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# Is this New Zealand's most beautiful drive?

Head north from Queenstown beside Lake Wakatipu and you'll be stopped in your tracks by untrammelled vistas.

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It takes twice as long as it should to reach Glenorchy. Rush hour is under way as I set off from Queenstown, but provincial traffic jams are not the cause of my delay. No, it's the untrammelled vistas that slow me down, divert my attention, twist my head hither and thither so that I must stop every few kilometres to give them my full attention. Glenorchy lies at the end of a 46km scenic drive tracing the northwestern arm of Lake Wakatipu all the way to the confluence of the Dart and Rees rivers.

Queenstown's comparatively sedate rush hour gives way to a near-empty road tunnelled with trees, hemmed by blue water, buttressed by heart-stirring peaks. I pull over and climb the short distance to Bennett's Bluff Lookout. Bright clouds swim across the lake below and the road weaves along the shoreline in a graphite scrawl. Looking back, I see no evidence of Queenstown; it has been blotted out by the glorious swell of mountains.

Long after my scheduled arrival, I finally come to a halt in Glenorchy. This isn't the end of the road, strictly speaking. Scant laneways wind onwards through pockets of farmland before disappearing into the ranges and dissolving in the Te Wahipounamu UNESCO World Heritage area. This view is framed by the window at [The Headwaters Eco Lodge's](#) restaurant, The Headwaters Dining Room.

“Sometimes it rains and gets foggy and people say ‘But where is the magic?’” says host Daria Gurtler.

The magic is up to its old tricks today. Late-afternoon sunshine streams through powderpuff clouds; pastures are fleecy with sheep; the peaks appear to be latticed with cobwebs.

The award-winning lodge defers to the conservation ethos underpinning its immaculate surroundings. Part of a complex encompassing a neighbouring campground and [Mrs Woolly's General Store](#), it's the very blueprint for regenerative luxury. The 14 private cabins and central “homestead” are designed and certified to the standards of Living Building Challenge, a global institute promoting construction that enhances the health of both communities and the environment.

To this end, The Headwaters Eco Lodge is an amalgam of repurposed objects. There are light fixtures crafted from discarded metal, beams fashioned from demolished woolsheds, building materials salvaged after the Christchurch earthquake, and fences collected from old stockyards. Community talent is harnessed in the photographs, paintings and sculptures by Glenorchy artists and artisans. In turn, photovoltaic panels in the solar garden harness the sun. Reminiscent of a collection of very elegant woolsheds, this lodge is “eco” in the most granular sense.

**Late-afternoon sunshine streams through powderpuff clouds; pastures are fleecy with sheep; the peaks appear to be latticed with cobwebs**

At dinner, a bride and groom sit beside that dining room window, their heads haloed in alpenglow. They were brought by helicopter to one of those mountains this morning, and there they eloped. They're still clad in their wedding finery, the bouquet of wildflowers they picked for their nuptials blooming on the table between them.

From our respective tables, we fellow diners toast the couple with flutes of Central Otago brut and feast from the same "wedding banquet" – the nightly Chef's Choice menu. Tonight's four-course dinner is paired with local wines and produce plucked from the lodge's fruit and vegetable garden and foraged from the wild. The squid-ink prawn and crab tortellini with parsnip, bacon and saffron puree is pure delight; the raspberry cheesecake with rhubarb ice-cream makes for a triumphant wedding cake.

The moon is high and the chill has set in as I make my way along a pathway embedded with stone mosaics to my cabin, Lancewood West. The light flips on automatically as I step into the vestibule, and switches off when I move to my room. The plaid blanket on my bed – and cabin insulation made from recycled plastic bottles and wool – keep me toasty. Panels moulded from woolsheds and iron roofing add rustic touches to this plush space. Even the toilet adheres – in principle, at least – to an outdoorsy ethos: it's waterless, chemical-free and composting. Remarkably, it's also entirely odourless. Next morning I step into the self-timing shower and surprise myself with my own eco-credentials: I complete my ablutions well within the allotted five minutes (timers can be reset).

Breakfast is sizzling in the homestead's open-plan kitchen, but I grab a picnic bag from Mrs Woolly's General Store and head into town on foot. Wood smoke from the campground scents the dewy air, and the town's many veggie gardens – delightfully feral or neatly clipped – are quenched by dawn's condensation.

"Any medical conditions? Hypochondriacs?" asks Dart River Adventures guide John Franklin as he steers a jet boat out on to Lake Wakatipu. "Push your bum into the seat and hold on. Some spins can be cruisy, some can be a bit of a whip."

Aches real or imagined evaporate as Franklin spins the boat and the lake whirls around us in an exhilarating blend of water, wind and G-force propulsion. But the Dart River presents challenges. Braided by sandbars and fed by the Dart Glacier, it reshapes itself at the whim of the weather. Just a few weeks ago heavy rainfall caused it to rise dramatically; today a mere film of water separates the hull from the rock-strewn riverbed.

“It’s like going over a bunch of marbles,” Franklin says as we skitter towards Mount Aspiring National Park. Such were the trials faced by the local Maori tribe, Ngai Tahu, on their way to Te Koroka – a gargantuan seam of pounamu (jade) also located upriver. “It was a vein of greenstone, a giant beast in Maori culture,” Franklin says.

Te Koroka is sacred to the Ngai Tahu, owners of [Dart River Adventures](#), and entry is by permit only. Today, the forested ranges conceal these treasures. Their peaks are a brilliant white, their flanks gold with the bell-shaped blooms of the kowhai bush, upon whose nectar the jewelled kereru (New Zealand wood pigeons) feast.

We pull on to a pebbled shoreline and clamber over rocks smoothed by eons of movement. Among them I find a shard of pounamu, cast adrift from that seam and polished by time. I replace it in its sedimentary nest and wonder where the river will take it next. Skating back on to the lake, Franklin hands me a koha (gift): my own splinter of pounamu, by which to remember this journey. It takes twice as long as it should to traverse the [Glenorchy Lagoon Walkway](#). Is it any surprise? I meet a woman walking her dog, a man wrangling gorse in a copse – “I’m just trying to keep it weed-free,” he says.

I watch the languid pull of watergrass beneath the lagoon boardwalk, and the bees sipping on the blooms of what appears to be a golden pohutukawa tree. On a platform overlooking the lagoon I find a lone bench on which to eat my picnic. The picture hanging before me is an unframed masterpiece: Mount Earnslaw, standing tall against a lacquered sky, and its twin, imprinted on the lagoon in perfect symmetry.

## In the know

Stays at [The Headwaters Eco Lodge](#) from \$NZ790 (\$740) a night for two people, including breakfast.

Dart River Adventures [Wilderness Jet Experience](#) is priced from \$NZ259 an adult, including transfers between Queenstown and Glenorchy.

[Glenorchy Lagoon Walkway](#) is 3km long and takes one to two hours to complete.

[Mrs Woolly's General Store](#) is open for breakfast, lunch and takeaways; it also sells art, clothing and homewares.

*Catherine Marshall was a guest of Tourism New Zealand.*

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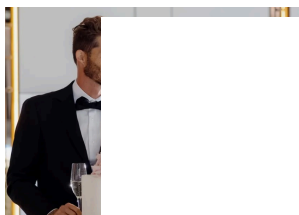
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