

You can't turn back the clock to
skiing's golden age in the States. But you can
travel this summer to New Zealand,
NEW ZEALAND TIME where the skiing remains pure,
the vistas pristine and the 'Kiwiana' culture impossibly friendly.

BY PAUL TOLME

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIERAN SCOTT





HAPPY MINORITY

New Zealand's sheep to human ratio is 12 to one, as demonstrated on the beautiful drive to South Island's Treble Cone resort (opposite). A day on nearby Cardrona's slopes will prove that sheep out rank skiers by an even greater margin.

The fact that I might be a 'nancy boy'

overwhelms me as I size up the high-speed ropetow at Craigieburn Valley, high in New Zealand's Southern Alps. In my hands is a "nutcracker"—a foot-long contraption attached to a harness around my waist. The name, I'm relieved to learn, derives from the device's resemblance to the tool used to crack walnuts. The idea is to attach the nutcracker to the rope, brace for a jolt and hang on for dear life.

Eight days into a whirlwind New Zealand ski tour, I've come to Craigieburn to experience the country's most legendary club field. Club fields, a uniquely Kiwi tradition, are no-frills backcountry ski areas with steep lines, ungroomed snow and no lift attendants. "Club fields aren't for nancy boys," a Kiwi warned me earlier in the trip.

So my ego hangs in the balance as I line up beside the ropetow, the first of three that yank skiers up 1,700 vertical feet to the summit. I grit my teeth, clamp onto the rope and jerk forward like a novice water skier. Somehow—and this in no way is a given—I make it to the summit without face-planting.

The payoff is immediately obvious: 1,000 acres of steep chutes, treeless alpine bowls and no crowds. "Club fields weed out the punters," says Kiwi carpenter Christian Bridson. "On a powder day, you've got maybe 150 people on the hill. Where else can you find that?"

New Zealand is a land of many such quirks and surprises—and of raw, staggering beauty. There's a reason that movie producers staged Middle-earth here for the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. One third of the country is protected park land, with vast open spaces, big skies and white-capped mountains that sweep down to beaches, fjords and coastal rainforests. My itinerary is frenetic: Nine ski areas in 12 days, spanning two islands

that, combined, are roughly the size of California. The plan is to hit all of New Zealand's major resorts and find a few hidden gems off the tourist track.

South Island, with its rugged mountains, is the national epicenter of outdoor tourism and skiing. My journey begins—after 15 hours in the air from San Francisco—in Queenstown, one of New Zealand's most scenic cities. Jet-lagged, I pick up my Astra rental car at Queenstown airport and grapple with my first challenge: driving on the left. Horns blare as I gun through roundabouts and struggle to shift with my left hand.

Queenstown's 150 bars, cafes, pubs and restaurants bustle with skiers and backpackers from Australia and Japan. The late hour precludes skiing, so I stroll the waterfront paths of Lake Wakatipu, dine on shark curry at the Fishbone Café—where the menu also features muttonbird, a salty, fishy-tasting baby gull—then stumble back to my room, flip

on the tube and pass out to the New Zealand Sheep Dog Championships.

Coronet Peak, founded in 1947, is a 30-minute drive from Queenstown through rolling farmlands. Billed as South Island's most popular ski area, Coronet features three lifts and a Tbar across 690 acres. New Zealand resorts are small by American standards, and different in one major respect: All are above treeline. That makes for jaw-dropping views and, when the snow is deep, lots of off-piste lines. Unfortunately, a two-week warm spell has thawed the Queenstown area. Only the groomers, covered in manmade snow, are open. I ride the mountain from side-to-side, happy to be making turns in September but disappointed by the quality of the snow. My experience is similar the next day at The Remarkables. The slopes are icy in the morning and turn sloppy by early afternoon. So after a dozen runs I make like a tourist and go sightseeing.

THERE'S A REASON THAT PRODUCERS STAGED MIDDLE-EARTH HERE FOR THE *LORD OF THE RINGS* FILM TRILOGY. **ONE-THIRD OF THE COUNTRY IS PROTECTED PARK LAND, WITH VAST SPACES AND SWEEPING MOUNTAINS.**



VIEW FROM DOWN UNDER New Zealand skiing, like that at Treble Cone (opposite), isn't known for its deep snow, but the same can't be said of its stunning views. A statue of a Kiwi, the national symbol of New Zealand, greets visitors on the shores of Lake Wanaka.







FIT FOR A QUEEN

The epicenter of New Zealand's kinetic lifestyle is South Island's Queenstown, with Coronet Peak (opposite), the country's most popular ski resort, a short drive away. Two pillars of Kiwi life: native green-shell mussels and a handle of local ale.

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The good news is that the entire Queenstown area appears to be suffering from an outdoorsy strain of Attention Deficit Disorder. A partial list of options includes jetboat rides, paragliding, bungee jumping, skydiving, whitewater rafting, hiking, biking and fishing. Better still, Kiwis extend their general zest for a good time to eating and drinking. I visit the nearby tourist hamlets of Glenorchy and Arrowtown, feast on slow-cooked lamb shanks (a Kiwi specialty) and get acquainted with Kiwi beer. Rather than pint glasses, beer comes in mugs called "handles," as in, "Another handle of Monteith's please, barman."

I rise early on Saturday morning and grab a "long black" (a large black coffee) and a meat pie for the hour drive to Cardrona Alpine Resort. The route winds through wineries, orchards and sheep pastures before climbing into the Crown Range and its 15 kilometer-per-hour (10 mph) switchbacks.

Cardrona is a family hill, a miniature Keystone, Colo., in the Southern Alps with a tricked-out terrain park that draws kids from across the country. "The best runs are off the Captain's Quad lift," says Richard, an expat American who lives nearby in Wanaka. For the next two hours we work Eagle Rock and Secret Chute, wide trails that run between tow-

ering rock outcroppings. "The snow isn't as good as the Rockies, but the weather is hard to beat," he says. "You can ski up here all morning, then go down to the valley and go for a bike ride." Sure enough, I pass two cyclists later that afternoon as I drive to Wanaka.

Lake Wanaka ripples with peach-colored hues at sunset. Wanaka is smaller than Queenstown, though it has a good selection of restaurants and pubs showing rugby matches on the telly. Dropping into the Edgewater resort bar for a handle, I meet Fly, a ski guide who is nursing a Steinlager near the fireplace. Fly sports a goatee, says "spesh" for special and declines to reveal his real name. "Fly is good enough for the coppers," he says with a smile. Fly has skied around the world, so I ask about the differences between New Zealand and the United States. "The States have a lot of beautiful aspects, but here it's all condensed into a small area. New Zealand is one giant green valley with snowy mountains. You get a lot of different micro-climates in a short distance. It's a spesh place."

Treble Cone, near Wanaka, is an advanced skier's destination that offers some of South Island's best off-piste terrain. After three days on the groomers I'm hungry for spring corn, so I follow a path from the top of the Saddle Quad to

Treble Cone summit at 6,850 feet. The view is among the most beautiful I've ever seen. Lake Wanaka spreads out across the valley floor, framed by high peaks on the distant shore. Above me, a rock climber scales one of the 50-foot rock towers that rise from the ridge as I drop down the face and push soft turns. "Yeah! Git it, mate," someone shouts.

Day 6 finds me speeding north through arid valleys of tussock grasses on Route 8, where cars are few and passing lanes are ample. I turn off the highway at the Ski Ohau sign in Clearburn and head for the distant mountains. Cresting a ridge, Lake Ohau appears, rimmed with leafy beech trees. Imagine Lake Tahoe with no development. Way off the beaten track, Ohau (OH-how) is one of New Zealand's little-known treats.

Several hours later, I stand speechless on the ridgeline high above the ski area, which is set in a cirque that drains to the lake far below. I ski the center lines to get the lay of the land, then follow a boot path up to the ridge, where, for the rest of the afternoon, I repeatedly plunder a virtually untouched field of sun-warmed corn that drops 1,000 vertical feet back to the trail network.

With just one fixed-grip lift, Ohau is reminiscent of the austere ski areas, such as Colorado's Berthoud Pass, that once dominated the Rockies. Owner Mike Nielson smiles when I tell him this later in the lakefront lodge. He puts on his best American accent and repeats what an American skier once told him: "This place," he says, "it's like Collier-rada in the Sixties, man!"



A TALE OF TWO WORLDS While it's warm and green on the shores of Lake Wanaka, snow caps 9,951-foot Mt. Aspiring, one of New Zealand's highest peaks. Leave the SUV in the garage; at Mt. Hutt a staff Vespa does the trick (opposite).

UNLIKE IN THE STATES, IT'S THE NORTH-FACING SLOPES THAT WARM UP IN THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE. **IT TAKES ME A WHILE TO RECALIBRATE MY SKIER'S INSTINCT TO SEEK SOFT SNOW ON SOUTH-FACING SLOPES.**

The Ohau Lodge features locally milled wood floors and Kiwiana art and furniture. I stay in the Upper Temple Wing overlooking the lake, share some Tasman Bitter with a few Kiwis from Dunedin and dine on salmon, risotto and red wine in the lodge. Of all the areas I visit, Ohau is the hardest to leave.

Next up: Mt. Hutt, the largest and highest of the South Island resorts. I arrive at noon after a three-hour drive from Ohau to find the south-facing aspects glazed with ice. So I traverse to the resort's boundary and find sun-baked slopes of soft corn. Unlike in the States, it's the north-facing slopes that warm up

in the Southern Hemisphere. It takes me a while to recalibrate my skier's instinct to seek soft snow on south-facing slopes.

"Coming here is like going back in time," Salt Lake City resident Steve Gartner says. We're drinking Steinlager handles at the Blue Pub in Methven, a tourist town on the Canterbury Plains where Mt. Hutt skiers lodge. Gartner returns to Hutt every few years to reunite with his childhood pal Pete Brentwood. Aussies, the two ski-bummed here as young men in the early '80s. Now they're in their 50s, and returning to New Zealand is also a return to their carefree youth. "I told Pete today that it could be

1980," Steve says. "It has barely changed. I mean, they still deliver milk to your doorstep here."

No resort better epitomizes this Kiwi old-school charm than Craigieburn Valley. Having survived the nutcrackers, I hike the ridgeline and drop into a steep slope covered in softening crud. Many of the skiers I encounter here booked their trips through Black Diamond Safaris, a company that specializes in club field tours. They teach newbies how to use nutcrackers and guide skiers to the best snow. "The club fields have minimal budgets and staffing, and they're too busy to help you," says Heather Dent, a Tahoe native who runs the company with her Kiwi husband.

Craigieburn features a log-and-stone lodge with communal dining tables. Staff members take turns cooking. Tonight, it's all-you-can-eat lasagna and salad, followed by chocolate cake. With no TV, phones or Internet, lodgers tell stories and share drinks. At dusk, I venture outside and see an odd bird eyeing a rental car. I come to learn that it's a Kea, one of the few species of parrots that live in the mountains. Keas are a protected species, and seem to take advantage of that status. They swipe unattended gloves and goggles and are known to rip the rubber linings out of car windows. "They're cheeky little buggers," a bystander says.

I awake the next morning shagged from seven straight days on the slopes, so the six-hour drive back to Queenstown is a chance to relax and enjoy the scenery. Tomorrow, I'll fly to the North Island, rent a car in Auckland and drive five hours south to Mount Ruapehu for the last leg of the journey.

Mount Ruapehu (Roo-ah-pay-who) is North Island's highest peak, a smoldering volcano featured as Mount Doom in the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Home to Turoa and Whakapapa (Fa-ka-papa) ski resorts, the mountain is located in the lush Tongariro National Park. Due to its elevation (9,177 feet), the mountain receives some of New Zealand's deepest and driest snow. Conditions are superb when the weather is good. When the Pacific rain storms roll in, however, it's abominable.

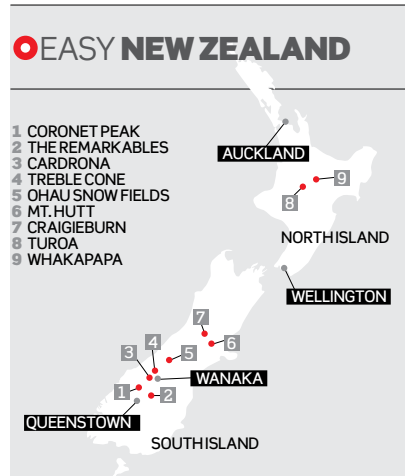
"Aw, you just *meest* it," says Turoa staffer Nadia Ferguson. "It's been beautiful for two *wikes*." It's dumping rain, and after three runs I'm soaked to my base layer. As I planned my trip, I had considered avoiding Ruapehu for this very reason. Kiwis told me to stay on South Island because Turoa and Whakapapa frequently close due to weather. Others regaled me with stories of deep snow and superior terrain. Today, thanks to thick

fog, I can barely see to the end of my arm.

"When you drive down all the way from Auckland you're out of luck if the weather is atrocious," says Phil Hawthorne. Hawthorne and his wife, Margaret, run the Spiral Gardens bed and breakfast in Raurimu, a village of 65. We're standing on the deck watching a group of tui birds flitter amidst plum tree blossoms. It's mating season, and they're making a racket. "Those tuis," Hawthorne says, displaying the Kiwi accent and colloquialisms I've come to enjoy, "are full of tucker."

As for me, I'm shattered. The next morning I arrive at Whakapapa to find the upper mountain closed due to high winds. The lower slopes are clogged with skiers and coated with blue ice. The infamous Ruapehu weather has blown in. Timing is everything when skiing in New Zealand. If you want deep powder, go to the Rockies. If you're an Easterner

and want a convenient ski vacation, head to New England. Come to New Zealand for stunning mountain vistas, Kiwi hospitality and a taste of what skiing was like before the sport went big time. After a half dozen runs, my tank is empty. Sometimes, skiing is about knowing when to go home. Still, as I drive away, carloads of eager New Zealanders stream up the mountain and disappear into the clouds in my rearview mirror. ●



New Zealand's ski season generally runs from June through early November. July and August are traditional powder months, with spring conditions starting in mid-September. Lift prices are slightly cheaper than those in the States, with tickets in the \$50-\$70 (U.S.) range. Here are a few travel tips for the New Zealand newbie:

- >This is the trip to upgrade to business class. It's a long flight (about 13 hours from L.A.), and Air New Zealand's business-class seats convert into sleepers.
- >Tipping is not necessary in restaurants and pubs, though Kiwis often give 10 percent for exceptional service. And make sure to ask for a "handle" rather than a pint when ordering beer.
- >Lugging skis to New Zealand can be a hassle, so rent them there.
- >Bring clothes for warm and cold weather, as New Zealand's climate is mild at lower elevations but can be frigid at elevation.
- >For help with lodging, activities, points of interest and other information, look for the abundant i-SITE visitor centers.
- >If you're short on time, head straight for Queenstown, the South Island's ski—and outdoors—capital. It rocks.
- > For ski information: snow.co.nz. For general info: visitorinfo.net.nz.