



Gibbston Valley Lodge and Spa, left; funyaking on the Dart River, below

eddies and swift sections without drama, though the scenery is so soaringly beautiful you feel like you are in the aforementioned movies. After a detour into Rockburn Chasm, many of us take a quick plunge into the glacier-fresh water. We're in wetsuits and booties but it's still gaspingly fresh.

Queenstown still answers to "adventure capital of the world" but not all the thrills are about climbing mountains or bungee jumping off bridges. Throughout my short stay the parade of scenery, food, wine (pinot noir is the signature drop), spas as well as funyaking and cycling renowned bike trails has me buzzing. But this adrenaline rush is less fight or flight and at a more considered, thoughtful pace.

When I get on an e-bike for the first time I'm in good hands. Matt Hirst from Better by Bike (which recently added an operation in Byron Bay) tells us "thumb it to the summit" when we're climbing hills. That's when the battery kicks in to give us Tour de France legs. We take the Arrow River Bridges Trail, which is along a roaring river and even more scenic than it sounds, from Arrowtown to Gibbston Valley. It's part of Queenstown's network of bike trails that cover 130km and with more to come.

Today's ride finishes at Gibbston Valley Lodge & Spa, where award-winning wines are newly certified organic and 24 villas overlooking the vineyards are in a luxury class all of their own. Nightly wine tastings are

The majestic snow-capped peaks encircle you in their craggy arms

included for villa guests, or book a tasting tour of New Zealand's largest wine cave. (They had me as soon as I saw the Cheesery & Deli next to the cellar door.) Under the soaring ceiling of the Lodge Restaurant, diners enjoy local produce; for me it's an almost-too-pretty-to-eat salmon mosaic followed by a lamb loin. The next morning, I have a massage but no time to soak in the hillside hot tub. Next time.

More rejuvenation is in store at Sofitel Queenstown Hotel and Spa in the heart of the busy lakefront district which has a Zurich-in-summer feel with people lining up at the Patagonia Ice Creamery and Chocolaterie. Perhaps the Swiss vibe is from that, or the name of our dinner restaurant, Eichardt's Grille, where my seafood chowder is crammed with prawns and clams, or is it the cerulean lake and snow-iced peaks?

The Sofitel dances between its trademark French luxury and Queenstown's sustainability-plus mission. "We want to do our part to lead the way," says general manager Jeremy Samuels, an Australian who's made his home here for seven years.

"At the Sofitel we take water straight from the lake, triple-filter it and put still and sparkling in glass bottles in every room twice a day," he says. The system's been in place since late 2022 and keeps 77,000 plastic bottles out of landfill every year. They're quietly but steadily waging a war on food waste. Fruit and veg scraps will soon become kombucha and at breakfast there are just four dishes on the buffet – everything else is cooked to order. I'd argue that any move that bins a bain-marie is a win for the world and tastebuds.

In the bar fridge of my room I find milk from nearby Windy Ridge Farm in the cutest little refillable glass bottles. "It's milk just like we used to get as kids," says Samuels. "It's fresh from the farm complete with a little bit of cream on the top." That idyllic, wholesome slightly retro vibe sums up how modern Queenstown feels to me, and I love it.

Jane Nicholls was a guest of Virgin Australia and Destination Queenstown. [queenstownnz.co.nz](http://queenstownnz.co.nz)

# Beyond the bungee

There are more relaxed ways to explore Queenstown

JANE NICHOLLS

It's been more than 30 years since I was last here (a time jump as scary as the notion of throwing myself off a bridge attached to a rubber band) but Queenstown is even more breathtaking than I remembered. The majestic snow-capped peaks of the Remarkables mountain range encircle you in their craggy arms and beckon you to chill.

We start our escape at the top of the improbably blue Lake Wakatipu in the postcard hamlet of Glenorchy. Here The Headwaters Eco Lodge, built with the money and vision of American philanthropists Debbi and Paul Brainerd, cossets us in considerable comfort while achieving impressive environmental credentials.

The Brainerds fell in love with New Zealand's physical beauty and relaxed pace but, unlike some other wealthy Americans, didn't want to bunker down and keep it just for themselves. Debbi says their vision is "to create a thriving and regenerative business model that is environmentally and financially sustainable, giving back to the local community and the wider world".

Add to that five-star food. On the night of our stay, dinner is whipped up by chef Darren "DJ" Lynch, who includes some of the gourmet mushrooms he grows at his company Remarkable Fungi, including lion's mane. Many consider this fungus to be a mycological marvel with a long list of potential health benefits. It's also completely delicious.

Good and doing good can happily coexist, which is what's happening with Queenstown's regenerative tourism program, preserving its mountains for the future. The ambition is for Queenstown's visitor economy to be carbon zero by the end of 2030. It's a level up from garden-variety sustainability, working to improve the local environment and community but not parading it in your face. Instead, it's all about small changes that flow as naturally as the icy blue rivers from the glaciers.

That's what I do when we go down the Dart River on inflatable kayaks outside Glenorchy. After days of rain, our timing is perfect. On a bluebird day a jet boat speeds and spins us up the wide braided river which flows 60km from inside Mount Aspiring National Park into the northern tip of Lake Wakatipu. With its rugged



The landscape surrounding Glenorchy, main; The Headwaters Eco Lodge, above

peaks cleaved by chasms and fringed by ancient forests, the landscape has served as locations in The Lord of the Rings, Wolverine, Mission Impossible and even a Taylor Swift video. It's also UNESCO World-Heritage-listed.

Time and water fly and the jetboat delivers us to where a fleet of bright orange kayaks (known as funyaks) wait, plump with expectation. Erin the head guide asks if anyone wants to ride in her inflatable canoe and my hand shoots up with the speed of a quiz-show contestant. A relaxing ride for me: I just pop in my paddle where and when she says. But everyone navigates the



## IN THE KNOW

Virgin Australia has multiple flights to Queenstown every week from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, with more scheduled over peak periods. [virginaustralia.com](http://virginaustralia.com)

A premium chalet at The Headwaters Eco Lodge from \$NZ1008 (\$913) a night, with breakfast.

[theheadwatersecolodge.com](http://theheadwatersecolodge.com)

The funyaks experience is owned by Ngai Tahu Tourism. A full day includes transfers to and from Queenstown, wilderness jet-boat ride, lunch, life jackets, wetsuits and booties, fleeces and spray jackets. \$NZ495 per adult until April 30; \$NZ429 May 1 to September 30. [darteriver.co.nz](http://darteriver.co.nz)

An Arrowtown to Gibbston Winery Ride with Better By Bike from \$NZ135 for an adult. [betterbybike.co.nz](http://betterbybike.co.nz)

A one-bedroom villa that sleeps two at Gibbston Valley Lodge and Spa from \$NZ794 a night; a cheese and wine tasting at the winery is \$NZ48 a person. [gibbstonvalleylodgeandspa.com](http://gibbstonvalleylodgeandspa.com)

Rooms at Sofitel Queenstown start from \$514 a night. [sofitel-queenstown.com](http://sofitel-queenstown.com)