

Wild, wild south

Thrill seekers travel year-round to New Zealand for adventures like skiing, bungee jumping, hiking, wine tasting and horse racing

Quiet, picturesque Wanaka, New Zealand, is on the south end of Lake Wanaka.

By Joe Drape

The New York Times News Service

It had taken me three flights, two days and a white-knuckle drive up spiraling switchbacks in swirling snow to arrive at this bar stool near the shore of Lake Wanaka at the foot of the Southern Alps.

Business had brought me here on such short notice that I barely even had time to buy a ski jacket — a weird experience, by the way, when it's August and you're shopping wearing shorts and flip-flops — let alone do any real prep work for my journey to New Zealand.

Now, here I was, catching the final month of winter and wearing hiking boots and layers of fleece, far from home and staring at a steaming bowl of fish chowder parked in front of me. Spring would be upon this land soon and the locals told me that by December, when I'd be shivering again at home, they'd be celebrating their "hot Christmas," with outdoor barbecues (typically called a barbie on the beach).

For now, it was noon and time to breathe deep and figure out how I was going to maximize my experience in a country that, previously, I had never given much thought.

In fact, what I knew about New Zealand could fit on a bubble-gum wrapper. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* had been filmed here — check. The All Blacks, its national rugby team, was a global powerhouse — check again. I also knew thrill seekers came here to jump

Southern Hemisphere

out of gondolas and off bridges attached to a bungee cord and that they also relished snowboarding and skiing off ramps and in half-pipes. Beyond that, not so much.

I was here to write about how elite athletes have descended on New Zea-

land each August for decades, transforming its South Island into a sort of extreme summer camp. None of these activities were exactly in my wheelhouse, and that was why tourism brochures were stacked between my chowder and cold beer.

I was riffling them one-handed, like a deck of cards, when a woman appeared next to me and offered a comforting pat on my shoulder.

"Nothing to stress over, darlin' ," she said, her pointed glasses accenting a luminous smile. "Just wander the town and enjoy us. You'll fall in love with the place, you will."

She disappeared out the door before I could offer even a smile. But it sounded

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like a plan: My time was as limited as my local knowledge, and surrendering to a strange land indeed might be good for the soul.

I had 72 hours to get the flavor of a place that I was neither particularly suited for nor would have necessarily chosen as a destination on my own. No one will ever mistake me for Bear Grylls, and I know that the wild is going to beat this man every time.

Still, in a couple of days I managed to discover my inner extreme athlete, contemplate magnificent nature, catch a flick in a charming art house, gorge on steak and fish, and even bet on a horse race or two.

I spent my mornings on skis in the mountains to get

to the Olympic athletes I was in the country to cover, which left my afternoons free to chart this resort town of Wanaka.

My days started with a meat pie and a flat white, which sounds rustic but was served with the newspapers at a number of coffee shops and was nothing more than an empanada washed down with a latte. It girded the stomach well for the drive up the mountain, where the sheep huddled against one another for acres upon acres before the road suddenly gave way to a steep, twisting, narrow dirt road.

On a postcard or from a well-fortified scenic lookout, the mountain range looks brushstroked by Michelangelo with the snowcaps a celestial white and bathed in golden light. From behind the wheel of a car, on a road without a guardrail pretending to keep you from driving off a sheer cliff, the peaks look more like forces of nature stalking your peripheral vision and ready to fall on you at any time.

I will join the chorus of travelers and tell you that the landscapes of New Zealand are magnificent. They are enchanted and ethereal but also forbidding and intimidating. In short, it is the perfect location to create J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth.

I shivered with relief each time I pulled into the Cardrona Alpine Resort and tried to forget that eventually I'd have to make my way down. I accomplished that after a couple of hours of snowplowing down the mountain.

New Zealand offers

challenges to skiers and snowboarders of all stripes — backcountry adventurers, expert mogul managers and freestylers. The Southern Alps are bald and knotty with few trees breaking up the terrain or shading the August sun. It means a fleece is often enough to keep you warm, and the wide runs encourage as much daring as you are up for.

With its jumps and Olympic-size halfpipe and a wealth of gentle intermediate runs, Cardrona accommodates most thrill seekers as well as a strictly functional skier like myself. It caters to families with a children's ski school and a raucous, casual lodge.

I didn't exactly go death-defying Kiwi, but I managed to get on my edges and hurtle down steeper runs than I had in the previous decade. In fact, by being out of my comfort zone at a winter wonderland on the other side of the world in the dead of August, I rediscovered the joy of the slopes. Just because I refused to jump off a bridge tethered to a giant rubber band didn't mean I was faint-hearted.

There were afternoons, however, I wanted solitude and a little history before returning to town, and I found it at the foot of the mountain at the Cardrona Hotel. Established in 1863, its stone walls and splintered wood floors attest to its place among the ranks of New Zealand's oldest hotels.

With a low-slung ceiling, fireplaces and relics from the area's gold rush

days, I was able to get a taste of the country's frontier days along with my apres-ski beer.

It was springtime in the Southern Hemisphere, which meant afternoons down the mountain near Lake Wanaka were sunny and mild and lent themselves to "tramps," in the local vernacular, or hikes, west of here at Mount Aspiring National Park.

I did want a taste of a New Zealand outdoor adventure and chose a tramp that started in the center of town, took me to Roy's Bay and wound me along the lake shore with strategic stops at the Edgewater Resort for a scone and then the Rippon Vineyard for a wine tasting.

It was cooler on the trails, and the wind rustled the red beech trees, giving me a chill as well as flushing the rifleman birds and South Island robins into the air.

Eventually, I arrived at Waterfall Creek, where I sat and enjoyed the waters of sparkling sapphire reflecting the soft edges of a snow-capped mountain range.

It looked like something out of *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth*, but colored and highlighted by Andy Warhol.

Admittedly, I was on much more comfortable ground in town, where I padded among boutiques and pubs and chatted up strangers until they became friends. Or maybe it was the other way around.

Like Lake Tahoe with its bounty of outdoor attractions, this is a year-round tourist destination mostly for Kiwis and Australians

—though the number of European travelers is growing. Many of them stay, too, which means bartenders and waitresses are snowboarders and hikers and love their home and are enthusiastic ambassadors for Wanaka's many pleasures.

I was sent to Cinema Paradiso by an expat from Auckland (his description) named Tim, who was a part-time ski instructor

and full-time bartender. It's a classic old movie house that shows four different films a day amid the smell of flat whites and freshly baked cookies and the sound of squeaking sofas that is the furthest thing from stadium seating.

It is more Film Forum than Sundance, but was a welcome dose of funky civilization amid all the
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Visitors can take a "tramp," or hike, along the shore of Lake Wanaka. *The New York Times/Andrew Quilty*

fresh air and hearty outdoor activity for which the area is famous.

It was during my initial hours in town over that bowl of fish chowder, however, that I got my best tips. The first of them came from Peter Byrne, who with his wife, Vicki, was the proprietor of the Lake Bar. He saw me looking at the entries for the New Zealand horse races and ventured a guess that I was a betting man; he suggested I find my way to the Bullock Bar, where there was off-track betting and the best steak in town. He was correct.

And then, of course, there was Carol Little, the woman in the pointy glasses with the husky, comforting voice who had urged me to wander Wanaka stress-free. I saw her on the mountain dressed, fittingly, as a fairy godmother, waving a magic wand and greeting all of us as we put on her skis. Eighteen years ago, her daughter



Wanaka has a lively, resortlike night-life scene. *The New York Times/Andrew Quilty*

"Look around. Where else are you going to see all this beauty?"

Carol Little

was married here and Little had such an enchanted weekend that she decided to leave her home near Dunedin and make Wanaka her home.

She found a job at the resort and has held every job from shelving skis and punching lift tickets to her present gig as a greeter, entertainer and the unofficial mayor of a fun-loving town. She has bungee-jumped, sky-dived, para-

glided and performed other acts of derring-do since arriving here. But Little insisted that none of them had first attracted or kept her here all these years. Instead, she felt a simpler pull.

"Look around," she said, swinging that wand from mountain peak to mountain peak. "Where else are you going to see all this beauty? We love the outdoors. We feel alive. And look at all the smiles on these people. They keep me young.

"If you haven't fallen in love with us by now, darlin', I can't help you."

There was no need for further intervention.