



SKIING

Remarkable

There's something for everyone when the family goes skiing in Queenstown. *Suzy Zail* reports.

LEGEND has it that Lake Wakatipu, the silver-blue slice of water that completes Queenstown's alpine paradise, was once a hollow formed by a sleeping monster.

Burned to death by a Maori warrior, the monster melted into the earth, leaving only a beating heart. Cast your eyes down from the top of the Shadow Basin chairlift, high up in the Remarkables snowfields, and you can make out the monster's outline. Closer in, from the water's edge in Queenstown, you can see that heart still beating beneath the water as the lake rises and falls.

Scientists credit the lake's 12 cm rhythmic rise and fall to variations in atmospheric pressure. I prefer the fable. The threat of an underwater monster might explain why the lake isn't churning with sailboats, motorcraft and paddle boats, and why this exceptional corner of the planet is not overrun with tourists.

Pull up a chair at any one of Queenstown's hip cafes in winter time, book a jet-boat ride down the Shotover River or drive to the nearby snowfields and you'll meet fellow travellers: the Americans and Aussies with a taste for extreme adventure, the Europeans chasing winter around the globe – enough tourists to give the town its electric vibe, just not enough to form serious lift queues.

This makes for an ideal family ski trip. There are few sports that allow the whole family to participate like skiing. In the time it takes to drive from Melbourne to



Mount Hotham, you can have your family strapped into skis and hurtling down New Zealand's snow super highway.

If your annual credit card expenditure hasn't racked up enough frequent flyer points to get the family to New Zealand for free, getting to the South Island's outdoor playground will set you back about \$300 per person, but you'll make a chunk of it back on the favourable exchange rate, cheaper lift tickets, rental rates and ski-school charges.

The best part is the whole family can enjoy the adrenaline rush

Closest to Queenstown, just 25 minutes by car, is Coronet Peak, offering gentle green beginner slopes, beautifully groomed blue runs and double black bowls, all with arrestingly beautiful mountain and lake views. Access via a sealed road and a drop-off bay means you can off-load the skis (and kids) metres from the ticket office before parking the car.

The ski season kicks off in June, and a new six-seater high-speed chair – as well as extensive snow-making – keep skiers pointing their tips downhill until October.

Kids aged six or younger receive free day lift passes. At NZ\$62 (\$52) per day for childcare, tuition, ski rental and lift ticket, we booked our four-year-old into Skiwiland. Indoor time includes painting, storytelling, cuddles and hot chocolate. Outdoors, the little ones enjoy ski tuition, tubing and snow-play with buckets and spades. Session times run from 9:30 am to 12:30 pm and 1:30-4:30 pm, allowing time in between to show Mum and Dad

newly learnt skills and head to the cafe for lunch.

For the same price, our older two headed to the children's ski and snowboard group classes, where grinning, suntanned instructors from England, Switzerland and Canada spirited them away on chairlifts. Avoid school holidays and your kids will reap the benefits of small group lessons. There's plenty of steep, deep powder-play for the adults too, and the vastness of the mountain ensures plenty of space between boarders and skiers. If you want to own the slope, however, try heli-skiing.

BREATHTAKING SCENERY

High above Queenstown is another family-friendly resort, the Remarkables Ski Area, a hairy 45-minute drive along a gravel road.

A natural suntrap, this north-facing resort offers live music, face painting and the Skiwiland program. Hurtle down the off-piste powder runs or sit on the cafe sundeck, order a latte and watch the kids ride the magic carpet below for free.

It's here that you'll fill your holiday album. Surrounded by towering cloud-piercing peaks, aquamarine lakes and green fields, the most rudimentary camera will capture scenery worthy of a magazine cover.

If you want to go further afield, you can drive or take a shuttle to Cardrona. A snowboarder's paradise, Cardrona is home to New Zealand's longest

terrain park, with 25 features set over a 1.3 km course. It also has the Southern Hemisphere's largest pipe park, ideal for the 'extreme' teen.

Children from three months to 12 years are catered for in four distinct all-day kid's centres, which open directly onto the mountain. Younger skiers have two one-hour private lessons during the day, while those older than five years ski anywhere up to five hours a day. NZ\$90 (\$75) covers hire, lift tickets, lessons and lunch (and in the case of our four-year-old, artwork and a report card).

Being an island in the middle of the turbulent South Pacific Ocean, New Zealand gets its fair share of storms. The first time the winds whipped through Coronet Peak, causing the closure of the mountain, we got our money back – lift tickets, rental and ski school. Check the weather forecast each morning, and if high winds are predicted, skip the snowfields and head to tourist information. The range of adventure activities on offer is mind-blowing, and the best part is the whole family can enjoy the adrenaline rush together.

Hop aboard an amphibious World War II vehicle and splash into Lake Wakatipu, or strap your toddler in and

see Queenstown from 180 m in a tandem paraglider. Pull a helmet on and bush-bash with your six-year-old on a quad-bike or hurtle down a hillside on a luge. Ten-year-olds can freefall into spectacular river gorges, and your kids only have to be 12 to take the driver's seat in a purpose-built plane. You don't need to book babysitters to go jet-boating, bungee trampolining or snowmobiling – kids are welcome.

If it's not extreme action you want, but rather extreme beauty, head to Glenorchy. Our four-year-old led our one-hour lagoon walk, fascinated by the ever-changing landscape of marshes, snow-capped peaks and hanging valleys, unaware that she was in the midst of Middle-Earth.

For devotees of the *Lord of the Rings* films (or those simply too worn out to walk), a drive through the lunar landscape of Deer Park Heights is a must. Herds of deer, alpaca, bison and yak roam this mountaintop movie location.

Closer to home, there are ducks waiting to be fed at the Queenstown Gardens and a playground with mountain views on the edge of lapping Lake Wakatipu.

With so much to offer the family – monster or no monster – come next winter, we'll be back.

KEY CONTACTS

Getting there: Some flights during winter with Air New Zealand, and Qantas flies direct from Melbourne and Sydney to Queenstown. Or choose from eight flights direct to Christchurch, then fly one hour or drive seven hours to Queenstown.

Ski season: Generally starts in June and lasts till October, though some areas open in late May and stay operational until November.

Accommodation: Plenty of backpackers accommodation, hostels, hotels and apartments to suit all budgets.

More info: www.nzski.com, www.newzealand.com, www.snow.co.nz, www.airnewzealand.com.au