



Queen

AMONG THE SMALL, incidental pleasures of a skiing holiday are the brief conversations enjoyed on the chairlift, as machinery speeds you towards the top of the mountain for your next run. These exchanges are as varied as the personalities encountered.

When your chairmates are New Zealanders, remarks tend towards the laconic. Talk ceases entirely for long stretches as the scenery or sunshine is appreciated or the adventures of skiers below vicariously enjoyed. Conversation might restart, or not. Another dry aside might be offered or an earlier remark enlarged upon, but not necessarily.

Australians — who cross the Tasman in droves to enjoy the South Island's skifields — are a different story. Early on my first day at the Remarkables on a

Overseas tourists and corporate visitors flock to Queenstown but it's also a prime family destination for New Zealanders, writes Bevan Rapson.

long-awaited family trip to Queenstown, I shared a lift with a young Queenslander whose monologue began as we lowered the safety bar and ended only in the flurry of activity as we disembarked at the top.

It wasn't without interest (where he'd skied before, how Australian fields compare with New Zealand's, where he was staying, the make-up of the family group he was travelling with, where they'd been the night before, the food and drinks

consumed, the acceptability of various New Zealand beers, where he planned to take his next holiday, the engineering advances in ski gear...) but unrelenting.

Not every Australian subsequently encountered tried quite so hard to fill every second with words, but the national tendency towards loquacity invariably marked them out.

The heavy Australian presence could also be detected at the foot of the field,



stowrn, mate

where an individual shouting authoritatively at a group of companions would first be taken to be an instructor but on closer examination revealed as just another Victorian taking his turn at leading conversation.

I did meet one Quiet Australian: late one afternoon, I was returning from the Remarkables' Shadow Basin via a steepish, narrow track called the Cat Walk and paused briefly to let the blood return

to burning leg muscles. Out of nowhere shot a speeding, out-of-control Aussie snowboarder who failed to negotiate a turn and, with a long grunt of surprise, whistled off the edge of the track.

Fearing the worst, I took off my skis and went to the edge of the precipice. He had avoided plunging to serious injury or worse only by landing on a ledge a couple of metres down the mountain face. I reached down with a skipole and helped



Queenstown fully lives up to its reputation as a world-class winter playground.

him back up to the track, where we agreed that his tumble had been a “close one”. His expansion on this point was in colourful language, but comparatively brief.

All of which is a long-winded way of emphasising how popular Queenstown and its outstanding ski fields are with our trans-Tasman cousins. And why wouldn't

it be? Wonderful skiing, famous scenery and an entire town dedicated to giving you a good time — it's not a bad package. The real question is why more New Zealanders don't join them.

Skiing and snowboarding make a great family holiday, particularly with teenagers. Everyone can have fun at their own level of expertise while still coming together to eat, drink, relax and exaggerate their adventures. And Queenstown fully lives up to its reputation as a world-class winter playground.

Our trip there last year coincided with the annual Winter Festival, 10 days packed with scores of activities on and off the slopes. Mostly we found the ski fields (see Coronet Peak and the Remarkables, nzski.com) gave us as much entertainment as we could fit into a day, although we took a passing interest in the indie-clad competitors at Coronet Peak who festival DJs had managed to convince to frolic in the snow.

A rental car gave us the freedom to alternate with ease between ski fields but, having started at Coronet, we found it hard to tear ourselves away from its expansive runs and queue-free, high-speed

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NEW ZEALAND



lifts. Coronet also had the option of skiing on at night under floodlights, although we managed to exhaust ourselves well before sundown.

We got a taste of low-visibility adrenalin during an afternoon of whiteout. One of the junior members of our party reckoned the safest way to get down in the eerie hush of such conditions was to “follow the wobbly people” — gaggles of learners presumably being led by someone who knew where they were going.

Over at the Remarkables, a couple of days later, we took some lessons and then tried our new skills on the terrain parks. Perhaps because of the relatively low skier density, both fields are as friendly as any I’ve been to. Maybe some of that might also be attributed to those talkative visitors. An instructor told me that the Australians throw everything into enjoying themselves, and their uninhibited glee seems to be infectious.

Off the mountain, our accommodation at the Rees (therees.co.nz) was a luxurious self-contained apartment overlooking the lake. For a family, self-catering is ideal. A quick trip to one of Queenstown’s

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supermarkets (a New World at Frankton, Fresh Choice in Gorge Rd) or, for more gourmet fare, the Mediterranean Market (also Gorge Rd) will stock your kitchen with everything you need for breakfasts and picnic lunches to take to the slopes. Packing a vacuum flask makes bulk-bought pot noodles a useful lunch option for hollow-legged teenagers.

Following the building boom of the past decade, Queenstown has a vast range of apartment accommodation at a range of

prices (see the Destination Queenstown site queenstown-nz.co.nz for a good selection). In addition to knockout views, our quarters at the Rees had a spa-bath — not to be underrated after a vigorous day’s falling over — a gym (pass) and a fireside to recline in front of in recovery mode for the next day’s action.

The on-site restaurant was doing good trade but we opted to head into town for our evening meals, joining the festival crowds. In many ways, Queenstown resembles a mini city, with all the energy and activity of a far larger metropolis. Mid-festival, just finding a carpark was the kind of challenge any Aucklander could identify with. The eating houses were heaving, with queues at the iconic burger joint Fergburger far longer than any seen on the skifields.

As anywhere, restaurants range widely in quality, but the Italian food at Bella Cucina (6 Brecon St, ph (03) 442-6762; bellacucina.co.nz) was the stand-out for us. The pizzas at Winnies (the Mall, ph (03) 442-8635) also come recommended by locals, as does the beer at Atlas Beer Cafe (Steamer Wharf, ph (03) 442-5995).



Wherever you plan to eat, try to book in advance, particularly during the festival, or be prepared to while away time in a bar waiting for tables to come free.

Then again, quality bar-time also has something to be said for it. One of our party fell ill during our visit, meaning the adults had to split carer duties while the rest of the family was up the mountain. Fortunately, the skifields are close enough that a lunchtime changeover was perfectly viable. And kicking around town with

the patient for an afternoon itself made a relaxing break: a couple of frames of pool in front of a roaring fire; a leisurely flick through the pages of the *Otago Daily Times* (sample front-page lead: "Meeting to Discuss Parking"), a lakeside stroll and a nosy through the racks at a music store (Play It Again, O'Connells Shopping Centre, Beach St, yielding a Radio Birdman compilation) then back to that fireside.

Queenstown has plenty to do when the slopes are closed or you need a break from skiing, and not all of it requires you to throw yourself off a bridge or otherwise frighten yourself unnecessarily.

Unsurprisingly, the place does a roaring trade in corporate conferences and

executive getaways.

But it would be a shame if New Zealanders didn't also see it as a destination for that special family holiday. Discount fares and self-catering can help keep the cost down and the skiing facilities are set up with excellent bus services and lift ticket options so the maximum skiing value can be extracted from any visit.

Snaps from our trip are still on the screensaver and adorning the fridge. We look sunburnt and happy.

We'll be back. After all, why should the Aussies have all the fun?

★ *Bevan Rapson and his family were guests of Destination Queenstown.*



Best of the Fest

This year's Queenstown Winter Festival runs from June 25 to July 4. Free attractions include: opening party and fireworks, June 25, 6pm; street parade, June 26, noon; Mardi Gras, June 29, 5.30pm; "Mountain Mayhem" events at Coronet Peak, July 3, noon; closing concert at Coronet Peak, July 4, 4pm.

Ticketed events include: ice hockey matches, June 26-27 and July 2-3; Masquerade Ball, June 26; Michael Hill International Violin Competition Recital, June 27; charity boxing, June 27; Comedy Gala, June 28; Poker Challenge, June 30; Old Farts Ball, July 3.

See winterfestival.co.nz for more details.