

THIS WEEK IN TRAVELLER



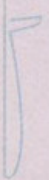
Tim Richards is charmed by Kuala Lumpur's diversity. "I attended a Hindu festival, ate hawker food, viewed beautiful Islamic art and jostled with crowds in Chinatown. And finished each day with an excellent cocktail. It's all about balance."



Touring New Zealand's South Island, **Sue White** was ready for picture-perfect towns awaiting their annual influx of skiers, boarders and snow bunnies. "But I hadn't anticipated the competition between chilled-out Wanaka and bustling Queenstown. The face-off came as a surprise."



Sean Mooney finds what might be the biblical paradise near the ancient city of Damascus. "Forget about the Axis of Evil; Syria is a vibrant, welcoming land and its capital is the world's original melting pot of cultures."



DESTINATION
NEW ZEALAND

Rivalry that's white hot

Sue White compares the attractions of the South Island's premier ski towns: Queenstown and Wanaka.

Residents of Australia's two biggest cities are experts at sniffing out rivalry. Those heading to New Zealand's South Island soon discover the ski towns of Queenstown and Wanaka also have a small-scale Sydney-Melbourne rivalry floating in the crisp winter's air.

So which is the destination for you? We put Queenstown and Wanaka to the test.

Scenery

Queenstown ticks all the ski-village boxes. It has a spectacular setting on Lake Wakatipu, is surrounded by snowcapped mountain ranges and its compact town centre boasts more than three dozen bars. What's not to like?

But Wanaka is also picture perfect. The sun sets perfectly over the town's centrepiece, Lake Wanaka, while Avalanche Glacier glistens impressively in the background and there are glimpses of nearby Mount Aspiring – all without the busyness of Queenstown. Neighbouring Lake Hawea is also worth the 20-minute drive.

The verdict Wanaka, because you'll share the views with fewer people.

On the slopes

From Queenstown, The Remarkables and Coronet Peak are the two main ski areas. At The Remarkables, where views across the Wakatipu Basin complement a day on the slopes, the main changes this year are practical. Free shuttles will escort passholders up to the north-facing resort if they don't want to tackle a 45-minute drive up a winding, unsealed road.

Coronet Peak has upgraded its snow-making facilities, guaranteeing season-long coverage on trails such as Sarah Sue. Both resorts are more parent-friendly this year, with babysitting facilities available for children as young as three months.

Can't ski? Strap-on snowshoes allow the old, the young and the uncoordinated to float across knee-deep snow with ease.



Sip and ski ... Queenstown's nightlife is legendary; (right) Wanaka's Treble Cone is the South Island's largest ski area. Photo: Mark Watson

Outdoor enthusiasts from Queenstown's New Zealand Nature Walks (nzwalks.com) have begun snowshoe trips along Ben Lomond Saddle and promise that "if you can walk, you can snowshoe".

In Wanaka, the facts are on Treble Cone's side: it's the South Island's largest ski area and has the island's highest vertical rise. Intermediate skiers and boarders will appreciate the new 90-minute, free guided tours of the groomed trails (11am and 1.45pm daily).

Experts are drawn to Treble Cone, though the resort is trying to accommodate more beginners and has widened some trails.

There is free access to the learner lifts, the Nice 'n' Easy Platter and Magic Carpet as further entertainment.

Snowboarders who want to hone their skills can descend on the jumps and rails of Snow Park opposite Cardrona. However, for those who've already put in a day on the slopes, visit on Tuesday, Thursday or Friday evening to sip a drink by the fire and watch the experts tear up the slopes outside.

With wide open basins, Cardrona is the



most family-friendly ski area near Wanaka. Improvements this season include a new trail down Arcadia Basin, which will appeal to advanced skiers and boarders, and improvements to freestyle ski areas for the inaugural Winter Games late next month.

The verdict The jury is still out but, according to Wanaka locals, first-time visitors tend to choose Queenstown while return skiers make their way to Wanaka.

Eating

It is not a town to do things by halves – there are more than 150 eateries in Queenstown. Locals start their day with coffee at Joe's Garage (Searle Lane), where a bustling no-nonsense energy accompanies big breakfasts; at the end of the day, Fergberger (42 Shotover Street) serves gourmet burgers until 5am.

With a roaring fire and award-winning cuisine focused on local ingredients, Saffron (18 Buckingham Street in nearby Arrowtown) draws crowds from across the region. However, you'll compete with locals and tourists for a table, so book ahead.

The Wanaka restaurant scene isn't humming

like Queenstown's, but you won't starve. Lago (151 Ardmore Street) has great café fare and lake views, while Botswana Butchery on Post Office Lane (and also in Queenstown) and Missy's Kitchen (80 Ardmore Street) are two of Wanaka's best-reviewed restaurants.

The verdict You'll be well fed in Wanaka but you're spoiled for choice in Queenstown. In dining, Queenstown is a winner.

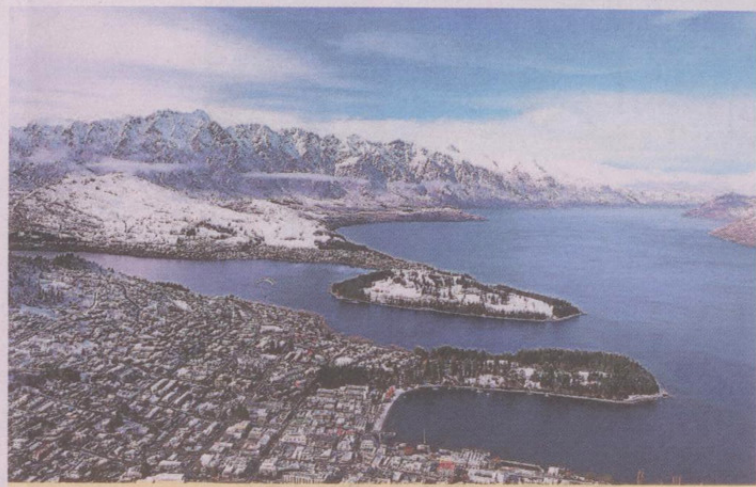
Sleeping

Queenstown has so much accommodation it feels as if almost every second building is a hotel or hostel. This can be visually overwhelming but the upside is there's something for all budgets.

The all-inclusive Remarkables Lodge is a pricey but enticing home away from home (remarkables.co.nz); The Glebe (theglebe.co.nz) is one of dozens of slick-looking self-catering apartments; and Pinewood Lodge does dorms and private rooms for those on a tight budget (pinewood.co.nz).

There are fewer options in Wanaka than Queenstown, especially at the top end.

Edgewater Resort is right on the lake



FAST FACTS

Getting there Queenstown has an international airport but most flights go to Christchurch, where you clear immigration and customs before changing aircraft. Air New Zealand flies once a week non-stop to Queenstown; fares from Sydney and Melbourne from \$399. Fares to Christchurch from \$209. Fares from Christchurch to Queenstown cost from \$56 and to Wanaka from \$86. (Fares are one way, including tax.)

Lift tickets Queenstown: The Remarkables day pass \$93, free shuttle from Queenstown centre; Coronet Peak day pass \$87, add \$10 return if using the shuttle. With NZ Superpass you can ski The Remarkables one day and Coronet Peak the next. You can also use it at Wanaka's Treble Cone and Snow Park and towards activities such as jet-boating. See www.nzsuperpass.com. Packaging lift tickets with accommodation can save money. See nzski.com, which is also the main site for The Remarkables and Coronet Peak resorts.

Wanaka: Treble Cone day pass \$99, see

treblecone.com; Cardrona day pass \$85, see cardrona.com; Snow Park from \$65 a day (also open some evenings), see snowparknz.com. The five-day "Wanaka pass" lets you ski Treble Cone and Cardrona for \$410 (buy direct from resorts). For Wanaka lift and accommodation packages see resort websites.

Getting around You might not need a car in Queenstown. Getting to and from the airport (eight kilometres from town), take a taxi (about \$25), shuttle (\$15 single or \$18 for two) or bus (\$5). Wanaka visitors usually are better off with wheels. Budget (www.budget.co.nz) rents vehicles from Queenstown airport. It's about 100 kilometres to Wanaka over the spectacular but hair-raising Crown Range Road. A more conservative option is to take the route by the Shotover River. If you're car-free, the "getting here" section of Cardrona's website has all the options to get from Queenstown to Wanaka.

More information See newzealand.com, queenstown-nz.co.nz; skilakewanaka.com.

(edgewater.co.nz), Wanaka Luxury Apartments (wla.co.nz) has an appealing hot tub but limited cooking facilities (microwave), while visitors in the know often choose to rent a house (wanaka-reservations.co.nz).

The verdict For sheer volume, Queenstown.

Apres-ski

An unfair comparison. Queenstown is a famous party town, known for its thriving nightlife at any time of the year. Even those with homebody tendencies will find themselves sucked into the heady Queenstown bar scene until the wee hours at least once during their stay.

Hot this season are Barmuda (for cocktails), Bardou (with open fireplace) and Revolver (comedy and live music).

Nightlife in Wanaka is more "sip a beer" than "stumble out of a laneway bar" but nonetheless the apres-ski action is solid.

The Cardrona Hotel (cardronahotel.co.nz) is known for pulling crowds once the ski lifts close, thanks to open fires, excellent mulled wine and an extensive wine cellar. In town, the bars of Post Office Lane (try Woodys or Barluga) stay open

late enough to ruin your form on the slopes the following morning.

The verdict Queenstown for the party people, but those who like low-key entertainment will be happy with Wanaka.

Off the slopes

Queenstown's adrenalin-pumping activities continue year-round. It may be freezing but you can still bungee jump, take a jet boat along the Shotover River or white-water raft throughout winter.

For those determined to keep things quieter, the Onsen Hot Pools (onsen.co.nz) are superb and should be on more visitors' to-do lists.

Most visitors don't realise many of Queenstown's adventure activities also exist in Wanaka. Paragliding, jet-boating and heli-skiing are all here. We love U-fly, a scenic flight during which unskilled passengers learn to fly over Lake Wanaka (u-flywanaka.co.nz).

For rustic cinematic heaven, Wanaka's Cinema Paradiso shouldn't be missed. With comfy couches, red wine and home-made biscuits in the interval, it's a much-loved Wanaka institution.

The verdict Queenstown, because the operators will pick you up and drop you off. Wanaka is a little more work but only because the infrastructure is far less commercial.

The final word

Queenstown is a fast-paced ski town where there's never a dull moment. Wanaka has just as much on the slopes but with a quieter vibe. Because Queenstown is such a tourist drawcard, holidaying here is well-packaged. There's always someone ready with exactly what you're looking for, which helps to create a hassle-free holiday.

The Wanaka experience, in contrast, will reward those who prefer travelling more independently.

We all love a good-natured rivalry but, putting preference to one side, let's look at the facts. The snow is falling; the dollar is in our favour. The skiing, boarding and apres-ski of Queenstown and Wanaka are some of the best in the southern hemisphere, so you're unlikely to be disappointed with either destination.

Sue White travelled courtesy of Tourism NZ.



Good-natured rivals ... a quiet Wanaka street; (top) the idyllic setting of Queenstown.