



Land of the long white slope

By Flip Byrnes

MOST Australian powder hounds who follow the snow have heard of the larger resorts in the New Zealand's South Island, but what about the smaller ones?

Lying like diamonds on a necklace and strung between Christchurch and Queenstown are a series of family-owned and family-run areas, which are certainly worth a look if you are willing to point your skis and snowboards off the beaten track.

A direct Air New Zealand flight from Sydney to Christchurch takes just under three hours and then it's a short drive to one of the bigger fields in New Zealand – Mt Hutt. Some say Mt Hutt is steep and only for experts, but they are only talking about the unsealed road which winds its way up the mountain high above the Canterbury patchwork fields.

Once there, it's worth the drive, with a good terrain park for jibbers and the South Face offers challenging terrain. If you thought sliding was over for the year think again. Mt Hutt has the longest season in Australasia and the only reason they close at the end of October is because people start heading for the beach.

The town of Methven is charming. Stop in at the Blue Pub for a pizza or the Steel-worx on a Tuesday night for \$10 beer, curry and jam session. But why eat here if you are staying at the luxurious Terrace Downs High Country Resort (www.terrace downs.co.nz) and can refuel with fresh salmon before taking a putt in the 18-hole international golf course with in-your-face views of Mt Hutt?

Tear yourself away and head for Tekapo, where you will find the small field of Round Hill, which is just that – a round hill, (www.roundhill.co.nz) and the easy terrain will be a relief for those starting out. For the more experienced, an hour and half down the road is Mt Cook and the adventure of a lifetime. If weather permits take a ski plane up onto the Tasman Glacier, (www.heliskiing.co.nz) or perhaps a helicopter.

By now riders are warmed up enough to tackle Ohau, one of the best secrets of the New Zealand skifields. The lodge is old school style with a modern interior, and the Neilsons will make you feel one of the family. (www.ohau.co.nz). As for the Ohau hill? In a good snow year, it's sensational.

Two and half hours down the road are Wanaka and the famous Treble Cone ski area. If the natural half pipes and new chairlift only whet your appetite, take a back country tour with Aspiring Guides (<http://www.aspiringguides.com/>) and go where the snow is good and the powder fresh. Wanaka will charm, too. Stay in the Hobbit Room at Minaret Lodge if Lord of the Rings is your thing. (www.minaretlodge.co.nz).

Finally, any good road trip ends in Queenstown where there are two mountains to choose from – The Remarkables and Coronet Peak, both worth as play on any type of day. But the real draw is the town, full of buzz and vibe. If drinking is your thing head to Bardeux or Bar Up. For quality food you can't go past The Bunker and Joe's Garage serves a mean cappuccino. In between snowboarding, partying and drinking, lay your weary head at The Dairy, a charming former corner store in the heart of town. (www.thedairy.co.nz).

After a ski road trip in New Zealand, chances are you may need a little rest.

The snow must go on: Ohau with Lake Ohau behind (left) and a couple look out across Queenstown and Coronet Peak (below).

Pictures by courtesy of Ski Tourism Marketing Network NZ

