

# 2008 Snow Travel Expo New Zealand



Just you and a couple of friends... (left and right) take the heli-skiing charter option and have the mountain to yourselves for the day.

Main photo: Mark Ashkanasy



## ► TRIP NOTES

■ **Getting there** Air New Zealand operates direct flights from Sydney to Queenstown five times a week in July and August and four times a week in September. See [www.airnewzealand.com.au](http://www.airnewzealand.com.au) or phone 132 476.

■ **Staying there** The Dairy luxury private hotel is stylish and comfortable. Rates are \$NZ410 (\$339) for a double room with cooked breakfast and apres tea daily. See [www.thedairy.co.nz](http://www.thedairy.co.nz).

■ **More information** Southern Lakes

# Heli of a good time



## After experiencing a private charter, there's no going back to ordinary skiing, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.

**T**arn Pilkington is a god. It's not just his movie star name and rugged good looks that endow him with this god-like status, it's his job. Tarn is a heli-ski guide. He takes a helicopter to work each morning and no two days are ever the same. You could say his workload is mountainous – in fact, his office is a great expanse of powder-laden terrain in the Southern Alps of New Zealand.

It would appear the other gods have been watching over us with a snowstorm from the south dumping more than 30 centimetres of super-dry fluffy powder before clearing to a bluebird day. There are times in the ski world when the planets align and the conditions present themselves on a golden platter. This is one of those days.

Tarn is taking me and three of my friends for a day in his office. He has spent the morning calculating avalanche conditions, estimating snow depth and reading synoptic charts before deciding where we will ski in the seven mountain ranges to which he has access.

Janes Peak sits across from Lake Wakatipu, itself on the shores of Queenstown. It's private farming land whose owners have granted

Southern Lakes Heliski the right to schuss, carve and rip it up when the conditions are right. Today it is our personal mountain, untracked, untouched and covered in the good stuff.

We're on a private charter. This means that Johnny, our helicopter pilot, is ours to do with what we will. A standard heli-ski experience means joining a circuit day where the chopper is shared among numerous skiers. If there are 20 people out for the day, the chopper will circuit with five groups doing the same runs in progression and the speed of the day is set by the groups.

It's loads of fun, a great boasting right and a sensational way to enjoy the mountains with people at a similar ski or boarding level as yourself.

You pay from \$695 for a set amount of runs from three, four or five and then pay for each run after that.

The advantage of a private charter is you choose who sits in the chopper with you. So

I vow to win  
Lotto so I can  
have Johnny  
and Tarn on call.

long as they can cough up the \$1400 cash per person and are happy to ski or board at the same pace, it's possible to get up to 15 runs or more in a single day. You don't share the helicopter with any other group and you don't share the mountain either. If heli-skiing gives you rockstar status, private charter gives you the No. 1 chart position.

One of my three amigos is a powder virgin and it's for him we've brought out the big guns – Simon Wilkinson, private ski instructor extraordinaire – to get him through the powder. There's nothing worse than \$1400 worth of face planting every turn down the hill.

Johnny flies us through a river valley guarded by peaks on either side before lifting us high over a ridge to reveal the spectacular Janes Peak. There are whoops and hollers all round and we haven't even stepped onto the snow. We land, alight from the chopper and click into our skis. Tarn chooses the line we will ski and digs a snow pit to check for avalanche danger. All clear, he takes the first line and we follow one at a time, with Wilkinson coaching my friend on how to handle the powder and make the most of his day.

This is living – knee-deep dry snow, sun on

Heliski has the Classic (four runs) day for \$NZ795 a person; the Max Run (six runs) for \$NZ920 a person or private charter is available for \$NZ1400 a person. See [www.southernlakesheliski.co.nz](http://www.southernlakesheliski.co.nz). For general tourism information about Queenstown, see [www.queenstownnz.co.nz](http://www.queenstownnz.co.nz).

the face, wind in the hair, good friends in a remote mountain region miles from anywhere with not a lift queue in sight.

I vow to win Lotto so I can have Johnny and Tarn on call. We're bonding, our group, sharing a unique experience that will stay with us for life and remain painted on our face with beaming smiles for at least a week.

We get five runs in before a gourmet lunch of sushi, hot soup, open sandwiches and thick chocolate brownies served on a table dug from the snow. Another five runs and we take turns having some time out in the chopper as fatigue sets in. The most enthusiastic member of our group is the only one who refuses all rest, not wanting to give it up for a moment.

Heli-skiing's like that.

*The author was a guest of Destination Queenstown and Air New Zealand.*