reign after closing time, so I plan to spend my night lingering over the exhibits. But when Mahalski leaves, shadows form in the corners. Suddenly, I'm praying that the museum doesn't come to life at night.

Mahalski had assured me that he didn't feel any evidence of a haunting and none of the Airbnb reviews mention anything strange. Heck, Mahalski even has a "superhost" badge.

"Relax," I chide myself. "How can a place that has Netflix be haunted?"

I muster up the nerve to make a cup of tea. Filling the kettle, I gaze out across to Mahalski's garage. On its roof, bones are scattered to dry in the sun — like something from *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, books that I scared myself silly with as a pre-teen. This is where Mahalski's flesh-eating beetles live, the same kind that are used by public museums to pick bones clean for display. Through the window, I see a human skeleton.

I scurry back to my room, only emerging hours later when I determine that wetting the bed isn't a realistic option.

Three months later, I finally return to look through the cabinets again. This time, I bring my partner to hold my hand.

Wandering through the house, objects pop out that I didn't notice on my first visit, like the *nkisi*, a wooden object from the Congo. Mahalski tells me that its brutal-looking exterior — which has been impaled dozens of times over — hides its true nature. Each piece of metal, he explains, is nailed in like a *karakia* (prayer).

"People think that African art is about devil worship, but this has been designed to keep your house safe from witches and bad omens," he says. "It's like a spiritual battery that's been built up to repel evil."

Had I known about the *nkisi*, I might have slept better on my first visit.

As midday light pours in through the windows, I watch my partner pose at the antler selfie station. The Dunedin Museum of Natural Mystery, I realise, isn't about death or things that go bump in the night: it's a testament to life.

There is a presence here, but I can assure you he's very much alive.

Checklist

The Dunedin Museum of Natural Mystery is open Friday to Sunday. Entry is by *koha* (donation). An overnight stay at the museum is \$150 per night for two guests plus service fees.
royaldunedinmuseum.com