

TOP OF THE

Famed for its spectacular scenery and adrenaline-fuelled pursuits, Queenstown has lifted its game further with world-class accommodation and wine to match, writes **MAX ANDERSON**.

Photography **JULIAN KINGMA**

LAKE





Thirty years ago I arrived in Queenstown with a backpack and a week to spare. It was a promised land, an outpost where the party never ended and, sure enough, from Eichardt's pub you could look onto vistas of unimaginable splendour. A coronet of soaring peaks. A glacial lake 80 kilometres long. A shoreline of young revellers working on tans and working off hangovers.

The only dilemma was how to siphon off enough beer money to afford the Queenstown Triple Challenge: a jetboat ride, a helicopter flight and a half-day of whitewater rafting. It was also the year everyone was talking about a crazy new thing called "the bungy jump". If you jumped naked, you could do it for free.

Thirty years later, what's changed? You can still bungy-jump, but you'll pay for it whether you're clothed or not. The backpackers are still here, but they're on work visas. And Queenstown's standing has undergone a thorough transformation.

A few years ago reports emerged that the town of 15,000 had become an unlikely bolthole for American hedge-fund owners and at least one Paypal co-founder. The likes of Katy Perry, Oprah and Reese Witherspoon have visited recently. The second homes of wealthy Kiwis stretch along Lake Wakatipu, and the town's average house price is more than a million dollars.

Queenstown's guest accommodation has likewise gone upmarket. Hulbert House is an 1888 villa that once served as a backpackers' hostel; now owned and restored by a Japanese billionaire, its suites cost up to \$700 a night. The old pub Eichardt's has a \$10,000-a-night penthouse. And in December, Queenstown got its own QT, the latest venture by the stylish Australian hotel group that dares to ask "Why so serious?"

The hotel is built into the foothills of Ben Lomond. The location means guests are only a short lakeside promenade from central Queenstown, but high enough to enjoy commanding views of Wakatipu and the aptly named Remarkables range. The lobby is dressed in split grey stone, suggestive of the schist favoured by Queenstown's pastoralists and the builders



PREVIOUS PAGE:
Lake Wakatipu.
Clockwise from
above: MV Yvalda
moored at
Queenstown Bay;
Hulbert House;
Queenstown Bay
shoreline; the
Kawarau River.

of New Zealand's first ski fields. With tongue firmly in chic, the designers have paid homage to ski culture with big graphics of 1950s snow bunnies, super-soft New Zealand sheepskins and reading matter such as *Cabin Pom* (a compendium of sexy wilderness cabins).

The fun continues in rooms that are handsome and plush. I especially like the polished copper tray bearing all the matériel for an après-action Martini (including bespoke gin made for QT by Kiwi distiller Karven), the big tub for soaking, and the tin of instant movie-prop snow, a contingency in the unlikely event the ski fields don't deliver.

Most of all, however, I like my wall of glass.

So dramatic is the picture of summer mountains rising from Lake Wakatipu that one should probably reference the Scottish poets. But I can think only of American children's illustrator Richard Scarry, who populated his Busytown with happy human-like animals.

My window on Queenstown is filled with people doing stuff. Skydiving, parasailing, biking, lugeing, jetskiing, hydroflying, jetboating – and at least one activity so out-there I can scarcely believe it. Because I've just seen a five-metre submersible shaped like a great white shark. And it's leapt clear out of the lake.

Speaking of adventure, Queenstown's small international airport is infamous among pilots who must steady their nerve and shoot for it through a deep V of mountains. Quaintly, there's a farmers' market next door.

It's another feel-good slice of Busytown. Among 100 stallholders at the Saturday morning Remarkables Market is an artisan who upcycles unwanted pallets ▶





into breadboards, and another who upcycles unwanted possums into rugs. Most, however, are devoted to produce.

Zamora the Meat Preachers are a Uruguayan and Argentine duo selling slices of sizzling grilled pork belly and spicy aji sauce in freshly baked buns. Market gardener Julie Milne, of Philippine heritage, sells her vegetables in hand-tied bunches and paper bags labelled with felt-tip. And Canadian Terra-Lynn Multhaup sells restorative kefir under her label Revive. “Queenstown reminds me of southern British Columbia,” says Multhaup. “The dry climate, the mountains, the winelands... Plus Canadians are very similar to Kiwis. They love the outdoors and they apologise a lot.”

It’s a recurring theme – travellers who fall in love with the place and stay. Eichardt’s Bar still has the palatial façade dating back to 1867, but these days it also has Bollinger by the glass, the aforementioned penthouse and a fine-diner next door. The Grille by Eichardt’s is overseen by British chef Will Eaglesfield, who came here four years ago. Eaglesfield, who paddles

across the lake to work, describes Queenstown as a big playground. “When I was in Europe, I split my time between the French Alps so I could ski, and the Mediterranean so I could go windsurfing.” He grins: “Here, I get to do both.”

The quality of highlands produce is another draw for him: he pots wild rabbit and tops it with a romesco-style crust of pine nut, almond and tomato; and Te Mana lamb, raised on Walter Peak, is a feature. “The Te Mana sheep are rotated between the lower and upper slopes,” he says. “The lower slopes give them a fat cap, helping to marble the meat and make it extra juicy.”

Matching wines are by Mount Edward, a vineyard in nearby Gibbston Valley, a subregion of Central Otago. I try a grüner veltliner, a chardonnay and a pinot noir – this last so delicious I’m tempted to go another glass. Except I’m scheduled to walk the Via Ferrata or “iron path”, so I decline.

This is just as well because the Via Ferrata isn’t a path at all. It’s a cliff-face traverse using a “ladder” of iron hoops and a 380-metre cable, requiring the use of a climbing harness with carabiners and safety lines. The system was used by Italian soldiers during the First World War to fashion shortcuts over the Dolomites.

My guide, Kaden Anderson, is a qualified climber from Utah. He mentally drags me up the side of the mountain – high enough to disturb a New Zealand falcon from its nest, high enough to sense my fear turning to panic. “Come on, man, you’re crushing it,” urges Anderson. “One more step, keep going. That’s great work.”

After the climb, I’m sweating and gabbling – a feverish mixture of relief, exhilaration and achievement. “A lot of people end up the same,” says Anderson. “They’re like, ‘Wow, this is a bit more full-on than I thought!’ But they’re stoked to have pushed themselves through it.”

What happens if someone gets stuck?

“I clip them to me and abseil them back down.”

And how often does that happen?

“About once a month.”

The number of pursuits devised to entertain travellers is said to number about 220. But not all of them are adrenaline shots. If you can find \$NZ1,600, join skipper Alan Kirker for a two-hour cruise on his beautiful 1936 launch MV *Yvalda*, which was moored on the Thames during World War II and was used by Churchill. And if you can find only \$NZ65, a steamship called the TSS *Eamslaw* does four cruises a day.

Heli-e-biking sounds like a heart-stopper, but this is pillow-soft adventure. A helicopter outfit called Over the Top drops off guests at a high-country station in the mighty Richardson Range, then guides them ▶

Clockwise from far left: pork gyoza at Fan-Tan Kitchen & Bar; QT in-room cocktail station and QT room; vines at Kinross Cottages.





back to earth by electric bike, freewheeling through glades of beech and crystal-clear streams.

But, hands-down, the cruisiest adventure I undertake is a tour through the Gibbston Valley vineyards by electric bike. “The beauty of e-bikes is they make the trail flat,” says Steve Norton, of cycling tour company Around the Basin. “They take away the hills.” A 16-kilometre trail starts in the gold-rush village of Arrowtown, winding through forested valleys and occasionally crossing suspension bridges over deep gorges. And, just as Norton promises, a little electric motor kicks in on the gradients, lifting me as magically as Mary Poppins rose over rooftops.

I can barely claim to have worked up a thirst by the time we reach Gibbston Valley. Nonetheless I dutifully taste the subregion’s famed pinot noir at three cellar doors: a 19th-century timber church, a lanolin-rich woolshed and an 1860s trading post.

The bike ride isn’t altogether devoid of adrenaline, even if the adrenaline isn’t ours. We stop at Kawarau Bridge, an 1880 suspension bridge where travellers are still flinging themselves into a 43-metre-deep gorge. I tell Norton I was on the bridge in 1988, the year that New Zealand entrepreneur AJ Hackett and his business partner, Henry van Asch, made commercial bungy-jumping a reality.

“Yep, that’s the year it started. Actually, I helped him test it. I was a pilot with a tandem paragliding operation, and one day Hackett came to see us. He said, ‘I’ve got this underpants elastic and if you attach yourself to it and jump off a bridge, you don’t die. What do you blokes think?’

“So we watched him do some test jumps. Us flyboys looked at it and said: ‘Nah, it’ll never take off.’”

The town’s adventure industry has flourished in part because New Zealand’s national insurance scheme allows companies (and customers) to avoid the added expense of liability insurance. It also means Kiwis have pushed the boundaries in pursuit of thrills. Bungy-jumping, Zorbing and jetboating are all New Zealand inventions. So, too, is the Seabreacher X – only, in Queenstown, they call it “the shark”.

“You know Tintin? You know his shark submarine? Well, the inventor got the idea off that.”

I’m waiting for my 20-minute ride, trying not to jig from foot to foot as the operator at Hydro Attack explains the concept.

More than 120 Seabreachers have been sold abroad (most of them to Dubai playboys), but the inventor insisted that a licensed operation open in New Zealand so the public could try it. Of course, it had to be Queenstown.

I take my seat behind Rory, a Briton who used to skipper rescue boats. He seals the overhead canopy



Above: Jay Sherwood of Lake & Wood Brew Co smokes meat at the Wet Jacket winery. **Opposite:** electric-biking across the Southern Discoveries suspension bridge over the Arrow River.

and guns the in-board jet-ski engine, which sends us tearing across the lake at 80 kilometres an hour. After five frenzied minutes, he pushes at the controls, forcing the super-buoyant vessel underwater. We jet along under the surface, an extraordinary place of glacial blue where sound is distorted and the air pressure builds.

“Y’ready?” Rory yells.

I holler my assent – at which he drives us deeper for a few seconds before angling upwards and giving full thrust. Our grinning shark shoots metres into the bright sky of Queenstown, issuing a roar before crash-landing in a spectacular plume of spray. I sit in the back hooting and yelling.

I haven’t felt like this in, oh, about 30 years. ►



Eat & drink

Prime New Zealand produce takes centre-stage across Queenstown and surrounds.

ARROWTOWN

Blue Door Arrowtown sprang up in the 1870s, soon after the Arrow River began surrendering gold. This blink-and-miss-it bar with stone walls, open fire and Otago wine list evokes gold-rush good times.

18 Buckingham St, +64 3-442 0415

Fan-Tan Kitchen & Bar Behind a long granite counter, bar staff mix sake Daiquiris and sous-chef Trina Amberger prepares moreish share plates such as open wontons of rabbit and karengo, a purple-tinged local seaweed. 18 Buckingham St, +64 3-442 0885, fantan.co.nz

Lake & Wood Brew Co Jay Sherwood and Anna Kerslake brew four beers and sell to bars and cafés. Sundays at Wet Jacket brewery they serve 18-hour smoked brisket and pinto beans from their travelling smoker. lakeandwoodbrewco.com

Provisions The best breakfasts in town are served in the garden behind this heritage cottage. 65 Buckingham St, +64 3 442 0714, provisionsofarrowtown.co.nz

Settlers Bar & Restaurant Chef Jesse Lombardo serves fusion dishes as a nod to the Europeans and Asians who worked the goldfields. A "vegan pulled pork sandwich" is made with braised jackfruit; Kiwi clams appear in miso soup. 21 Ramshaw La, +64 03 428 0821, settlersrestaurant.co.nz

GIBBSTON VALLEY

Kinross This 1880s farm, trading post and gold agency now houses a café, guest cottages and cellar door. 2300 Gibbston Hwy, +64 21 028 134 99, kinrosscottages.co.nz

Waitiri Creek and Cargo Brewery The winery's chardonnay and pinot noir are served in a stunning 1894 church. Or match Cargo's craft beers (brewed on site from April) with wood-fired pizze. 2323 Church La, Gibbston, +64 3 441 3316, waitiricreek.co.nz, cargobrewery.co.nz

Wet Jacket The tasting room is as refined as the pinot noir and rosé, yet it's attached to a woolshed straight out of *Footrot Flats*. 1 Bendemeer La, 903 State Highway 6, Lake Hayes, +64 3 441 8383, wetjacket.nz

QUEENSTOWN

Bazaar

QT Queenstown's restaurant has six food stations, three of which are manned by chefs. Highlights are the salt-baked Marlborough salmon with dill and grapefruit, and the dry-aged sirloin. 30 Brunswick St, +64 3 450 1336, qthotelsandresorts.com

Bespoke Kitchen The town's action men and women come here for superfood-rich breakfasts and lunches, such as poached eggs with edamame and watercress hummus. 9 Isle St, +64 3 409 0552, bespokekitchen.co.nz

Fishbone Australian journalist Darren Lovell bought this former fish and chip shop 12 years ago. Today, the restaurant lined with booths is known for its seafood, such as John Dory in miso "crazy water" broth, and albacore tuna poke with wasabi and

avocado cream. 7 Beach St, +64 3 442 6768, fishbonequeenstown.co.nz

The Grille by Eichardt's This fine-diner gives Anglo-European fare a Mediterranean twist. 9 Marine Pde, +64 3 441 0444, eichardtsdining.com

Rata High-profile Kiwi chef Josh Emmett is inspired by the natural environment. His signature dish is a curio: six tiny goat's cheese profiteroles flavoured with rosemary and honey served on a rock. 43 Ballarat St, +64 3 442 9393, ratadining.co.nz

Reds Bar Staff at QT Queenstown's bar create refreshing, often pretty cocktails such as the Spring Awanui, with vermouth, bitters, prosecco and vodka infused with cherry blossoms.

Yonder Queenstown This diner in a conservatory-style space serves comfort food with a healthy slant. 14 Church St, +64 3 409 0994, yonderqt.co.nz

From top left: Cargo Brewery's Malcolm Blakey mans the pizza oven; wild rabbit with romesco crust at The Grille by Eichardt's; a punter inspects Julie Milne's fresh produce at the Remarkables Market. Opposite: clockwise from top left: coffee cart at the Remarkables Market; QT Queenstown; the vibrant Yonder Queenstown.



Getting there

Air New Zealand flies direct to Queenstown from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane year round. Qantas, Jetstar and Virgin Australia also operate direct flights from select Australian cities.

Stay

Eichardt's Private Hotel From around \$NZ1,100. Marine Pde, +64 3 441 0450, eichardts.com

Hulbert House Suites from \$NZ650; the six-suite villa costs \$NZ4,000. 68 Ballarat St, +64 3 442 8767, hulberthouse.co.nz

QT Queenstown

An uncharacteristically understated lobby gives onto spectacular views and 69 plush rooms and suites. From \$NZ399. 30 Brunswick St, +64 3 450 3450, qthotelsandresorts.com

Do

Around the Basin Guided e-bike tour costs \$NZ189 per person. +64 27 952 5801, aroundthebasin.co.nz

Hydro Attack Ride "the shark" for \$NZ149 per person. +64 27 477 9074, hydroattack.co.nz

MV Yvalda Cruise costs \$NZ805 per hour, minimum two hours. +64 27 434 5555, cruising.net.nz

Over the Top Heli-e-biking flight, half-day guided tour on e-bikes and picnic lunch from \$NZ7,200 for two. +64 3 442 2233, flynz.co.nz

TSS Earnslaw Cruise from \$NZ65 per person. realjourneys.co.nz

Via Ferrata The four-hour climb is \$NZ189 per person. 39 Camp St, +64 3 441 3003, viaferrata.co.nz ●