

It's only natural

With its alpine surroundings, abundant adventure pursuits and ample opportunities to eat, drink and be merry, one New Zealand city is winning over a million visitors a year. Rachael Oakes-Ash leaves her heart in Queenstown.

Great travel is like falling in love. The first few days are spent getting to know a place, the next revelling in what you've found, then melancholy hits as the affair comes to an end and you pack your bags. I fell in love this southern winter, with Queenstown. It started as a fling, four days that extended to seven, each day more intense as the inevitable end drew near. I couldn't resist the temptation to return two months later for 10 days that extended to 16 and ended in talk of property prices and entry-level purchases. Some destinations do that to you.

Situated on the South Island of New Zealand, in Central Otago district, Queenstown has a population of 12,000, with an annual tourist turnover of one million visitors who come to experience its beauty. The town is dominated by the powerful, snow-capped Southern Alps that rise from Lake Wakatipu. When a town's energy is dictated by the natural landscape something magical happens. Byron Bay in northern New South Wales, Australia, has that energy from the curve of the bay; the West Australian Kimberley region exudes it too, with its red earth and green gullies. These are places that stay with you long after you've left.

According to Maori legend, Lake Wakatipu was created when the mythical giant, Matau, stole the princess Manata from her father, a Maori chief. The chief asked his bravest soldier, Matakauri, to rescue his princess. Matakauri found the giant sleeping, the princess secured to him with rope. He tried to cut the rope but failed and Manata started crying. Her tears dissolved the rope and together they ran, chopped down scrub and bracken, surrounded Matau with the firewood, set it alight and burned him to death. The fire melted the snow on the mountains and the water filled the burned shape of the sleeping giant, creating the lake. The water level rises and falls every eight minutes and it is said this is the giant's heart still beating.

Like Lake Wakatipu, everyone has a story of how they came to rest in Queenstown. Local identity Alexa Forbes moved from the North Island, thought her dating days were over, married a local policeman 11 years her junior and had a baby at 38. Minhal, an artist whose sculptures adorn the shore, arrived from the Druze villages of the Golan Heights in the Middle East via the Ukraine, South Africa and Auckland, to be enchanted by the light and colours of Otago. On any given night in one of the 120 licensed venues you may find Scoop, the editor of the local paper, propping up the bar, an ear out for fodder for his next column. Scoop never has to buy himself a beer and is dined by those who guard their reputations. The weekly publication is devoured every Thursday and discussed vehemently in Joe's Garage cafe on Friday mornings.

You soon learn that drinking in Queenstown is a serious business and brought to you by the letter "B". Bar Up, Bardeaux, The Boiler Room, Brazz, Buffalo Club and the Bunker Bar are the A-list of the B's. The town centre is one square kilometre and a maze of back alleys, lanes and walkways that beg to be explored. This is where I found the intimate bars with open fires and cocktails where tourists spend New Zealand dollars like they are monopoly dough. After a few holiday bevies they turn into millionaires and start ordering French champagne.

If they were millionaires they would be staying at Eichardt's private hotel on the shore of the lake, where

rooms start at NZ\$1,200 (HK\$6,335) a night. Behind Eichardt's street-level House Bar, where property agents spend their growing commissions, are five guest suites boasting fireplaces, possum-skin throws and double bathrooms. Once a woolshed belonging to town founder William J. Rees, Eichardt's is now known for its wine list and sunset view at happy hour.

There are 270 accommodation options in Queenstown, from backpacker hostels such as Pinewood Lodge to six-star Blanket Bay Lodge, 35 minutes from town. If golf is your idea of a holiday Millbrook Resort is 20 minutes away and features a Sir Bob Charles-designed 18-hole course, four restaurants and a health spa.

The landscape provides a playground for jet boating at high speeds through narrow gorges, bungee-jumping off bridges into water, paragliding from mountain tops, rafting the rapids and skiing down powdered mountains. You could attribute such a compulsion for thrills and spills to altitude sickness, but considering Queenstown is only 330 metres above sea level it is more likely the Speight's Ale.

For the more sedate traveller there are steamboats to sheep stations, fly-fishing and golf, Milford Sound sojourns with overnight cruises, fossicking for gold in Arrowtown or catching a movie on a couch at Dorothy Brown arthouse cinema – and there's eating. Bill Clinton ate at the Boardwalk seafood restaurant when he was in town. I dined one morning on Café Vudu's organic porridge with vanilla, apple and raisins as I sat next to Olympic gold-medal triathlete Hamish Carter (okay, he had to be pointed out to me).

I did, however, ski with the prime minister. Helen Clarke opened the Whitestar Express chairlift at nearby Cardrona Ski Resort during my first visit. It was refreshing to see the laid-back approach to security. No one asked me for identification when I arrived at the venue on top of the hill, and the desk at the entrance to the bar where proceedings were to begin was unmanned. A room full of local tourism identities in ski wear clinked glasses and the PM said a few words: no lectern, no microphone, no paparazzi. Then we all took the lift with Helen and skied down the mountain together. That's New Zealand for you: accessible, quirky and untouched by terror.

Sister city to Vail, Colorado, and member of the Leading Mountain Resorts of the world, Queenstown has access to some of the southern hemisphere's best alpine ski mountains: Coronet Peak, The Remarkables, Cardrona and Treble Cone. In summer, erstwhile ski bunnies take to the hills, trekking the heritage walks of the region or water skiing on the lake. Twilight persists until after 10pm and the bar staff serve drinks on the streets.

Everywhere in Queenstown has a view of the lake or the mountains: this is *Lord of the Rings* country after all. When sitting in Queenstown airport waiting to board, holiday-makers face a wall of glass behind which sits the terrain they have grown to love. Airports make me cry but Queenstown makes me sob. Some destinations do that to you.

Air New Zealand flies from Hong Kong to Auckland and Queenstown weekly. January 30, 2005, marks the start of the Central Otago Wine and Food Festival – and Queenstown's biggest garden party. For information on events throughout the year visit www.queenstown-nz.co.nz.

