



01

WINTER WONDERLAND

Snow, scenery and a sensational selection of luxury options make New Zealand an unbeatable cold-weather destination. Hilary Doling explores Queenstown and Wanaka in winter.

The helicopter circles and hovers like an insect over the aptly named Dragonfly Peak. Below us – a tiny Toblerone triangle on a vast tablecloth of white – is Whare Kea Chalet, perched a dizzying 1750 metres up on the edge of Mount Aspiring National Park.

To get here the chopper has flown over endless snowy saddles and impossibly jagged icy peaks. We're only a 20-minute ride from Wanaka, but this is true mountain wilderness. We land in a

swirl of flakes and whirling blades and I step out into silence. The mountains are sleeping under a doona of deep snow. I feel as if we're balanced on the edge of the world in a private, frozen paradise.

And in the middle of nowhere – luxury. The chalet is owned by Louise and Martyn Myers (of department store fame), and building in this inaccessible spot with minimal environmental impact was a two-year labour of love. Aspiring Helicopters manages stays and day trips to this eagle's eyrie of a chalet which

provides accommodation for up to six guests in simple rooms with spectacular views. Apparently skiing down from here is a life-changing experience for serious powder-hounds, but as I peer over the edge at the dramatic descent I'm not inclined to try. The view is heart-stopping enough for me.

In New Zealand, comfort and the outdoors come together in a way you find almost nowhere else in the world; it's a marriage made in luxury heaven and Queenstown and Wanaka excel at it.



01 Whare Kea Chalet by dusk 02 Tranquil lake views at The Rees Hotel & Luxury Apartments 03 Luxury in the middle of nowhere at Whare Kea Chalet 04 Cosy living at Wyuna House 05 At home in Queenstown at The Copper House

The Chalet's sister property, Whare Kea Lodge, below us on the rim of the lake, is now only available for private hire.

Its acclaimed executive chef, James Stapley, now has his own restaurant, Bistro Gentil, just outside Wanaka.

I stayed at the lodge when James was in situ so I'm not going to miss an opportunity to taste his food again. Bistro Gentil serves modern French cuisine featuring seasonal produce

from Central Otago and its own kitchen garden. The little township of Wanaka has a new gourmet vibe with Francesca's Italian Kitchen and the view from The Lake Bar also attracting locals and visitors alike.

All the rivers run

I am sleeping in Prince Harry's bed, although not, I hasten to add, at the same time. The British royal stayed here



03

at Riverrun on a day of R&R during a recent trip to New Zealand and by all accounts fell in love with the privacy and the landscape.

The lodge was created by Meg Taylor-Pawson and the late John Pawson, co-founder of outdoor specialists Kathmandu, so it is not surprising that it is set in spectacular scenery with views of the mountains beyond. Pawson made much of the furniture himself and the lodge mixes relaxed, rustic charm with style and service.

Each evening guests relax on leather sofas in front of a glowing fire with canapés and red wine and swap ski stories. Fellow guests might be celebrities or CEOs, but what matters here are the conversation and the food.

The lodge can organise heli-skiing, private guides, horse riding or (Prince Harry's favourite) fly fishing. Most people who stay here are self-drive but private transport can be organised to the nearby Cardrona ski fields and the steeps of Treble Cone.

Lakeside leisure

A drive over the Crown Ranges takes me to Queenstown. The sun has come out and the frost on the hills has a diamond sparkle but nothing beats the views of Lake Wakatipu from my suite at The Rees Hotel & Luxury Apartments.

Wide glass balcony doors frame the lake, its green depths almost lap my window and beyond I can see the snow-smudged peaks of The Remarkables. Nothing breaks the silence except the odd jet boat from Queenstown's action central buzzing like a red mosquito across the polished jade of the lake.

At The Rees you can stay in a hotel-style room or an apartment. The concept works because those who choose apartments still get the five-star service. This year new private Residences will be opened on the edge of the lake for an even more luxurious lakeside experience.

Coronet Peak is the closest ski resort to Queenstown which means you can ski the day you arrive or the day you

leave and still catch your plane home. So despite the fact that I was flying out I couldn't resist the siren call of sun on snow. Luxury lovers can become day members of The Peak Club, or pay for a season's membership which allows access to the exclusive club room with gourmet dining, snow-white leather chairs and expansive mountain views.

A perfect finish to a skiing day.

Private luxury

If you're planning to linger in Queenstown, opt for a private villa. New Zealand's top travel curators, Touch of Spice, count some of the country's finest properties among its collection, including The Copper House. This six-bedroom masterpiece gets its name from the copper sheeting that lines its exterior, complemented with open-plan living and large balconies perfect for entertaining on a tremendous scale.

If you'd rather escape to the countryside, Wyuna House in the heart of Glenorchy (recognised the world over as Middle-earth) offers a warm lodge feeling, sleeping up to eight. Each of its rooms is in a separate pavilion, all anchored around a courtyard with a crackling outdoor fireplace.

For those who would like to work on their swing as much as their schussing, Jack's Point Lake House is located in the 'Preserve' territory of a world-renowned golf course. The four-bedroom house features floor-to-ceiling windows and open fires for a cosy stay surrounded by the majesty of the mountains. ♦

Travel file

Accommodation
www.riverrun.co.nz
www.therees.co.nz
www.touchofspice.co.nz

Experience
 Whare Kea Chalet stays and day trips
www.aspiringhelicopters.co.nz

Ski
www.nzski.co.nz

Dining
www.bistrogentil.co.nz



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05