

Down the ridge the only sound is the new snow crunching softly under my skis.



Peak time

fact file

Where to ski: **CORONET PEAK**'s rolling terrain has a wide variety of intermediate runs. Snow-making machines cover the whole ski area.
Facilities at base building: ski/snowboard rental, shop, cafe/restaurant/bar.
THE REMARKABLES has a large beginner's area and some challenging off-piste terrain. Steep access road now has crash barriers.
Facilities at base building: ski/snowboard rental, shop, cafe/restaurant/bar.
Website: www.nzski.com
Where to stay: The Dairy, corner of Brecon and Isle Streets, ph (03) 442 5164, www.thedairy.co.nz.
August packages: three nights from \$450/person.
September packages: three nights from \$390/person.
Where to eat: Botswana Butchery, Archer's Cottage, Marine Parade, ph (03) 442 6994, www.goodbars.co.nz/botswana



giveaway

WIN A PAIR OF CANADIAN CLUB RETRO SKIS
 Designed for all-purpose use, these woodgrain skis from Canadian Club, one of the world's favourite Canadian whiskies for more than 140 years, will ensure you'll stand out on the slopes this winter. The CC retro skis come complete with poles and bindings and are valued at \$1000.

To enter, email escape@star-times.co.nz with Canadian Club Retro Skis in the subject line by Friday, August 7. You must be 18 or over to enter and only one entry per person please.

In Queenstown, there's no business like snow business, writes Tim Hunter.

REMINDS ME a bit of Scotland this. The mountain I'm being hoisted up is mostly white, so is the air around it. There's an icy wind trying to blast-freeze the four square centimetres of my face left uncovered, while snow that's just the crystalline side of rain settles into the huddled folds of my jacket. I wipe a gloved finger across my goggles and blink.

Should have been here yesterday.

Landing in Queenstown the sun was blazing from a clear blue sky and the Remarkables looked down in rocky magnificence. Snow glittered on the mountain peaks as the scent of jet fuel drifted in the late afternoon calm. The skiing was sure to be superb.

Stage one of my midweek adventure is to collect a grunty 4WD from the helpful people at Budget rentals and head into town for installation at The Dairy, a little place that bills itself, promisingly, as a "private luxury hotel".

The description turns out to be accurate.

Arriving at The Dairy is like turning up for a stay at the home of a rich and friendly distant relative whose cool pad you wouldn't mind inheriting one day. There's a crackling fire in the schist fireplace, scones on the sideboard and quietly squeaking leather couches in the lounge.

It's run with warm

efficiency by Elspeth Zemla, a Scot from the borders who plied her trade as head housekeeper in big corporate hotels before opting for a change of pace at The Dairy when it acquired new owners in 2003.

The owners are well plugged in to the Queenstown scene – local property developer John Martin helped build the Steamer Wharf complex and Andrew Brinsley is director of Kawarau Jet and several bungy companies, as well as a former director of NZSki, owner of ski areas Coronet Peak and The Remarkables. "Fingers in lots of pies," says Zemla.

Clearly they have a good idea what the market wants. Their small hotel focuses on doing the key things well – bed, breakfast, spa pool, date and walnut cake – and why do dinner when Queenstown has so much to offer?

Which leads me to the Botswana Butchery, a relatively new place down on the waterfront. In a previous life it was the offices of law firm Anderson Lloyd but it's now an upmarket restaurant belonging to Queenstown hospitality king Al Spary and head chef Leungo (pronounced Luno) Lippe, (he's the Botswanan).

My hosts tell me the fitout cost \$1.2 million, and it looks like money well spent.

Later, in the company of some excellent hare and the



finest steak I can remember, we try some of the 2007 Gibbston Valley "Valli" pinot noir from the glass-walled wine room. It's superb. So is the Mt Difficulty Pipeclay Terrace we have next. Should I have the poached pear and almond torte? Why not.

The next morning dawns darkly and there's a patter of rain on the iron roof. I look outside and see a medical

centre across the way – must be why that guy on crutches was hanging round last night.

On the 20-minute drive up to Coronet Peak the road is clear and mostly empty, so I get a park close to the top and head into the big new base building to meet Hamish McCrostie, manager of the skifield. McCrostie has been working skifields for a long time – a former ski patroller,

From its mountains to luxury hotels such as The Dairy, left, Queenstown has plenty to offer when it comes to a skiing holiday. Photo: Miles Holden

he's run Coronet for three years and was manager across the valley at The Remarkables for 13 years before that. On the whiteboard in his office are the words, "atmosphere, excitement, inspire our team to follow". Sounds good.

I follow him downstairs to get equipped. The hire system is efficient – my feet are measured, boots fitted, K2 Apache skis selected and poles grabbed in just a few minutes. Next year, says McCrostie, they're investing in a new system which uses just three different footplate sizes, cutting fit time by 40%.

Out on the mountain we head straight up the Express chair, the main lift to the top at 1650 metres. When the Winter Games are on in two weeks this is where the Super G will start, sending the racers hurtling down a steep roller-coaster run called The Hurdle and over a muckle great hump that will launch them into orbit. If they're still on the racecourse when they hit the ground they can swerve left towards the finish at Heidi's Hut, where they can have some tasty Hungarian soup. It'll be spectacular.

McCrostie is clearly a considerate bloke because we tackle The Hurdle below take-off speed and emerge intact for a smooth run down Shirt Front to the bottom of the chair. The smoothness is one