

The guide NZ ski towns



Snow business ... skiers and snowboarders in chair lifts take to the slopes at Mount Hutt in Methven, New Zealand.

Photo: Getty Images

Take the powder ... in comfort

Rachael Oakes-Ash ploughs the New Zealand snowfields for the best places to stay.

Kiwi commercial ski resorts have little on-mountain accommodation which means snow-sports lovers stay in the closest ski town, from farming villages to international alpine resorts. Skiing in New Zealand is as much about the town you stay in as the hill you decide to ski. Here's a rundown.

Ohakune

The town of Ohakune services the active volcano Mount Ruapehu's ski-fields of Turoa and Whakapapa on the North Island and has a population of a little more than 1,200.

Its fame as the "carrot capital" of New Zealand is heralded by a giant fibreglass carrot on the road into town not quite big enough for a souvenir store but too big for a casserole.

Thames Street is the street to be seen. It's within the bars of the Turoa Lodge pub, Powderkeg and the Projection Room fusion bar that you'll find Monster, Moo, Paddy and Little Hands. In a small town you know you've arrived when you're given a nickname.

There's a routine in Ohakune that's easy to slip into. Start with a hearty breakfast at Utopia, owned by Harry from the Exponents rock band and his partner Dawn, then up the hill for fresh turns. Hot tubs and sauna in the Powderhorn Chateau followed by apres drinks at the Turoa Lodge, cocktails and pool at Altitude, steak at the Matterhorn then mix it up with the DJ at the Projection Room. Sleep and repeat.

Where to ski Mount Ruapehu, www.mtruapehu.com.

When to go Celebrate winter with Ohakune's street party Mardi Gras on June 28; www.ohakune-mardigras.co.nz.

Where to stay Ruapehu Golf and Country Lodge - hosted accommodation with golf pro; www.ruapehugolfodge.co.nz. Powderhorn Chateau - European style in the heart of Thames Street; www.powderhorn.co.nz. Miro Ridge - hosted budget accommodation; www.miroridge.co.nz.

Methven

The sleepy village of Methven sits at the base of Mount Hutt ski-field, an hour from Christchurch, and plays host to the world's champion skiers. Austrian Olympians Herman Maier and Mario Matt are regulars. They come for Mount Hutt's perfect training conditions and stay for Ian McLean at Forest Lodge.

Ian's a legend in Methven. As New Zealand's only FIS international technical director he made it big on the world stage when he coached the Austrians and the German ski teams. Now he owns and runs the Bavarian-style Forest Lodge.

Swing by here when the Austrians are in town and expect to be slamming homemade petrol Ian calls schnapps. Thank the hangover lords for Maria at Cafe Primo. This eclectic bric-a-brac store-come-cafe is filled with homemade treats to make Martha Stewart salivate. The entire Burton snowboard team set up camp here last season, fuelling themselves before taking to the skies in a chopper to shoot their new season's brochure in the majestic Arrowsmith Ranges.

That's the beauty of Methven, it's unassuming yet filled with international types that lead their fields in the snow industry.

It's also home to the best heli ski terrain New Zealand has to offer. Folks from around the world travel to hang with one of the world's original heli ski company's - Canadian Mountain Holidays - most senior heli guides. Kevin Brokhoelt has set up an impressive operation with Methven Heli Skiing in these equally impressive hills.

They call a spade a spade in this town. The Blue Pub is blue and the Brown Pub is brown. Beware of Steel Worx where the local mountain staff hang out for cheap curries and a cocktail menu that features 100 shooters and the famed Methven Mother. No one knows what's in this cocktail. They just know they won't be walking home.

Where to ski Mount Hutt, www.mthutt.co.nz.

When to go Mount Hutt Spring Festival September 27 to October 12.

Where to stay Terrace Downs - 18 holes of golf and fine dining; www.terrace-downs.co.nz. Ski Time - perfect for groups and families; www.skitime.co.nz. Forest Lodge - Austrian hospitality; www.forestlodge.co.nz.

Queenstown

This is the grand daddy of Australasian ski towns. Sitting on the shores of Lake Wakatipu this 15,000-strong resort town has its own international airport and hosts more than 1.4 million visitors a year.

With 120 licensed establishments in one square kilometre of back lanes and paved alleyways there is plenty of apres action from the hole-in-the-wall Mini Bar to Barmuda lounge and fireside Eichardt's House Bar.

Threesixty at the Crowne Plaza has Wakatipu views and seriously good grub, the Bunker's intimate restaurant for 16 has two sittings a night, the Cow is a pizza institution and Wai is the fine dining quiet achiever on the shore with the best service in town.

Burnt-out ski thighs head to Amisfield Winery's award-winning restaurant where picnic rugs with picnic boxes keep the kids amused on the grass and parents munch on a simple menu filled with flavour.

Locals swear by Joe's Garage, Halo Cafe and Vidu for coffee while Fergburger draws in the 2am crowd looking for sustenance to soak up the booze. Culture vultures head to nearby Arrowtown's galleries and royal furniture designer Ed Cruikshank's contemporary studio followed by a flick at Dorothy Browns art house cinema.

Then there's the skiing. Coronet Peak is 25 minutes up the hill, The Remarkables an hour and Cardrona is midway to Wanaka. If you have the cash you can take to the skies with Southern Lakes Heli Ski from NZ\$675 (\$550) for a two-run taster.

That done, there's still time for a quick bungee jump off the original Kawarau Bridge before a direct flight back home.

Where to ski The Remarkables,

www.themarkables.co.nz. Coronet Peak; www.coronetpeak.co.nz.

When to go American Express Queenstown Winterfestival, June 27 to July 6; www.winterfestival.co.nz.

Where to stay The Spire Hotel; www.thespirehotels.com. The Dairy private hotel; www.thedairy.co.nz. The Crowne Plaza; www.crowneplazaqueenstown.co.nz.

Wanaka

Wanaka is the kind of place in which one exhales. With a stunning lakeside setting in the foothills of the Aspiring Ranges, this year-round resort town services the ski-fields of Treble Cone, Cardrona and Snow Park.

Expect luxury lodges on the lake shore such as the Myer family's Whare Kea complete with private heli pad. This stylish town serves up cocktails and gourmet cuisine in Post Office Lane, a side alley filled with a handful of bars including the swanky Bar Luga and restaurant of the moment the Botswana Butchery.

The Speight's Ale House does a roaring trade and the Bullock Bar is known for its unique take on indoor curling involving garden plastic, washing-up liquid and frozen discs of ice.

Like most small towns it's the people that make the difference, from the Australian-turned-Kiwi Leigh Stock, the manager of Edgewater Resort who skis with silly hats on his noggin, to Shaker at Racers Edge, a ski retailer who goes by only one name.

Wanaka is filled with folks who came for a week, stayed for the season and then set up camp for life.

Where to ski Treble Cone; www.treblecone.co.nz. Snow Park; www.snowparknz.com. Cardrona; www.cardrona.com.

When to go The NZ Mountain Film Festival, July 4 to 8. www.offpiste.co.nz/festival.html.

Where to stay Bluewater Lodge - designer home comfort; www.bluewaterwanaka.co.nz. Lime Tree Lodge - a gourmet experience; www.limetree lodge.co.nz. Edgewater Resort - families, groups and couples; www.edgewater.co.nz.