

# What's Up Down South

There's more to New Zealand than a glow-worm infested grotto

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*EARLY ONE MORNING*, bleary-eyed after clearing passport control at Christchurch International Airport, I make my way through customs. There, a burly customs officer peers suspiciously at the shoes I have on and demands, "Where was the last place you wore these to?" Groggy and still shrouded in brain fog, I fumble a reply: "Uh, Mount Cook."

"Mount Cook? Wow," she says and lets me through. Truth is, I'd never been to the place. But I will on this trip.

So, I set foot on the most beautiful country I've ever seen. People say, "If life gets too sticky wherever you are, that's ok. You can always pull up and go someplace else". Sh\*t wasn't hitting the fan yet, but a break was just what I needed. And New Zealand is just perfect.

It is the sportsman's wilderness. You never have to worry about overcrowding, in fact, it's quite the reverse. There are more sheep than

people living in New Zealand, and people live at a pace where there's time to think and to talk. They live a double life of indolence and outdoor adventure.

New Zealand first saw the Maori, who arrived around 1,000 years ago. It then welcomed its first British settlements around the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, around the same time Singapore got founded by Raffles. Today, largely off the main tourist tangent, New Zealand is more welcoming than ever. It receives visitors with the same hospitality and curiosity that must have greeted the English in the 1700s. Life in New Zealand echoes an unforgotten past. Much of the countryside and rolling hills are dotted with happy cows, and the trout grow fat and strong in rivers as clean as a toddler's mind.

It's a shame if you're here only to sail down a glow-worm infested grotto or see a Maori



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dance. The North Island is well, nice, but the South – boy, oh boy. It's a cocktail of the many flavours of Finland, Scotland, and Switzerland, with bits of Maine and Santa Cruz thrown in for good measure.

## FIRST, CHRISTCHURCH

It's been five years since the 6.3-magnitude quake shook Christchurch, killing 185 people and reducing many cathedrals and national treasures to rubble. Scores of people have moved out, and it still feels a tad solemn

## DESTINATION

### THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE

The Church of the Good Shepherd by Lake Tekapo; a ski plane resting on a glacier; the TranzAlpine; street art in Christchurch; sheep grazing the high country



and post-apocalyptic this late autumn. The city is recovering, but at a stately pace. Some buildings have been left alone, as if to memorialise the event.

But between the rubble and its sorry state, efforts have been made to keep the spirits up. This is done through fun 'gap fillers' like outdoor dance mats and movie theatres, as well as family playground pop-ups. Streets are spruced up with colour – there's art plastered everywhere and the original Christchurch Cathedral has been replaced with one partly made with cardboard. There's also shopping at the funky Re:START Mall built on shipping containers and The Tannery, a stylish enclave of cafes, bars and boutique stores.

I'm positive Christchurch will heal and feel wanted again. But until then, the clock is ticking and I must leave for a special Alpine Safari tour to the high country.

### ONWARD TO LAKE TEKAPO & MT COOK

Still jet-lagged, I leave Christchurch in a rented Corolla. Flying down an empty four-lane highway, I worry more about my bearings than crashing. I've never done a road trip by myself and given my 'remarkable' sense of direction, friends back home are not confident I'd make it. Neither am I. Miraculously, three hours and five dead possums (not me) later, I make it.

Lake Tekapo's a dream, a stunning town of some 300 folk. Like a brief summer fling, I stay for one night wishing it could be longer. Still, an overnight stay can get you to do almost everything the town has to offer if you get here early enough. Check into Peppers Bluewater (best view, I promise), have a soak or massage at the Tekapo Hot Springs, visit the famous Church of the Good Shepherd and get confused by constellations under the Aoraki Mackenzie Dark Sky Reserve.

The next morning, I almost shatter an icy windscreen with hot water (in my defence, I panicked) before heading on to Mount Cook, a quick 1.5 hours away. My timetable is packed. At 8.50am: a bumpy 8WD tour, 12.30pm: jet about endangered glaciers over murky waters, and 3.30pm: jet about the mountains in a ski plane and land atop the Tasman Glacier. While it was cool getting to know an ex-Sherpa who almost died in the Mount Cook avalanche, and getting up close with glaciers alongside chatty Chinese tourists, the ski plane for me was the cherry on top.

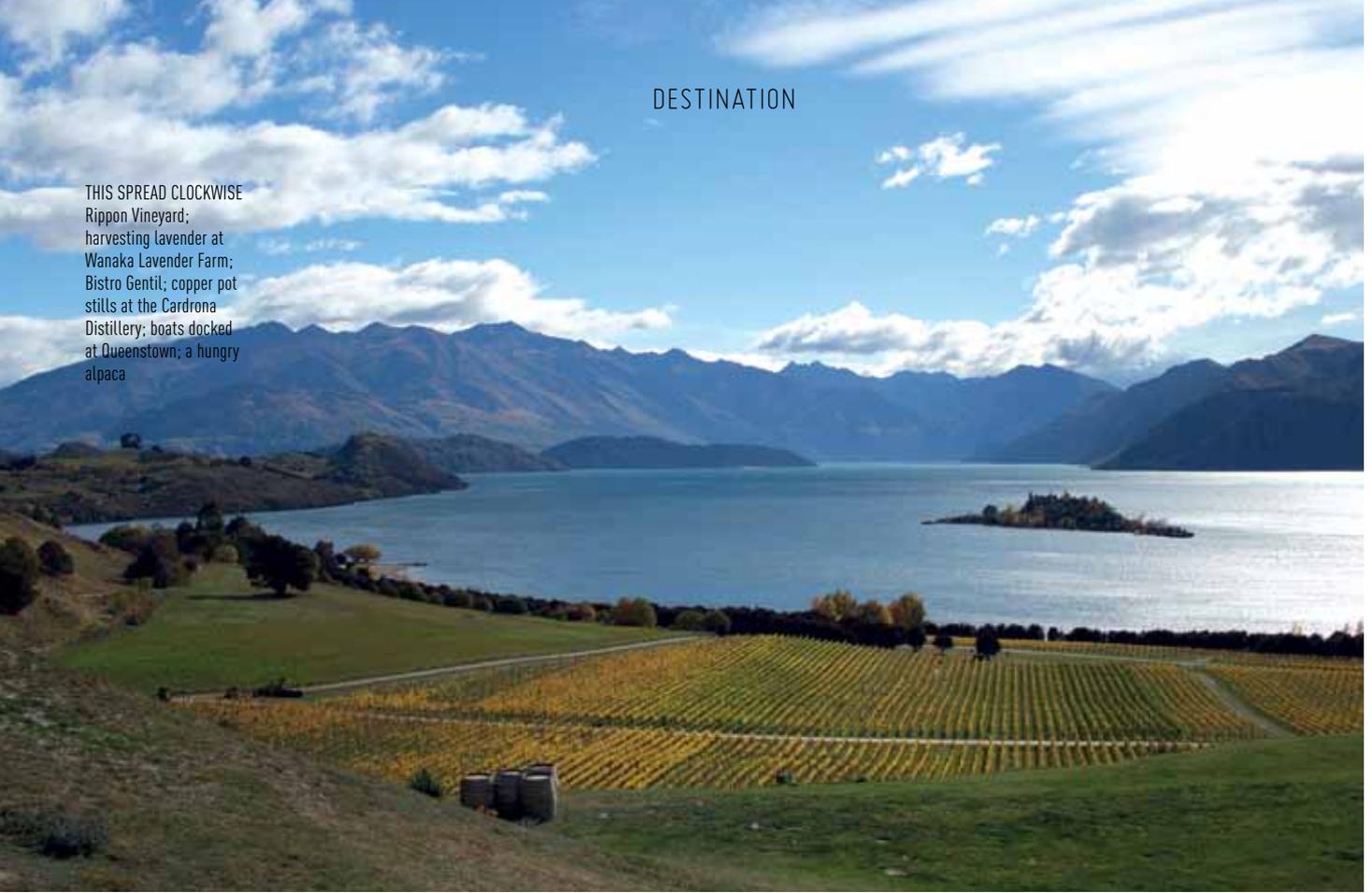
The next time I'm back, I'm going heli-hiking.

### WANAKA

Things got pretty interesting when I arrived in Wanaka, a beautiful resort town in the Otago region. I met a pair of good-looking snowboarders who run the Wanaka Lavender

## DESTINATION

THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE  
Rippon Vineyard;  
harvesting lavender at  
Wanaka Lavender Farm;  
Bistro Gentil; copper pot  
still at the Cardrona  
Distillery; boats docked  
at Queenstown; a hungry  
alpaca





Farm – actor Sam Neill, who owns the Two Paddocks winery, lets them produce their essential oils on his grounds. Here, I meet eight curious alpacas on the way in. I get the chance to take a ride around town on a World War II Tiger Moth plane. Then I skydived from 15,000 feet and lived to tell the tale.

The best way to discover the open country of Otago is by camping out but if you're not one for roughing it out, Woolshed has plenty of spots for glam camping, or glamping. The tents come with mattresses, duvets, mohair throws and plenty of modern facilities that make the outdoor experience more comfortable.

Back in my tent I realise it has got cold. Slipping under the covers of my bed though, I am thankful to find it warm from the hot water bottles my host had placed there. The thing about glamping at Criffel Station, is besides its friendly host, Samantha, it is rustic. You have to get used to doing your business the natural way – in the open. You need to fire up a tank of water to shower, and pee into the mechanical toilet. I wake up in the morning, feeling sure I'm alone apart from the deer and elusive rabbit, till I see a farmer drive past on a tractor right right after I am washed and dressed. You can call it good timing.

## QUEENSTOWN

Fresh out of mild-mannered Wanaka, I find life a lot busier in Queenstown. Famous for guest-starring in *Lord of the Rings*, Queenstown is a beauty that's framed by boats and

I wake up, feeling sure I'm alone, save for the deer and rabbit, till I see a farmer drive past

Lake Wakatipu. It is also where AJ Hackett pioneered bungee jumping, but I'm not here to jump off a bridge, I'm here for the food, art and nightlife. It's ski season by the time you read this, but in the summer, you can take the Dart River Jet tour out to Glenorchy and beyond. Or you can stay in town, have an afternoon beer on a boat, stroll down the weekly craft markets. If you do come across Fergburger, grab one. People kill for its burgers and the queues can be cruel. But that's how you know they're good.

I would stay on in Queenstown for as long as I can, but just like the burger and its perishable brothers, all things good must come to an end. Of course, I'll probably come back as there's still a lot more road to cover. For now, it's back home. And all I can do is turn to take one long last glimpse of New Zealand, to see it in that light, against that blue sky before it's gone all too soon. 🍷

*Special thanks to Tourism Board New Zealand and Leica, for loan of the X-U camera.*

*Getting there: Want to fly comfortably on a budget? Singapore Airlines now offers premium economy to New Zealand via Auckland. Painful long haul flights and backaches will soon be a thing of the past*

## WHAT YOU DO NOT WANT TO MISS

### Harlequin Public House

Cosy up to fresh oysters and one of the best risottos you will ever have. All in a beautifully restored old villa that only sophisticated folks go to. *32 Salisbury Street, Christchurch Central*

### TranzAlpine Train

Hop on one of the world's most famous train escapes. This runs daily through the year over deep gorges and running rivers. *kiwirailscenic.co.nz*

### Rippon Vineyard

Enjoy biodynamic reds and whites beside a lake that keeps the grapes warm in the cold. *76A Golf Course Road, Wanaka*

### Bistro Gentil

At this joint off the beaten path, enjoy good French food and brilliant views in a cottage setting. *76A Golf Course Road, Wanaka*

### Cardrona Distillery

Look behind the scenes at the world's most southern whisky distillery. A Speyside-style whisky will be released by the 2020s, but for now, gin and vodka will do. *2125 Cardrona Valley Road, Wanaka*