

QUEENSTOWN CALM

Words by Mikaela Dery & Photographs by Georgina Skinner

Some of New Zealand's wilder, action-packed destinations come with a surprising amount of quietude.

Pilots often talk about the peace they feel in the sky; the silence that encapsulates the world when seen from above. In the many years that I have been flying in to Queenstown I've never had that experience. For a small town, its beauty is remarkably loud. The rugged mountains, glass-like lakes and rolling paddocks create a bold and intoxicating landscape that calls to you well before you land. Indeed, the ascent often elicits gasps from passengers, some marvelling at the scene below, others nervously anticipating a seemingly inevitable collision with the abrasive mountain ranges.

Queenstown's dauntless landscape lends itself to big experiences. Here you can leap from planes (willingly and with the appropriate safely equipment of course), speed along im-probably clear waterways, swing between canyons, bungee from bridges, snow shoe, ski, zipline or paraglide - to name just a few of the scream-inducing attractions sought by those with a penchant for adrenalin. Interestingly though, like most of New Zealand, Queenstown deals in contrasts, and so there is still plenty of calm to be found amongst this daredevil storm.

Now rightly known as the 'adventure capital of the world', Queenstown's rambunctious his-tory stretches back to the Central Otago Gold Rush. The explosive ambition of those early miners is the stuff of legend, with locals speaking of intrepid pioneers

burrowing through layers of rock to create tunnels and roads across the mountains - clearly rougher pursuits than the thrilling activities that characterise the area today. Yet even these stories of foolish-ness and bravery exist alongside calmer accounts of ingenuity and creativity. While Europe-an miners were building tunnels with dynamite, their thirst for gold imprinting eternal marks on the landscape, a smaller community of gold miners from China worked with quiet artistry, creating new technologies and finding inventive ways to survive New Zealand's harsh physical conditions, which have since earned the praise that eluded the group at the time. Their contributions are commemorated in the picturesque and well-preserved Arrowtown Chinese Settlement, located on the fringes of the now thriving community.

The existence of quiet moments alongside significantly louder ones is not unique to Queenstown, but they feel more pronounced, playing out against the vastness of the landscape. The Glenorchy Races, held on the first Saturday of January, offer a thousand moments of tranquil brilliance that unfold within the rugged, otherworldly setting. The event takes place on the local golf course - which, it should be noted, is not a deterrent for some of the more in-trepid golfers who continue to play between races. I would encourage anyone considering partaking in





Glenorchy's more traditionally daring offerings to forgo white water rafting for the cheaper and equally terrifying experience of entering the racecourse. Punters line up outside the makeshift track and wait for a gap between races before walking quickly across, hoping a wayward horse doesn't run them down. Once inside you will find a VIP tent which consists of one slightly bedraggled couch (that remains empty all day) and the freshest and most delicious whitebait fritters I have ever tasted. The competitors themselves are locals of all ages, riding their own horses, and events include the ladies race, which is particularly competitive, and the double-banking race, where each horse has two riders. One of the more exciting moments for spectators is when the jockeys disappear around the back of the golf course, with only a few of the starting line-up returning into view.

Outside of the races, the small township is home to some of my all time favourite places, including the Glenorchy Café. This unassuming building is surrounded by immense, time-worn mountains that, although this isn't literally the case, make it feel like it's always slightly overcast, as if you're experiencing it all through Jane Campion's camera lens. Inside, the walls are adorned with local art, the furniture is delightfully kitsch and it's dangerously easy to get so excited by the regional beverages on offer that you end up drinking your lunch. That said, the food is an equally fantastic testament to local produce and thoroughly worth trying.

This sense of community, which feels worlds away from the tourist attractions of Queenstown, exists

closer to the town centre as well. Take, for example, Angus Watson's studio. Watson is a local artist who, after suffering a debilitating skiing accident, dedicated himself to watercolours. His fascinating array of subjects are captured in vivid colour and detail and while his works are striking on their own, seeing them in his vibrant studio is particularly special. They fill the space, in perfect conversation with Watson's wild and fabulous garden which comes complete with a Monet-esque water lily pond and gypsy caravan.

Conveniently, Watson's studio is also located very close to Amisfield Winery. While the vineyard and its accompanying restaurant are beautiful all year round, it is particularly stunning when everyone else has gone skiing and you find yourself sharing the space with a select few kindred spirits who have chosen to stay behind. Amisfield combines fresh, local ingredients with the kind of creativity and sense of modernity that Queenstown's surge in popularity has fostered. Lunch is best accompanied by a game of pétanque, watched over by an abundance of lavender in summer and snow-capped peaks come winter.

Treasures like these exist in tiny towns, at the foot of weathered mountains, and hidden within rows of vines, yet never feel incongruous to the dramatic flair of their Queenstown surroundings. Instead, they are somehow amplified by their contrast to the setting, even appealing to those fearless adrenaline seekers. A trip to Queenstown is a reminder of life's simple pleasures and its endless complexity; an inescapable assertion that moments can feel small and mighty all at once.



