

# February 2018

ADVENTURE

## Risk and Reward

Queenstown has stayed true to its pioneering roots and there's still plenty of gold in the region's thrilling hills.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY STUART WALMSLEY



Hiking Roys Peak,  
an hour from  
Queenstown.



FROM TOP: One of the Hydro Attack “sharks” on Lake Wakatipu; looking out over Queenstown from Stratosfare Restaurant, at the top of the Skyline Gondola.



**GLOBETROTTERS FIRST CAME** to Queenstown in the 1860s to try and strike it rich on New Zealand’s goldfields and, while the commodity may have changed, that pioneering spirit most definitely remains. The world’s unofficial adventure capital now hosts a staggering 3.2 million visitors every year from backpackers to bourgeoisie, combines fast living with rare beauty, and has stayed true to the boom-or-bust culture on which it was founded.

“This town, I love it, it’s amazing, but it’s a gold rush that never stopped. It was a gold rush that built it, and it’s a gold rush to this day,” reflects Richard Docherty, the Glaswegian owner of popular health-food eatery **Rehab** ([therehabstory.com](http://therehabstory.com); mains from NZ\$10) and a Queenstown resident of nine years.

Docherty is indicative of many Queenstown “locals,” a rather arbitrary term in this part of the world. The resort town’s modern-day pioneers are as international as the original cast of the 19th century and form a surprisingly tight-knit community servicing the steady flow of adventurers, selfie-stick wielding tour groups and holidaying antipodean families.

The Scandinavian miners who introduced skiing to the region 150 years ago would be delighted to see the snow sport center it has now become, but likely be quite befuddled by the recent explosion in mountain biking that has helped make shoulder seasons a thing of the past.

“It used to be just winter when you saw the casts and ankle injuries, but now it’s all year around,” laughs Rae Ellis, co-owner of **Bespoke Kitchen** ([bespokekitchen.co.nz](http://bespokekitchen.co.nz); mains from NZ\$12), named 2016 New Zealand Café of the Year only six months after opening. I find Bespoke’s sun-drenched garden the perfect place to sip coffee and watch the constant parade of sightseers, mountain bikers and other thrillseekers bustle between the center of town and the now 50-year-old **Skyline Gondola** ([skyline.co.nz](http://skyline.co.nz)).

The gondola places you atop Bob’s Peak, and is a great way to orient yourself with the town’s dramatic setting amid Lake Wakatipu, The Remarkables and Coronet Peak, New Zealand’s first commercial ski field. The December timing of my visit means the snowboard stayed in storage, but summer opens up an even more bewildering array of high-octane activities from river surfing to heli-biking. New Zealander A.J. Hackett started the first commercial bungee jumping

operation here in 1989 and Queenstown is also regarded as the home of jet boating with operators on Lake Wakatipu and the Shotover, Kawarau and Dart Rivers.

Centrally located **Vertigo Bikes** ([vertigobikes.co.nz](http://vertigobikes.co.nz)) is the place to start any pedal-powered outing, but I have my eye on a different type of descent. More familiar with the parched earth of outback Australia, I am captivated by the *Lord Of The Rings*-like landscape of New Zealand’s South Island, and I’m yearning to fly to one of its perilous looking peaks.

A Canadian couple kindly allow me to gatecrash a mountain-top photography lesson/picnic with **Heli Glenorchy** ([heliglenorchy.co.nz](http://heliglenorchy.co.nz)) and **Paradise Pictures** ([paradisepictures.co.nz](http://paradisepictures.co.nz)). “There’s no bad time to visit Queenstown, especially if you’re a photographer,” says Laurence Belcher, who runs Paradise Pictures. “All the seasons offer something different, the landscape is always changing. It’s just magic.”

Back at a more sensible altitude, I set about enjoying my Kiwi-styled Mexican lunch at **Taco Medic** ([tacomedic.co.nz](http://tacomedic.co.nz); mains from NZ\$7) while watching various aquatic activities on Lake Wakatipu. By far the weirdest watercrafts are operated by **Hydro Attack** ([hydroattack.co.nz](http://hydroattack.co.nz)): four semi-submersible “sharks” inspired by a vessel Kiwi designer Rob Innes saw in a *Tintin* comic.

“He [Rob] is part mad scientist, part thrillseeker; he’ll try his hand at anything, an

amazing engineer,” explains head pilot Ruaidhri De Faoite, an Irishman who has been in Queenstown for four years. “To say it’s a modified Jet Ski is a bit of an understatement; the controls are taken from small stunt aircraft and the cockpit glass is from a fighter jet.”

Creatively, this is a place with few limits, an attitude clearly evident at community-focused retreat **Sherwood Queenstown** ([sherwoodqueenstown.nz](http://sherwoodqueenstown.nz); doubles from NZ\$180). The in-room literature asks me to “Be Here Now” and this request is not hard to honor. Staff often visit on their day off to join the relaxed vibe of the midweek market, work on their own projects or attend gigs.

The skeleton of the mock-Tudor motor inn that preceded Sherwood has been retained, and other parts of its anatomy repurposed; the walls of the guest rooms are lined with recycled cork panels and ex-Italian army blankets prove perfectly serviceable as curtains.

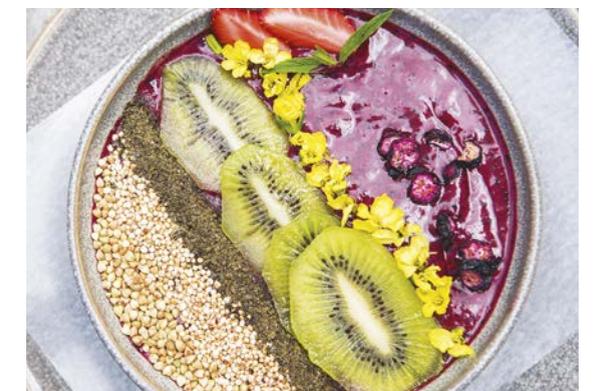
Guests are encouraged to roam the bountiful garden, from which up to 70 percent of the restaurant’s ingredients are sourced, Master of Wine Stephen Wong has created a fascinating guide of all-natural selections, and a nightly campfire provides the opportunity for guests, staff and locals to connect.

“We’ve had people through here whose normal accommodation would

CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: A mountain biker prepares to descend Coronet Peak; Bespoke Kitchen’s colorful fruit smoothie bowl; Sherwood’s restaurant menu makes use of the hotel’s kitchen garden.



**The in-room literature asks me to ‘Be Here Now’ and this request is not hard to honor**



FROM TOP: Polished design at QT Queenstown; Yonder is famous for its specialty coffee and diverse menu; stargazing at Skyline Queenstown.



be a five- or six- star hotel, but the thing that made the experience for them was the ability to sit out there and drink a whiskey and talk to the people that cooked your food and share stories,” explains co-creator Sam Chapman, who made his name overseeing legendary Wellington establishment Matterhorn. “We were surprised by how powerful a simple fire and some stumps can be.”

Unconventional in a completely different way is newly opened **QT Queenstown** ([qthotelsandresorts.com](http://qthotelsandresorts.com); doubles from NZ\$319), which boasts unmatched in-room views of The Remarkables in a prime location.

QT’s quirky, playful ethos fits the area’s energetic vibe like a comfy ski glove and is perfect for the adventurer who likes a bit of luxury at the end of their zip line. Matched with high-end buffet dining experience Bazaar, mealtimes stimulate all the senses as the international mosaic of flavors combines with the visual pleasure of changing light on the mountains and lake.

A retro ski theme prevails throughout, QT’s creative music director Andrew Lewis has crafted a suitably upbeat soundtrack and I highly recommend calling for ice to mix the Karven dry gin-based cocktail that begs to be enjoyed on your balcony upon arrival.

Fresh from my own balcony beverage, I float down the hill to a see a Brazilian band at new café/bar **Yonder** ([yonderqt.co.nz](http://yonderqt.co.nz), mains from NZ\$22), and discover a culinary scene also infused with innovation. As the South-American chefs lead the samba, head bartender Phil Cooke talks me through his summer selections featuring homemade citrus gels and locally foraged bark, elderflower and chocolate mint.

Marketing and events manager Suzy Larsen explains Yonder is a clean-living concept from Gary Livesey, one of the creators of Queenstown institution **The World Bar** ([theworldbar.co.nz](http://theworldbar.co.nz)), and swapping teapot tipples for turmeric lattes was something of a necessity.

“He [Gary] was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis a couple of years ago and a huge part of dealing with that was changing his diet—cutting out gluten and dairy—and he noticed that there wasn’t really anywhere in Queenstown catering to different dietary requirements,” Larsen says. Yonder’s menu is color-coded, denoting whether their dishes are dairy- or gluten-free, vegan, or all three.

Another delicious discovery I make during a day trip to nearby Arrowtown is specialty brunch venue **The Chop Shop** ([fb.com/thechopshopfoodmerchants](http://fb.com/thechopshopfoodmerchants); mains from NZ\$25), a prominent café with rustic décor just like its town. So well preserved are Arrowtown’s original miner’s huts and historic main street that some mistake this picturesque place for a themed village, but digging a little deeper to find this local haunt will bring you pleasantly back to reality.

Arrowtown is also home to some of New Zealand’s most expensive real estate and, ironically, the region’s popularity is one of the few things holding it back. Ellis of Bespoke Kitchen relied on local connections to secure an eight-bedroom Queenstown rental home in December, just to retain staff who couldn’t find accommodation in town.

But for those not looking to put down roots, this is now a remarkable all-seasons destination. High-quality hotels and cuisine and any number of ways to activate your adrenal gland, all in a community where you can still buy a car on the side of the road or safely hitchhike to work.

Sherwood co-creator Chapman, whose dual existence as a strategic planner and communications professional means his consult often extends beyond the retreat, sums up this balancing act: “Resort towns are interesting beasts. They can either go one way and become a cultural doughnut, whereby real life is pushed out to the furthest margins and they become the preserve of the few and the wealthy, or they can really fight to build community and become far more enduring than a postcard existence. I think that’s the choice Queenstown faces and—the encouraging thing is—it seems to be pushing for the right outcome.” ☺



FROM TOP: The dining room at Bazaar in QT Queenstown has unbeatable views over Lake Wakatipu and The Remarkables; a rainbow and sun-shower over Queenstown.

## More ways to play in Queenstown

### Onsen Hot Pools

This boutique day-spa experience includes private, cedar-lined pools that overlook the Shotover River canyon. [onsen.co.nz](http://onsen.co.nz); from NZ\$95.

### Remarkables Market

A community catch-up, featuring crafts, gifts and fresh produce in a

spectacular location. [remarkablespark.com](http://remarkablespark.com); every Saturday until April 14.

### Skyline Stargazing

Learn about the Southern Hemisphere’s mesmerizing solar system with an expert atop the historic Skyline Gondola. [skyline.co.nz](http://skyline.co.nz); tickets from NZ\$93.

