

GO NZ: Central Otago »

Stacey Hunt checks out Queenstown's best skiing, boarding, eating and drinking

While living in London on my OE, I casually slipped into conversation with my horrified colleagues that I'd never been to Queenstown. Europe? Of course. I'd ticked off most of the boxes there. My own backyard, however? Those boxes were embarrassingly empty.

We New Zealanders are notorious for visiting far-flung regions of the globe before exploring our own turf, so I know I wasn't alone in this admission. Fortunately, since returning home nearly eight years ago, I've remedied this and Queenstown now sits up there as one my favourite places in the world.

With Covid-19 curtailing our international travel plans, there's never been a better time to take advantage of this incredible country we call home. We're surrounded by some of the most Instagrammable scenery in the world, so it's not exactly a hardship to trade in that European summer for a snow-kissed South Island winter.

The flight into Queenstown is enough reason to visit the lakeside resort town. The descent through the mountains gives you a glimpse of the beauty of the region and, once you've landed, this little slice of paradise is yours to explore.

During the heart of winter the main attraction for most is the ski fields. Queenstown is lucky to have four world-class ski fields on its doorstep: Coronet Peak, The Remarkables, Cardrona and Treble Cone. All are within about 90 minutes' drive of town, making it easy to assess the weather and pick a field on the day. With Coronet Peak sharing ski passes with The Remarkables and Cardrona's lift passes also working at Treble Cone, mountain-hopping is a breeze.

And in terms of safety and hygiene around coronavirus, all fields will abide by level 1 health and safety standards with Covid-19 QR codes and increased cleaning.

Having fewer international visitors provides the perfect opportunity for Kiwis to step up and support New Zealand's tourism industry and also means, perhaps selfishly, that we get more to ourselves (and possibly a few Australians, bubble-expansion dependent). Lift queues should be shorter and slopes less crowded, meaning more bang for your buck this season.

A decrease in visitor numbers does, however, mean each field will be running slightly reduced services with a few lifts or T-bars out of action at each resort. But this year, Coronet Peak introduces new gondola cabins on the Coronet Express for the first time and The Remarkables' new Sugar Bowl chairlift will be complete this month, opening up 2.5km of new trails.

Only 20 minutes from central Queenstown, Coronet Peak is the closest field for those basing themselves in town. With a good combination of wide-open runs and well-groomed trails of all levels, it's a great mountain for the whole family.

Across the valley you'll find The Remarkables, which, despite having less skiable terrain, sit at a higher altitude, meaning you're more likely to strike a powder day here.

Slightly further afield, among the picturesque mountain ranges between Queenstown and Wānaka is Cardrona, a great field for skiers and snowboarders of all levels. With lots of wide-open slopes, there's plenty of challenging terrain for experienced riders as well as nice easy runs for beginners. Plus it boasts an excellent terrain park, which makes for great viewing as you go over on the Whitestar Express chairlift.

For parents with little ones in tow, Cardrona



Checklist QUEENSTOWN

GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand and Jetstar fly direct from Auckland to Queenstown.

DETAILS

queenstownnz.co.nz

Skiing at The Remarkables near Queenstown (main); Buckingham St, Arrowtown; the Milky Way over Lake Wānaka (right).

Photos / Getty Images; Destination Queenstown

has a fully licensed childcare centre, so you can hand them over to play in the snow while you take to the slopes.

A trip to Cardrona isn't complete without calling in to the Cardrona Hotel, one of New Zealand's oldest pubs, for some apres-ski.

Half an hour's drive north of Cardrona sits Treble Cone, the mountain most popular with advanced riders. Traditionally more of a skier's mountain, it has the highest and largest ski terrain in the South Island.

It's not all about the skiing, however; the region has a multitude of other activities on offer, and this season guests who have purchased passes for Coronet Peak or The Remarkables have the option of taking a break from the mountains and exchanging their day lift pass for credit towards an off-mountain activity, dining out or retail therapy in and around Queenstown.

Adrenaline junkies can get their fill jet-boating, bungee jumping or skydiving. Those keen to keep their feet more firmly on the ground can take in the breathtaking views of the Shotover Canyon while relaxing in the Onsen Hot Pools, hire a bike and explore the trails, take a trip up the Skyline Gondola or tour some of the local wineries.

No matter what you do though, don't leave town without sampling a world-famous Fergburger.

Take some time to venture slightly further afield. An hour or so through the Crown Range leads you to Wānaka, the perfect place to visit or stay for anyone looking to ski at Treble Cone.

Known for its scenic lake views, the town also boasts a number of great eating joints. Pembroke Patisserie is home to arguably the world's best custard slice while Rhyme and Reason Brewery has chilled beers, food trucks and allows your four-legged friends to join you.

Still hungry? Hit up Cromwell en route back to Queenstown for a cheese roll or call in at any number of wineries in the region for a sneaky tippie of Central Otago's pinot noir.

If you're keen to stay slightly closer to Queenstown, a trip to Arrowtown can still be easily made. The charming small town's tree-lined streets are full of historic buildings and quaint cottages.

Tiny in size, yes, but Arrowtown offers enough eating and drinking options to keep you going for days. I regularly dream of Fan-Tan's Asian fusion dishes, La Rumbra's tapas and Arrowtown Bakery's pies. No trip is complete without a visit to the Blue Door Bar. Slip into a leather sofa next to the fire and let the bartender pour you a winter cocktail. Heaven.

If you have a special event to celebrate or you're just looking to treat yourself, the degustation lunch or dinner at Amisfield, complete with matching wines, is to die for. You'll roll out of there blissfully full and happy after feasting on delicacies such as pāua pie and Southland beef.

Tolkien fans should make their way to Glenorchy, the heart of *Lord of the Rings* country. The small settlement is a gateway to the Mt Aspiring and Fiordland National Parks and is surrounded by incredible mountains, crystal-clear lakes and rivers and ancient beech forests. Known for its untouched beauty, it's provided the backdrop for a number of films, notably *The Hobbit* and the *LOTR* trilogy.

Without a doubt the best way to take in the jaw-dropping landscape of this area is from the air. Heli Glenorchy can fly you over the shingle-edged tributaries of the Dart and Rees Rivers towards the domineering Mt Earnslaw.

It's the perfect way to finish your mid-winter getaway. Escape the hustle and bustle, rest your weary legs and relax while taking in the incredible surrounds. Soaring alongside the snow-coated mountains with electric-blue glaciers peeping out is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

