



Ski

Truly remarkable

Matthew Benns goes from hot tub to hot slopes in Queenstown.

THERE are very few things in life finer than sitting back in a steaming hot tub, martini in hand, gazing across at the snow-capped mountains of New Zealand's South Island. Of course, someone is always going to ruin it. "Oh, darling," she said. Already I knew it was going to be trouble because she never calls me darling.

"I've left my drink on the table, could you just get it for me?"

Now what is a man to do? On the one hand it is freezing outside the hot tub and I don't want to get out. On the other, if I don't, the temperature inside the tub will quickly cool to match the outside air.

Happily the hostess of The Dairy Private Luxury Hotel miraculously appeared and came to my rescue. Elspeth Zemla is the beating heart of the boutique bed and breakfast accommodation in the heart of Queenstown. She cooks your breakfast in the morning, books you the best table in the town's leading oyster bar and offers advice on everything from tours to shopping. Oh, and she also passes your daffy partner the martini she left on the table.

Queenstown is the vibrant apres ski hub for several ski areas. It has a buzzing night-life, more than 200 bars and restaurants that serve excellent martinis. In fact, the Argentinian barman at the newly renovated Crowne Plaza has just won a prize for his cocktails. We had several just to be sure the judges were right.

Queenstown is the vibrant apres ski hub

were right ... and they must have been good because I can't remember what we decided. We had reached Queenstown from Christchurch via the stunning scenic drive that took us past Mount Cook, the cornflower blue water of Lake Tekapo and through the stunning scenery provided by the Southern Alps.

With all those beautiful snow-capped peaks the urge to get among them and start skiing once we hit Queenstown was irresistible. Just 18 kilometres from Queenstown, with sealed road the whole way, is Coronet Peak. It has 280 hectares of faces, bowls and chutes with wide open spaces that allow skiers to go just about anywhere they want.

The ski area manager is Duncan Smith, who has worked at the mountain for most of his working life and is passionate about it. Especially now, with new owners pumping cash into the ski area. "We are really making things happen here now," he said. "It is a very exciting time."

Best of the new improvements is an alpine hut serving pizzas and coffee at the foot of the discouragingly named Rocky Gully T-Bar. Smith was still figuring out a name when we were there but was diplomatically favouring Heidi's Hut in honour of his Austrian girlfriend.

The following day we took the winding, unsealed road to the Remarkables.

As the Ford Fairmont slithered and skittered through the slush, I was very glad that Hertz had provided top of the range snow chains. The problem was I knew who had put them on the car - me. From the anxious looks shooting my way from the passenger seat I could see I was not the only one with the same niggling doubts.

Happily, we made it. Big sighs all round. And, boy, was it worth it. The Remarkables have three sunny, sheltered bowls of mostly beginner to intermediate terrain.

The ski areas are fringed by snowy peaks and the views as you ski live up to the name of the area - remarkable.



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> TRIP NOTES

■ **Getting there:** Air New Zealand has several flights daily to Christchurch. See www.airnewzealand.com.au. For hire cars see www.hertz.co.nz.

■ **Staying there:** The Dairy Private Luxury Hotel in the heart of Queenstown has rooms from \$390 a room a night with a winter special for five nights or more which works out about \$NZ260 a room a night.

■ A double lift pass for Coronet Peak and the Remarkables is available for NZ\$89 a day. More information is available at www.nzski.com.



MARTINI, PLEASE?: The Dairy is luxury accommodation in the heart of fun-loving, picturesque Queenstown