

# heaven on a *harley*

Dramatic landscapes, historic sites and adrenaline activities are all to be found in the alpine region around Queenstown, says Ewen Bell.



Main: The splendid alpine view over Lake Wakatipu  
Above: On a Harley tour



**As beautiful as** Queenstown may be, the real attraction is the surrounding countryside – and getting to see more of it. Visitors descend on the region year-round to head outdoors, get up close to the natural attractions and return in the evenings to their villas in town to recharge the batteries. World-class accommodation in Queenstown sits nicely against the world-class natural wonders all around.

Queenstown rests on the shores of Lake Wakatipu, a brilliant blue jewel embraced by dramatic mountains and alpine scenery. Private holiday homes

and exclusive villa accommodation cling to the hills around the lakefront, affording dress-circle sunset views of the water and distant, snow-capped peaks. It's the perfect place in which to go wild in the wilderness or indulge in some South Island-style pampering.

For something a little different, swap the usual self-drive option for a self-ride encounter on a Harley Davidson. Anyone with a full rider's license valid in Australia can land in New Zealand and head off on a bike the same day. The winding bends along the country's alpine roads are

an immersive experience even when you're driving a car, but they're double the fun on two wheels.

When you grab the throttle of a Harley, you're making a conscious effort to enjoy the ride, forget the world back home and let the miles roll on. There's even a back seat for your significant other. Your mother-in-law won't like this idea one bit, so maybe it's best you don't tell her.

Big-bike cruising is not for everybody. I'd never ridden a Harley Davidson before visiting Queenstown – but once I slid into the seat, my worries were gone. It took barely a





Top: Night view over Queenstown  
from Commonage Villas

Above: Paragliders at the Flight Park

Top right: Lake Wakatipu near Glenorchy

second to feel right at home and get the essentials under control. I'd always imagined Harleys were designed for big fellas with long legs and short necks but it turns out that the dominant group of riders is a little more average than that.

The thing about motorcycles is that you never forget how to ride one. It's like, well, riding a bike.

Not only can you hire a bike here for a day, you can get a tour guide thrown in. Local motorcycle guide Graham Beker loves the wilderness of New Zealand's South Island almost as much as he loves riding the bikes. First-time Harley riders get taken through the basics, getting familiar with the throttle, brakes and "cruiser" riding position. A big engine and a torque-filled gearbox mean you can be pretty lazy about changing gears.

Pulling back on the throttle at low revs releases a guttural roar from the tailpipe – the kind of noise to which your mother-in-law would take a

special dislike. Graham waxes lyrical about the wisdom of combining alpine scenery with a Harley. "They don't do zero to 100 in record speed but they give you a tonne of torque down low, which makes climbing mountains a breeze," he enthuses. "It's about enjoying the ride, not winning a race."

You could spend several days touring the highlights of the South Island, or just use Queenstown as a base for day-trips into the surrounding countryside. West of Queenstown, the highway hugs the shoreline on its way to Glenorchy, following last century's steamboat route past farms and forests. Just a few decades back, you couldn't reach this town by road: only a ferry serviced it. Back then, the journey was half the fun, and things really haven't changed.

As you cruise along, absorbing the scenery, the odd bike or car can be seen up ahead, tiny specs in the distance on the stretch of the road



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that winds along Lake Wakatipu.

Harleys are pretty big bikes but they’re nothing compared to the grandeur of New Zealand’s southern lakes. Massive mountains just keep coming at you, mile after mile. Each time you get around one peak, there’s another waiting on the other side.

Both autumn and spring hold their charms for nature-lovers and, for motorcycle riders, the air is cool and clear. In peak seasons – winter and summer – these roads hum with travellers, but things ease off nicely in the intervening months.

Winding alpine trails lead through the mountains to Coronet Peak and Arrowtown in the north – slow roads that take their time to go anywhere. The view from Coronet Peak towards The Remarkables is just that: remarkable. Snow-capped peaks are on show here for much of the year, until the summer weather arrives.

To the west of Queenstown, the roads head into the wine-growing regions around Wanaka and

Bannockburn. You might have to go easy on the tasting for the sake of safe riding but the area’s abundance of cellar doors is accompanied by some terrific places to rest up for lunch. Quality and choice are a hallmark of the region for wine-lovers and foodies alike. The back roads around Arrowtown provide access to some top-grade rural sightseeing, boutique galleries, and pit-stops geared for adventure.

The Harley is a freedom machine, not an adrenalin ride – for real thrills and spills, get aboard a Shotover Jet Boat. These nimble inventions use

two V6 big block engines to scoop and shoot water off the surface and rocket-propel the craft through the canyons of Shotover River. Once aboard the river ride, it’s all screams and giggles as the driver throws the jet boat past boulders and around bends. When he waves his right hand in a circle, it’s the sign that another 360-degree manoeuvre is about to happen. Everybody holds on tight.

The ride seems to go on forever, dumping sprays of water over the boat and passengers at regular intervals. Jet-boating may not be regarded as an extreme sport – but





Above: The long and winding road to Coronet Peak

Right: The docks of Queenstown and the *TSS Earnslaw*

Bottom: On the road through Arrowtown



it is extreme fun.

High above Queenstown and Arrowtown, genuine thrillseekers throw canvas to the wind: a steady stream of paragliders make solo and tandem leaps into the sky above a glorious landscape. Nothing but thin air keeps them aloft until they land, eventually, on *terra firma*. Bungee jumpers have ropes tied to bridges; para-gliders have ropes tied to bags of air. If your mother-in-law didn't like the motorbike, she's not going to be crazy about this, either.

Even if you don't plan to ride the wind from mountain-top to river valley, the aptly named Flight Park is worth a visit. The most unassuming café in the region is hidden away beside the landing strip, serving locally produced treats – some savoury, some sweet. Enjoy Queenstown's best-value lunch while you watch adrenalin junkies swoop out of the sky and kiss the grass. Every half an hour, a mini-van collects them from the café and takes them back up the hill to do it all over again. Once, it is, is never enough.

Further up the valley is historical Arrowtown, a good place to find your low gear and explore the remnants of local gold-mining heritage. Arrowtown is a little bit kitsch with a

dash of quaint, an ornate collection of miners' cottages, public buildings and stables. The working-class façades flanking the main street front outlets for tasty home-made pies, locally carved jade and exhibitions of pioneering hardships.

Poplar trees and willows turn many shades of yellow in April and recover from a barren winter in November with a palette of vibrant greens. The views here change in sympathy with the seasons.

After a long day of jarring your bones on boats, gliders and motorcycles, make a stop on the hill that will really help soothe the muscles. Onsen style hot pools – toasty-warm pools of glacial run-off, perched above the Shotover River at Arthurs Point – have arrived in the Queenstown area. And from inside each private timber tub, you get a piece of the alpine scenery to call your very own. Each of the hot pools has its own retractable roof to let the outdoors in, and there's plenty of room in the tub for two. It's the smart and sensual way to end a scenic day on the road.

At the end of your journey, you may be reluctant to give back the Harley. The more you ride, the more you want to. South Island scenery blends well with the laidback riding style and the

lowdown power of a big bike engine. Your mother-in-law may not approve of two-wheeled touring but your stories about alpine-style pampering in villas, onsens and wineries are sure to meet with her approval. •

**Photography by Ewen Bell**





## travelfacts

### gettingthere

Air New Zealand operate direct daily flights between Australia and Queenstown during the winter, or via Auckland and Christchurch at other times. Phone 13 2476 or visit [www.airnewzealand.com.au](http://www.airnewzealand.com.au)  
Qantas flies direct to Queenstown from Sydney. Phone 13 1313 or visit [www.qantas.com.au](http://www.qantas.com.au)

### gettingaround

AAT Kings, phone 1300 556 100 or visit [www.aatkings.com](http://www.aatkings.com)  
Avis, phone 13 63 33 or visit [www.avis.com.au](http://www.avis.com.au)  
Creative Holidays, phone 1300 747 400 or visit [www.creativeholidays.com.au](http://www.creativeholidays.com.au)  
Grand Pacific Tours, phone 1800 622 768 or visit [www.grandpacifictours.com](http://www.grandpacifictours.com)  
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Kirra Tours, phone 1800 007 373 (Australia) or 0508 3675 4772 (New Zealand) or visit [www.kirratours.co.nz](http://www.kirratours.co.nz)

### wheretostay

Blanket Bay Luxury Lodge, phone +64 3 441 0115 or visit [www.blanketbay.com](http://www.blanketbay.com)  
Browns Boutique Hotel, phone +64 3 441 2050 or visit [www.brownsotel.co.nz](http://www.brownsotel.co.nz)  
Commonage Villas, phone +64 3 442 8000 or visit [www.commonagevillas.com](http://www.commonagevillas.com)  
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Crowne Plaza Queenstown, phone 138 388 (Australia) or 0800 801 111 (New Zealand) or visit [www.crowneplazaqueenstown.co.nz](http://www.crowneplazaqueenstown.co.nz)  
Hotel St Moritz Queenstown, phone +64 3 442 4990 or visit [www.mgallery.com](http://www.mgallery.com)  
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### whatodo

Harley Tours New Zealand offer motorcycle touring with or without a guide. Gloves, jacket, helmet and boots are included in the rental. Phone +64 7863 6069 or visit [www.harleytoursnewzealand.co.nz](http://www.harleytoursnewzealand.co.nz)  
Shotover Jet, phone +64 3 442 8570 or visit [www.shotoverjet.com](http://www.shotoverjet.com)

### furtherinformation

Tourism New Zealand, phone 02 8220 9000 or visit [www.newzealand.com](http://www.newzealand.com)  
Destination Queenstown, visit [www.queenstown-nz.co.nz](http://www.queenstown-nz.co.nz)



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