

These Are a Few of My Favourite Things

Images courtesy of Tourism New Zealand

Our ever-so-slightly champagne-addled **Callum Laing** had so much fun in New Zealand he decided to invite **lifestyle + travel** readers back with him. Not all of the activities or accommodations are commercially available so please pick and choose wisely from this snowy tale.

“We should definitely do that again. I was ‘a radical gnarly snowboarding dood’. But next time we should bring all our friends and maybe we should hire a chalet or a whole hotel, and then perhaps we could go back up to the North Island and get a boat and go for a sail and then we should... hey, whad’ya doing?”

My partner leant across me and held down the full recline button on my Thai Airways Royal Plus seat until I was nearly parallel with the ground. She then, rather brusquely I thought, removed the glass of champagne from my hand and drew the blanket up over my head. In the darkness, I felt her pile some pillows on top of my head too.

Well, she might not have appreciated my musings on my perfect holiday, but as our plane took us up and away from the land of the long white cloud that is New Zealand, back home to the long dark smog of Bangkok, I let my mind wander over the past fortnight.

Being picked up from the airport by an old rowing buddy was definitely a good start. It’s cheap, efficient and allows you plenty of time to chat about old times while your partner is having her bags pulled apart by immigration. Half an hour later we were meeting the wife, kids and dog out at Mount Eden in Auckland.

What a great old place; classic NZ wooden house complete with trampoline and tree house in the garden. They have a lovely spare room and are wonderfully accommodating.

As tempting as it was to settle into the routine of cold Speight’s (a good Kiwi beer) and earthy home-cooked food, we could only stay there a day as it was time to move on and visit

my grandmother. Hiring a car is simple enough and soon we were winding our way up the main road north to Whangarei. From the looks of the beautiful garden and the first-class roast dinner she had waiting for us you would have had no idea she had problems with her eyes. Not to mention Nana’s Shepherds Pie, which is a must-have on any trip to NZ!

Lunch down at the harbour was fantastic, and then of course no trip to Whangarei would be complete without a visit to the Clock Museum. I highly recommend the whole shebang, but do give Nan a couple of days to get ready for you - and remember, she is a hardy soul who has the windows open in winter so you may want to sleep with your socks on (and a hat and jumper!)

Back to Auckland to catch a flight down to the South Island, but not before spending an evening in an Executive Suite at **The Langham** (langhamhotels.com). Did you know that the original Langham in London played host to such distinguished guests as Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain? Aspiring writers can take inspiration from that. While thoughtfully chewing on a Langham pencil, staring at the blank Langham writing paper in front of you, strive to allow these literary greats’ powers to manifest themselves through you.

If after 10 minutes your paper is still blank, don’t be disheartened. Those writers never had to deal with such distractions as ‘Men and their Monster Machines’ on the massive plasma screens. I’m sure the more recent dignitaries to have stayed in the Langham such as Tony Blair and The Rolling Stones find themselves drawn by the big screens and don’t do anything so trivial as creative writing or real work.



Boarding The Remarkables



The Langham certainly celebrates days gone by. Heavy curtains and dark wood make you feel like you should have dressed up somewhat before arriving; even watching the telly should be attempted in a smoking jacket. A discrete butler will unpack for you, iron your shirts and mix you a Gin & Tonic. Our butler was discrete to the point that we never actually saw or heard him during our stay.

In Auckland we boarded an Air New Zealand flight, and an hour's snooze later found ourselves in Christchurch. Very kindly the town threw a big welcome party, and all of its citizens came out to welcome us. Our arrival apparently coincided with the 150th anniversary of the town. So that worked out well.

The last time I was in Christchurch, over a decade ago, I was training with the Canterbury Rowing Club. That meant that I spent my life doing 5km runs around the banks of the River Avon. No such problems this time, Christchurch has turned itself into quite a cosmopolitan little town and the best way to enjoy the river is by sitting at one of the many bars and restaurants and watching it lazily wind its way through town as you sample the fine wines of the region.

For accommodation I have to recommend our friends Pete & Sally [names have been changed because quite frankly the author is just being silly now! Ed]. About half an hour's drive out of town at Little River, they bought a lovely old house and

One week's snowboarding; carving fine lines at great speeds through fresh powder on the mountainsides; catching 'gnarly air, dood' as we 'land a switchside 540' and other terms that only a small group of young people with slightly odd facial hair and piercings would understand.

Opposite, top: Sofitel Queenstown's Juliet Balcony
Opposite, bottom: Operatic staff abound at Mollies in Auckland

This page: The Azur, Queenstown is a quintessential luxury lakeside lodge

are currently halfway through renovating it. The scenery is fantastic and once they have finished knocking through the kitchen at the back it will be champion. The spare room is cute, and I'm sure if you bought them a bottle of wine they would be as accommodating as they can.

A quick flight later - no sleeping on this one, the Southern Alps beckon on either side - and Queenstown greeted us. This a small place with easily enough activities to keep the most hardened adventurer amused every day for years - from tranquil walks to adrenaline-inducing gravity-assisted terror experiences - they cater to every taste here. Our objective was simple: one week's snowboarding; carving fine lines at great speeds through fresh powder on the mountainsides; catching 'gnarly air, dood' as we 'land a switchside 540' and other terms that only a small group of young people with slightly odd facial hair and piercings would understand.

We set off at first light for The Remarkables, 40 minutes' drive away. These mountains live up to their name with fantastic runs and remarkable views which I admired from many different angles as I somersaulted through the air, having tried to replicate a jump that those younger than me made look so effortless. Hobbling back to our hotel room each night, me cursing my selective memory of past snowboarding holidays, we slept like heavily sedated logs at the **Sofitel Queenstown** (sofitelqueenstown.com).

"This is my favourite hotel so far," chimed my partner as she made herself a gin & tonic from the mini-bar. Situated right in the heart of Queenstown, the Sofitel has been done out very nicely with pretty much every modern convenience you could ask for. My impression of any hotel is usually based on the bathroom: 'sumptuous' would be a good word to start with here. The bath itself rocks; I've always been a fan of gadgets and a bath that is not only a Jacuzzi but has a TV built into the wall above it with a waterproof remote control is definitely 'gnarly dood'. Gadgets continue into the bedroom with a touch-screen remote control for the TV that pretty much allows you

to do anything from the comfort of your toasty bed. Other perks are the daily presents that appear unnoticed on your bed, like hand warmers and lip balm.

Should you be able to tear yourself away, the hotel is literally surrounded by bars. Actually, nowhere in Queenstown is too far away from dozens of bars, and the people of Queenstown do like to party. But don't party too hard - the best time to get to the slopes is early in the morning and the Sofitel is right opposite the main bus run.

Next stop was a short trip up the hill to **The Azur** (azur.co.nz). As your vehicle winds its way up the narrow tree-lined street to the hotel, now would be a good time to take all your preconceptions about what a hotel should be and leave them on the side of the road. Imagine your ideal holiday home but with a permanent team on hand to take care of your every need.

Upon arrival the team rushed up to introduce themselves. It was like being famous. Before we knew it our snowboards had been taken to the garage, our boots and gloves were being dried and warmed, our bags were already on their way down to our villa and we were being shown around the lodge where we were welcome to help ourselves to anything from the kitchen whenever we wanted. Everyone already knew our names and within minutes we felt like we belonged.





God's country? Queenstown's Lake Wakatipu at sunset

“This is my favourite hotel so far,” chimed my partner as she made herself a gin & tonic from the mini-bar.

After a quick tour of the lodge we were shown to our villa, one of nine perched on a hillside, each with a stunning view of the lake and mountains. With the fire burning, a bottle of white wine on ice and the sun slowly setting behind the mountains, we felt like we had finally arrived. Actions speak louder than words and even though I had spent years looking forward to this snowboarding trip, The Azur was a place that demands you spend time in it. Amazingly, I actually chose to take a day off from the slopes in order to fully appreciate our villa; I think I could have spent the whole day in the bath alone.

Too soon our time at the Azur was up and we were packing our bags again for the short trip back into town, to the very funky **The Spire Hotel** (thespirehotels.com). Highlights include the hip hotel bar, and the state-of-the-art in-room entertainment system that lets you watch and record TV, surf the net, and plug in your camera to review your day's extreme sport photos on the plasma screen.

With just 10 rooms, this hotel's biggest problem is a lack of space for the increasing number of guests attracted to the modern feel. Having said that, The Spire doesn't come off like a business hotel; it's relaxed, comfortable and feels more like staying at a friend's apartment in a foreign city. That would be the friend who has done very, very well and has the sort of apartment that makes you very glad you stayed in touch with him even though he was a geek at school.

“This is definitely my favourite,” my other half chimed once more.

The Langham Hotel's prestigious lobby





A quick look at the expiry date on our ski-passes revealed that our time was nearly up. More than once I had looked on enviously at those working a season at Queenstown. It would be awfully tempting to give everything up and become a chalet girl for a few months.

I was still mulling it over as we looked down at the Southern Alps on the flight back to Auckland for our final night in New Zealand. It had been a dramatic, almost operatic two weeks, an imbroglio at times, and so what better finale to the holiday than to stay in one of Auckland's Prima Donna hotels, **Mollies** (mollies.co.nz).

"Wow, now this really is my favourite!" she gasped.

Mollies is an experience that everyone should sample, even if it is just to drink at the bar or dine at the restaurant. Mollies is not like other hotels. And Mollies staff is comprised of people unlike any you have seen before. An opera-singing GM was the first clue to explain why the rooms are either piled high with operatic scores or furnished with a baby grand piano. Each evening, there is a live rendition in the main room. However, the staff were entertainment enough; we could easily have stayed and chatted at the bar all night. But Ponsenby, where Mollies is located, is one of Auckland's hottest destinations, and all the restaurants, bars and clubs were drawing us onwards to celebrate our last night.

With the fire burning, a bottle of white wine on ice and the sun slowly setting behind the mountains we felt like we had finally arrived.

Maybe, just maybe, we could figure out a way to live in New Zealand. Auckland is buzzing, and the snowy mountains and gorgeous hotels of Queenstown are an easy weekend break away. Or maybe I could become a barman at one of the many bars, or work the ski lifts. Or perhaps I could go and...

"Oy, wake up, we're nearly there."

The hours had passed in a blink. A quick press of the gadget panel next to me and my fully reclining chair returned itself to upright. A smiling face walked past and handed me a fresh orange juice. Damn! I hadn't even had a chance to check out all the videos or play any of the games. Still, I was already planning my next trip back south. 🍷

Getting There

Connect at Bangkok to fly **Thai Airways** daily to Auckland. Visit thaiairways.com.