

A high-altitude mountain landscape. In the foreground, a dark, jagged rock formation is partially covered in snow. A person wearing a dark jacket and a light-colored backpack is sitting on a rocky ledge, holding a camera with a long lens, looking out over the landscape. The background features a vast, blue lake (Lake Wakatipu) surrounded by snow-capped mountains under a clear blue sky. The overall scene is serene and majestic.

TOP OF THE WORLD:
Queenstown, on
the shores of Lake
Wakatipu, often ranks
in the world's top 20
travel destinations.

Live it up in Queenstown

Famed for its spectacular scenery, Queenstown also offers visitors a taste of the high life, thanks to its five-star wines, fine dining and plush hotels with every creature comfort.

STORY Rachael Oakes-Ash

MARY MILLIONAIRE is my alter ego, which means she has fun and I pay for her lifestyle. After one champagne she's tapping on my shoulder suggesting I purchase the bottle, after the bottle she's shouting the bar.

Travel only encourages Mary, who thinks foreign currency doesn't look like hers so she spends it like someone else's.

Mary's favourite destination? The lakeside alpine enclave known as Queenstown on New Zealand's South Island. Its world-class vineyards, powder snow and movie set backdrops suit Mary's inner drama queen.

Once famous as the adrenaline capital of the world for its ability to throw backpackers off bridges with rope tied to their feet, Queenstown has a new ▶





PHOTOS: Tourism New Zealand

NATURAL WONDERS: the Southern Lakes district is an extraordinarily beautiful area (left); the Central Otago region is renowned for its pinot noir and has won more gold medals for this variety than any other New Zealand region.

role as the Aspen of the South for its fine dining, luxury accommodation and seven-figure real estate. Think 120 licensed establishments in one square kilometre, all serving up a mix of haute cuisine and cocktails in a world-renowned alpine lake setting.

If it's good enough for Shania Twain, who purchased her own trillion-dollar land mass nearby, then it's good enough for Mary – who is more than happy to knock on Sam Neill's cellar door at his local Two Paddocks vineyard for a glass of pinot and a chat about *Jurassic Park*.

She also enjoys sipping Kiwi coffee – Café L'Affare – with locals at Joe's Garage and ordering up big at The Spire. The 10-course degustation, with matching wines, by renowned NZ chef Rex Morgan is obligatory at this iconic restaurant, but as it only seats 16 reservations are essential.

Queenstown perches beside Lake Wakatipu, whose legend involves a Maori chief, his princess daughter and a warrior that saves her from the clutches of a sleeping giant. The giant is burnt by the warrior, the princess saved and the snow on the mountains melted from the heat forms a lake where the giant lies. Wakatipu rises and falls every eight minutes and it is said to be the giant's beating heart.

Like Lake Wakatipu everyone has a story of how they came to rest in Queenstown, and it seems everyone here has their given name and their hobbit name – just blame Peter Jackson and be prepared for *The Lord of the Rings* franchise as tour operators point out the second scene from the third act of the first movie and expect you to remember. So, be prepared and get out the DVDs and watch the movies before taking a Lord of the Rings Scenic flight with Heliworks. The company was contracted exclusively by Peter Jackson for aerial filming and transportation of cast to film locations in *Lord of the Rings*, so the pilots will no doubt have their own stories to tell about Middle Earth.

If the *TSS Earnslaw* could talk, it would also have a few good tales to tell as the vintage steamship has been cruising the beautiful blue waters of Lake Wakatipu since 1912. Affectionately called the "Lady of the Lake", it's the perfect way to feel the giant's heartbeat and relive the elegance of bygone days, while enjoying the breathtaking scenery.

Few things reduce Mary to tears, but Queenstown Airport makes Mary sob. Departing visitors face a wall of glass behind which sits the terrain they have grown to love... and find hard to leave. ■

FACT FILE

LOCATION

Queenstown is in the Otago region, in the south-western part of the South Island.

HOW TO GET THERE

Qantas now has direct flights from Sydney to Queenstown all year round.

WHERE TO GO

Bar Code: at the Sofitel, pure banquette boozed heaven with "Pretty Drink" cocktails.

Bardeaux: sit outside and watch the locals go by or warm up in front of the fire.

Lombardi Restaurant: discover why the St Moritz hotel wins awards year after year.

The Cow: when it's busy you may find yourself sharing tables at this pizza stable but remember, it's busy for a reason.

WHERE TO STAY

If the newly opened **Sofitel Queenstown** (inset picture) is full, don't despair because three-times winner of "Best Hotel" in the New Zealand Tourism Awards, **Grand Mercure St Moritz Queenstown**, offers boutique-

style elegance with the best Italian cuisine at Lombardi Restaurant. For a waterfront location in the heart of the city, **Novotel Gardens** is a great choice, especially with its newly renovated rooms. And sitting high on Fern Hill with majestic lake views, the **Mercure Resort** offers a shuttle service into town with a sauna and indoor pool to soothe the muscles you've overworked on the numerous adventure activities on offer.

MORE INFO

Visit www.queenstown-nz.co.nz

