



MOUNTAIN MAGIC

Queenstown is a world-class destination for skiing enthusiasts, but there's much more to this holiday hotspot. Chic lodgings fit for a duchess are scattered across Central Otago and make the perfect home base for snuggling up after a day's wining, dining and outdoor fun in this spectacular winter wonderland.

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOANNA TOVIA

"It's nice to light the fire and recline on the day bed in my room to take in the view."

The light is already fading as we wind our way around the lake and up into the hills to the acclaimed Matakauri Lodge, a cosy and ultra-refined 10-room boutique lodge overlooking The Remarkables. We're staying in the stunning four-bedroom owner's cottage, one of three Relais & Châteaux-endorsed lodges American owner Julian Robertson has built in New Zealand after falling in love with the place. The log fire is burning, the candlelit table set for the seven-course degustation dinner to come, and an array of stemmed glasses at the ready for the matching wines.

I already feel like I'm getting the royal treatment when I learn that my room is the same one Kate and Will stayed in when they visited in 2014. The suite is definitely 'royal worthy' – the grand bedroom opens onto a sitting room, glass-balustraded balcony and view beyond – and I

wonder whether they slept on the same side of the bed as at Kensington Palace or if it was a race to claim the side of their choice.

Auckland-born chef Jonathan Rogers treats us to an incredible dinner of Northland snapper, Fiordland venison, Southland beef tartare and more. Local and seasonal dishes should be a given for any chef, Rogers says, and ethical and organic produce worth striving for. The wines are sublime, as you'd expect of New Zealand. My favourite is the Coal Pit Sauvignon Blanc 2011 from Central Otago. It smells like asparagus to me but tastes of grapefruit, passionfruit and guava, with a long and lingering finish.

A wander around Queenstown is on the cards after a breakfast of truffle scrambled eggs, crispy bacon and excellent coffee. Queenstown's busy streets feature shops spruiking adventure gear, cafés and bars, tour operators and the famous Fergburger



This page (top to bottom): Matakauri Lodge is located right on the lake's edge; Alpine views courtesy of Over The Top helicopter tours; the luxury Matakauri Lodge offers cosy elegance just minutes from Queenstown.



Clockwise from top: a luxurious bedroom at Matakauri Lodge; cosy elegance is key; the Lodge's lake location is ideal for boating enthusiasts; the bustling jetties of Queenstown.

(there's a line out the door at 11am). The area is abuzz with energy and the air is crisp and fresh. Down at the lake I have a chat with a guitar-strumming busker and his English sheepdog-cross, Happy. One of Happy's favourite songs is John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads" – he howls along only to songs he likes.

We board a jet boat for a spin around Lake Wakatipu before catapulting up the Shotover River, dodging bridge pylons and pebbled river banks and hanging on tight during the 360-degree turns at speed. KJet's boats can zip around in as little as five centimetres of water, although depth was not a concern on the lake. At its deepest the lake drops 390 metres!

Our fearless driver drops us off at a wooden jetty where, right on time, a helicopter swoops in and lands. It's my first chopper ride so I'm urged to sit up front. As the roar of the rotor blades reaches a crescendo, we rise up,

up and away. Over The Top heli-tours takes guests to remote areas of The Remarkables for such spectacular views that any fear soon gives way to exhilaration. We land on a patch of snowy mountaintop, surrounded by icy peaks and cloud drifts. The black helicopter against white snow and glasses of bubbles in hand is the perfect excuse to go a little "Insta-crazy".

Back in the air, we head over the Kawarau and Shotover Rivers, over beautiful farmland so remote that the home-schooled kids living there have to be flown in and out to play their sports, and over old miners' huts dotted along walking tracks now used by bikers, skiers and rafters instead of gold prospectors – they don't call Queenstown the adventure capital of the world for nothing.

A car is waiting to take us back to the lodge when we land – Matakauri Lodge takes seamless luxury travel to a whole other level – and I'm whisked

straight into the spa for a massage tailored to my wants and needs.

It's been an action-packed day so it's nice to light the fire and recline on the day bed in my room for a while to take in the incredible view. Despite being around the corner from bustling Queenstown, it's peaceful here and the lake is completely serene.

The drive from Queenstown to Wanaka is spectacular and so are some of the wines we sample on the way. Chard Farm, which started with a self-described "fruit salad" approach to winemaking in the 1990s (in other words, a little bit of everything), now sells 45,000 cases of pinot noir a year.

"Nobody knew pinot noir would do so well in the region," says director and winemaker Rob Hay, who describes the wines he produces as "elegant" rather than "big bruisers". "We're definitely at the feminine end of pinots, never the gorilla-wrestling end," Hay says, and a few samples proves he's spot-on. ▶



LUXURY LODGINGS

Where will you settle in for a night on your next visit to New Zealand?

Lodge accommodation is unique and diverse around New Zealand. Whether you fancy a night at a historic residence, a vineyard stay or easy access to ski fields, lakes or private beaches, you are guaranteed warm Kiwi hospitality and memorable experiences. Extraordinary views are par for the course so your camera can expect a workout.



HUKA LODGE

Set on the Waikato River in prime trout-fishing territory, the luxurious Huka Lodge in Taupo on the North Island was originally founded as a simple fishing lodge.



LIME TREE LODGE

Set on a 10-acre estate outside Lake Wanaka, Lime Tree Lodge provides direct access to the region's ski fields, as well as easy access to mountain hikes and lakeside activities.



HELENA BAY LODGE

Forty-five minutes by helicopter from Auckland, the Helena Bay luxury lodge features five villa suites, three kilometres of pristine coastline, four private beaches and a Russian banya (bathhouse).



OTAHUNA LODGE

New Zealand's largest private historic residence, Otahuna Lodge in Christchurch is surrounded by 12 hectares of century-old botanic and vegetable gardens.

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Clockwise from top: The master suite at Mahu Whenua Ridgeline Homestead enjoys unparalleled views; its awe-inspiring location; the grand exterior of Mahu Whenua.



and that same magnificent view so I settle in there after my bath with a pre-dinner drink. I wonder how the meal to come could possibly top last night's French onion soup (the best I've had anywhere in the world), herb-crusted lamb rack and decadent chocolate fondant. A week later, I can't get the pumpkin agnolotti with sage butter, pine nuts and feta out of my mind.

It's homely here despite the grandeur and feels far from pretentious. Book the whole lodge for up to 12 people if you like, but the lodge can accommodate eight in

the four separate suites and cottages. With a private ski field on the property, heli-biking and skiing are easily arranged – as are horse riding, gold panning and cooking lessons. Twain is no longer connected with the property but Lange remains dedicated to the eco-sanctuary's regeneration from its overgrazed past. Mahu Whenua means 'healing of the land'.

The next morning I rise with the dawn to sit outside and watch the sun come up. Distant peaks stand in silhouette against the orange glow slowly brightening the sky, and cloud hangs low over the lake. Coffee,

Left to right: One of the charming cottages at Mahu Whenua; the rustic yet luxurious interior of Mahu Whenua; on top of the world with Aspiring Helicopters.

blankets and cookies are brought out to me on the deck. It might just be the most beautiful view I've ever seen.



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For more information on what to do and where to stay when visiting the stunning Central Otago region, go to mindfood.com/article/guide-to-central-otago.

Next stop is Brennan Vineyards, where wild thyme and rosehip-covered mountains rise steeply from valleys patchworked with vines. We taste the 2017 trio, an unlikely blend of gewürtztraminer, riesling and muscat that is said to pair well with cheese – the stinkier, the better.

Lunch is served at Mt Difficulty Winery Restaurant. Vegan-friendly, low-sulfite wine is on offer here, with names influenced by the gold-mining era of the 1860s to 1920s. Roaring Meg was a hotel dancer back in the day, none the wiser that both a stream and wines would be named after her. Roaring Meg Pinot Noir is ripe with cherry, plum and wild thyme spice.

I feel like a rock star when our Aspiring Helicopter picks us up the next morning from the front lawn of Mahu Whenua Ridgeline Homestead, the grand stone and timber lodge where we're staying. We're soon landing high among the peaks. From here you can gaze out over the 55,000-hectare property now dedicated to conservation. Huntly McGregor, the

PLAN AHEAD

The Tried and True, and Something New package includes four nights in a deluxe suite at Matakauri Lodge and three at Mahu Whenua Ridgeline Homestead. Meals, wine tour, massage, heli-tour and wines all included. More information: robertsonlodges.com/the-lodges/matakauri/packages/tried-true-somethingnew.

Virgin Australia operates four direct flights per week between Sydney and Queenstown. From October 2018, Virgin Australia will operate a new route between Melbourne and Queenstown, with three flights per week. Visit virginaustralia.com.

farm manager, drives us back when we land, pointing out some of the million-plus native trees that have been planted here in the past 10 years.

After a light lunch of soup and salad – the chef asked us at dinner the night before what we thought we might like – I ride out with Zara Macdonald, the equine manager, on Dusty from stables that are simply out of this world. Shania Twain designed the homestead with her then husband, music producer John "Mutt" Lange, who has worked with the likes of Lady Gaga, AC/DC, Britney Spears and, of course, his talented ex-wife. Twain, a horse lover, had dancing Spanish horses shipped to New Zealand for her pleasure, so it makes perfect sense that the stables (complete with indoor arena, lighting and surround sound) are five-star fabulous.

I indulge in a bubble bath back at the lodge – I'm staying in the master suite, gazing out at horses as the sun begins to set. There's a fireplace by the kitchen with two cosy armchairs

Save the Dates!



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377 Frankton Road, Queenstown, New Zealand