

# Festive fever

Winter visitors to New Zealand's scenic Queenstown can now combine festival frolics with five-star comfort.

STORY Rachael Galas-Ash



PHOTO: Getty Images



WAVE HELLO: from the Sofitel Queenstown, the ski fields look close enough to touch. In fact, the Coronet Peak runs are only a 20-minute drive from the hotel.



**THE SOUTH ISLAND OF NEW ZEALAND** is more than simply a backdrop to blockbuster films. Come winter, it's a ski bunny's delight. And the capital of fun is definitely Queenstown, gateway to four of New Zealand's premium ski fields and home to 120 drinking establishments in one square kilometre. That's a lot of après-ski entertainment!

Queenstown has a population of only 12,000 but a tourist turnover of one million visitors yearly. It's easy to see why. The town is dominated by the Southern Alps, powerful seismic peaks that rise from Lake Wakatipu. The dramatic landscape provides a playground for jet-boating at high speeds through narrow gorges, jumping off bridges with nothing but a rope tied to your feet, paragliding from mountain tops, rafting the rapids and throwing yourself down a powdered mountain with a couple of planks bound to each foot. You could say this daredevil mania is inspired by altitude sickness, but considering Queenstown is only 330 metres above sea level, it's more likely the local Speight's Ale that's the culprit.

Just in case the hordes of hitchhikers strapped to snowboards and goggle-tanned faces don't alert you to the fact that the ski season has begun, then ▶



## FACT FILE

### LOCATION

Queenstown is in the Otago region, in the south-western part of New Zealand's South Island.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Sofitel Queenstown**, the city's first five-star hotel, is a boutique 82-room property in the heart of New Zealand's premier tourism, conference and incentive destination. The centrally located **Mercure St Moritz Queenstown** has won the New Zealand Tourism Awards

Best Hotel category three years running. Accor also has the **Novotel Gardens** and **Mercure Resort** in Queenstown, offering accommodation for every budget.

### MORE INFO

For tickets to the Queenstown Winter Festival go to [www.winterfestival.co.nz](http://www.winterfestival.co.nz). For general info, visit [www.queenstown-nz.co.nz](http://www.queenstown-nz.co.nz)

“For true getaway action, hire a chopper and act like Sylvester Stallone in *Cliffhanger*, heli-skiing across untouched powder snow”



## LESSONS IN LUXURY

It says something for the pride and professionalism in the hospitality industry that all Sofitel Queenstown staff, from porters and housekeepers to the management team, are required to take part in a Luxury Training course, developed in France and rolled out to Sofitel hotels worldwide. Fiona Woodburn reveals what goes into making your luxury stay a memorable one.

WHEN I SIGNED UP FOR A LUXURY TRAINING COURSE in the build-up to the opening of Sofitel Queenstown, I had visions of learning how to make beds with hospital corners my Mum would have been proud of. In reality, I became a card-carrying member of the L'Université du Service at Académie Accor for two days of learning all about welcoming and receiving guests in the luxury sector.

By the end of the first morning, having wracked our brains to come up with words and phrases to describe the characteristics of a luxury hotel (think location, architecture, decoration, materials, history, price and services), we were happy to come to the conclusion that a luxury hotel is not about the polished floors, plump beds, technology to die for and the biggest baths you've ever seen.

A luxury hotel is all about the people – its customers and employees. Split into groups, we went on eye-opening mystery shopping expeditions to see how other hotels and retailers treat potential customers. It was astounding how many of us came back with horror stories of disinterested shop assistants and lacklustre frontline hotel staff.

Back at base, I learned that a smile is not just a smile but also a highly effective weapon. “A smile makes communications easier, relations easier. It's reassuring, it defuses any aggressiveness, shows your self-confidence and makes you look as though you enjoy what you're doing,” said trainer Richard Anstee, Operations Services Manager of Melbourne-based Academy Sofitel, with a genuine smile.

There are even language rules for the luxury sector, most of which appear to involve the “I” word (“I'm taking care of it personally... I'll find out straight away”).

In essence, it's the little things that mean the most to guests and customers. It's the glance that creates a recognition with the customer, active listening, and enthusiasm, along with such intangibles as style, personality, ambience and, most importantly, service.

Our Paris cousins call it the “art de vivre à la Française”: in short, service and style make up an unchanging code that is applied out of conviction, not obligation. Salut to that, I say. ■



the city's annual Winter Festival (held this year from June 23) will do the trick. Think 60 madcap events over 10 days, from ice hockey to wacky races to a gala ball, plus plenty of free events and entertainment.

In a country that officially names its annual rabbit-culling weekend The Great Easter Bunny Hunt, it's no surprise to witness farmers in gumboots racing their working dogs down the black runs of Coronet Peak ski resort as part of the festival. The prize? Who cares? The event is sponsored by Speight's Ale and ends at the brew house.

At some point you may come across the “Franz of the Festival”. This is an official enclave of New Zealand celebrities attached to the festivities. It's safe to assume they are either hobbits, elves or regulars on local soap *Shortland Street*, so if you meet one, just nod your head politely and smile. It's all good fun and provides great people-watching from the restaurants and bars lining the maze of alleyways in town.

When the hilarity gets too much, head for The Remarkables, Coronet Peak, Cardrona and Treble Cone, where you can get lost in the silence of the snow. For true getaway action, hire a chopper and act like Sylvester Stallone in *Cliffhanger*, heli-skiing across untouched powder snow.

As they say in New Zealand, bless (that's Kiwi speak for bliss). ■

LET THERE BE LIGHTS: night skiing at Coronet Peak is a high-adrenalin rush for thrill-seekers, but don't worry, there are also (daytime) lessons for beginners.

