

Ski

The ultimate powder trip

Rachael Oakes-Ash charts a chopper and carves some turns on a remote, private slope.

At Jane Peak, a private farmland mountain deep in the heart of New Zealand's Southern Alps, there's only one way in and one way out and it involves a helicopter. In winter, when the peak is covered in fresh, untracked powder, it's just begging for a beating.

First-time heli-skiing is a moment never to be forgotten; first-time private charter heli-skiing goes one better. I undertake this adventure with three friends, one helicopter pilot, one heli-guide and one private ski instructor. This is better than the good life; it's the ultimate one, with a chopper pilot at the ready to do as many runs as you can fit into one full tank of fuel. If we're quick, and we can be, we can get 10 or more runs into a day.

A shared love of snow sports bonds people. Go anywhere in the world and start talking to strangers, mention the word ski or snowboard and, if they start salivating, you've found a friend for life. Next thing you know, you're comparing resorts and war wounds. Share a

helicopter with snow-loving friends and watch an even deeper bonding begin.

Traditional heli-skiing involves signing up for a spot on a helicopter. It's pot luck who you end up skiing with and, while operators do their best to ensure similar level skiers and boarders end up together, we all know blokes talk themselves up and women talk themselves down when asked to rate their prowess.

Chances are the group will be fractured in level and, for safety, they must ski to the lowest common denominator. A heli-day traditionally involves anything from three to five runs, with extras offered on the day once they know you're addicted. However, the group won't get to take extra runs if not everyone wants more.

Charter your own pilot and heli-guide, however, and you make the rules.

I've chosen my friends wisely and am well-matched. On board the chopper is David Kennedy, the former chief executive of



Destination Queenstown, David Owendale, the marketing manager of NZ Ski and Kris Vermier, owner of Queenstown's famed Browns Ski Shop. Southern Lakes Heli-Skiing in Queenstown and Wanaka offer the standard heli-days with hundreds of thousands of acres of terrain but they also offer the private charter with personal access to private farmland.

Australians wanting a heli-fix can now get it across the ditch.

It means we're out here alone, really alone. A 10-minute chopper ride across Lake Wakatipu and through a narrow valley with Alps thrusting from the floor reveals mountain after mountain of snow.

We're blessed – there's been a snowstorm from the south, the first this season, which means the snow has an Antarctic dryness to it, with little moisture. When skiing the good stuff

you want to float on top, the less moisture the more floating and with a bluebird sky like today, it simply doesn't get better than this.

We've been served up Tarn Pilkington as our heli-god guide to ensure our safety and get us down the hill in one piece. He skis so fluidly, making powder skiing look easy.

Thank god for Simon Wilkinson, our personal ski instructor extraordinaire, who helps us to channel our own inner grace as we perform carnage on the pristine snow. One look back up and it's obvious whose tracks are whose, as Tarn's perfect turns compete with our scribbles in the snow.

Once you've stepped out of a roaring chopper onto a silent mountain of immense power it's impossible to return to resort skiing without looking to the skies with hope and envy. When the chopper flies away, ready to meet you at the base of your chosen run, the silence is overwhelming.

To be this far from a lift queue and just one turn away from skiing the best snow of your life

Special report



Pristine ... (from far left) a skier carves up fresh snow; the adventure hub of Queenstown; door-to-mountain-top service.

Photo: Getty Images



> TRIP NOTES

■ **Getting there** Air New Zealand flies direct from Sydney to Queenstown. Phone 1800 005 563, see airnewzealand.com.au.

■ **Staying there** Azur Lodge has jaw-dropping vistas in private, full-service, stand-alone villas with all the luxuries, from \$NZ1000 (\$781) a night. See azur.co.nz. The Spire Hotel also has seriously swanky designer digs, from

\$NZ985 a night. See thespirehotels.com. The Dairy private hotel has home-cooked breakfasts, open fires and down to earth hospitality from \$NZ400 a night. See thedairy.co.nz

■ **Private charter** The Southern Lakes Heliski costs from \$NZ1399 a person, for five people. See southernlakesheliski.co.nz.

(and to be doing it with such talented people) is a luxury few can afford. Put simply, heliskiing comes with boasting rights and the more elite or remote the skiing, the bigger the rights.

I press my palms together in prayer and thank Hans Gmoser, the founder of commercial heli-skiing, who created the Canadian Mountain Holidays heli-ski empire in the late 1960s. He brought together choppers

and snow and, thankfully for us, other people have set up such adventure-based skiing. Australians wanting a heli-fix can now get it across the ditch.

At lunch, the chopper shuts down and we dine upon the snow, enjoying Queenstown's finest sushi, gourmet open sandwiches and gooey chocolate brownies. We've got six runs in and we'll get five more after lunch.