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A jet boat skims the surface of the Shotover River near Queenstown.

Adventure Island

Exploring Queenstown and Fiordland National Park

By Rob Dunton

I am calm and collected as the cable car lifts from terra firma and bobs gently toward the galvanized-steel bungy pod, which is nestled in a web of steel cables about 440 feet above the Nevis River. The terrain is mountainous and dry, the antithesis of the lush New Zealand I have seen to this point. It is a cloudy spring day, and a blend of light rain and snow flutters by. ■ At the pod, we gather in front of the jump master.

“We always start with the heaviest first,” he says, smiling. “If a Mr. Rob Dunton would be so kind as to raise his hand, we’ll have him make the first leap and test this rig for the rest of you.”

That pound-a-year since college hadn’t seemed like such a big deal until now. Soon my ankles are secured into a pair of pad-

ded foot cuffs with a thick bungy cord attached. Nervousness doesn’t arrive in earnest until I am penguin-walking toward the small platform on one side of AJ Hackett Bungy’s bungy pod overlooking the sinuous river far below.

When I learned New Zealand was the birthplace of commercial bungy jumping,

jet boats, Everest pioneer Sir Edmund Hillary and the motorcycle land-speed legend Burt Munro (featured in the film *The World’s Fastest Indian*), I knew I had found a country of kindred spirits. Fortunately, this island nation, which comprises two large islands and several smaller ones, was also high on my wife Susan’s list.

With a population of about 4 million people, New Zealand boasts dazzling landscapes with lush forests and mountain peaks, which served as the stunning backdrop for *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. The South Island is also well-known for adventure travel, so Susan and I designed

an action-packed itinerary here: jet boating, white-water rafting, hiking the Milford Track, kayaking Doubtful Sound, and a few days of R&R and canyoneering in scenic Queenstown. Susan was not interested in diving from a platform with an elastic tether strapped to her ankles, however, so, for the morning, I am solo.

RICK DALEY / WWW.DANITADELMONT.COM



Sea kayakers paddle the spectacular waters of Doubtful Sound in Fiordland National Park.

The jump captain counts down: 3... 2... 1... I raise my arms as if to swan-dive; then I leap. The rush hits before my toes leave the deck. My eyes water as my speed approaches 75 mph. I fly, Spiderman style, the length of a football field before I feel a slow tug at my ankles as the bungee begins to stretch. I laugh in jubilation. When I finally stop bouncing, I'm reeled back to make way for the next thrill-seeker.

I rejoin Susan in Queenstown an hour later. The town is perched on glistening Lake Wakatipu and surrounded by the snowcapped Remarkables and Eyre Mountains, providing a blend of Ireland and Colorado with a compact collection of first-class hotels, restaurants and bars.

OUR FIRST STOP AFTER LUNCH is the scenic Shotover River, where we climb aboard a cherry-red jet boat and race through nar-

row granite gorges at high speeds. The skipper expertly maneuvers past cliff walls, fallen logs and rock outcroppings. He revels in the excited exclamations of his passengers. Back on shore, we don wet suits, booties and helmets, and catch a helicopter that shuttles us upriver to float the upper rapids on a raft. From our aerial vantage, the vistas of the surrounding mountains and verdant valleys are breathtaking. The helicopter banks and drops into the river valley. Seconds later, we level off and land gently on the cobblestone beach, grab our paddles, and head to the waiting raft.

For the next two hours, we paddle, bounce and splash our way through playful rapids. During the lulls, we see remnants of the area's rich mining past as Queenstown Rafting's guides explain the

local history and geology. We hear howls of laughter echo off the canyon walls ahead and see people swinging from ropes and jumping into the water.

IT'S 6 P.M. WHEN WE MAKE it back to our exquisite residence, the Central Ridge Boutique Hotel. We stroll to Wai Waterfront Restaurant, an excellent seafood restaurant located on Lake Wakatipu, for a

luxurious dinner. We feast on seared scallops in almond milk, followed by oven-roasted New Zealand monkfish wrapped in Parma ham on a bed of seared banana prawns. Each of the five courses is paired with a superb Riesling or Pinot Noir from nearby Central Otago. Later, we wander back to our hotel, past handsome stone buildings, lively bars and a babbling brook that flows through town.

Milford Track

SUSAN AND I WAKE EARLY FOR the day's ride to neighboring Fiordland to hike Milford Track, arguably the best-known and least-

DETAILS

ACTIVITIES

AJ HACKETT BUNGY NEW ZEALAND

3-442-4007; www.bungy.co.nz

FIORDLAND KAYAKS

3-249-7700; www.fiordlandseakayak.co.nz

QUEENSTOWN RAFTING

3-442-9792; www.rafting.co.nz

ROUTE BURN CANYONING LTD.

3-441-3003; www.canyoning.co.nz

ULTIMATE HIKES

3-450-1940; www.ultimatehikes.co.nz

DINING

ROARING MEGS RESTAURANT

3-442-9676; www.roaringmegs.co.nz

WAI WATERFRONT RESTAURANT

3-442-5969; www.wai.net.nz

WINNIES GOURMET PIZZA BAR

3-442-8635; www.winnies.co.nz

LODGING

In Queenstown

CENTRAL RIDGE BOUTIQUE HOTEL

3-442-8832; www.centralridge.co.nz

THE DAIRY PRIVATE LUXURY HOTEL

3-442-5164; www.thedairy.co.nz

In Te Anau

KEIKO'S COTTAGES BED AND BREAKFAST

3-249-9248; www.keikos.co.nz

NEW ZEALAND





ROB DUNTON

New Zealand fur seals and bottlenose dolphins live in a mix of fresh and salt water. The snowcapped sentinel Mitre Peak stands 5,551 feet, surrounded by mountains, pinnacles, waterfalls and cliffs.

demanding of New Zealand's nine Great Walks, which are the top hikes chosen by the Department of Conservation for their exquisite scenery. Fiordland is the largest national park in New Zealand. It's a wild land flanked on the east by two glacier-carved lakes, Te Anau and Manapouri, and on the west by 14 dramatic fjords. The Milford Track, a 33.5-mile hike, often described as the "finest walk in the world," traverses the heart of this wild country. Permits are limited to prevent overcrowding, so Susan and I had booked spots with Ultimate Hikes to guarantee access and gain the benefit of top guides, prepared meals, hot showers and a private bedroom at the end of each day. We join an international mix of couples, families and friends who have come to walk the famed trail.

On our first morning on the trail, a gentle rain falls. With the area receiving about 16 feet of rain per year, this comes as no surprise. We put on waterproof gear and lightweight packs (we carry only clothes, personal items, lunch, snacks and water), cross the Clinton River via a suspension bridge and enter the mossy lushness of the temperate rain forest. We hike past massive beech trees, through wetlands and across innumerable streams as we move deeper into glacier-carved Clinton Valley. A few miles later, we reach a clear-

Hikers follow Milford Track up to Mackinnon Pass, the highest point of the trail.

ing and discover the canyon has narrowed dramatically. Sheer 4,000-foot walls jut up on either side, draped in a garment of hundreds of waterfalls. Susan and I arrive at our lodge for the night, hang our clothes in a large drying closet and settle in for a hot shower, a warm meal, pleasant company and a good night's sleep.

We awake to a cloudless morning for our big push up Mackinnon Pass (3,507 feet), the highest point of the trek. The surrounding peaks are capped with snow, and rainbows grace the morning mist as it rises off the valley floor. Lining the trail, foxglove and Mount Cook lilies are in full bloom, and bellbirds sing in the dense canopy. Vistas expand as rain forest ferns and moss give way to granite, grass and lichen. We arrive at Mackinnon Memorial and take in magnificent 360-degree views.

Over the remaining day and a half, we hike from this grassy pass down to the forests around Milford Sound, 20 miles away. The Ice Age-carved peaks floating in the dark, tannin-rich waters fit the ancient Maori legend of Fiordland: They call the area *Te Rua-o-te-moko*, "the tattooed land," said to be carved by the benevolent god Tuterakiwhanoa. Here, crested penguins,

Doubtful Sound

A DAY AFTER COMPLETING THE Milford Track, Susan and I dig into a hearty home-cooked Japanese breakfast at Keiko's Cottages Bed and Breakfast in the sleepy town of Te Anau. Then we meet Fiordland Kayak's Fi Lee, our guide for a two-day paddling adventure on Doubtful Sound. Lee's jovial and unassuming disposition belies her rugged spirit: She and a friend once spent 10 weeks kayaking the area's 14 fjords, hunting and living off fish and shellfish they caught.

We climb into our tandem kayaks and paddle west toward the Tasman Sea. Rain has returned, though only slightly. Except for the patter of raindrops and the sound of paddles pulling through water, all is quiet. The water looks like liquefied obsidian, blackened by eons of tannins leached from decomposing trees and vegetation from the steep cliffs and hillsides. Hairline waterfalls spill into the sound. We keep our eyes peeled in the hope of spotting red deer, crested penguins or seals as we glide silently along the lush coastline. We turn up an arm of the fjord and take in the dramatic splendor of the surrounding peaks. For hours we explore the islands, shores and inlets by water, even kayaking beneath a waterfall that spills over a rock outcropping. In the afternoon, we land our boats and set up our tents for the night.

In the morning, mist rises slowly off the sound like a ghostly veil. We continue to explore the fjord's varied inlets, and as time grows short, we attach sails to our paddles and ride the afternoon winds back to our launching point.

Queenstown

SUSAN AND I RETURN TO QUEENSTOWN for a few days of rest and rejuvenation. Our

base is the first-rate Dairy Private Luxury Hotel, barely 50 yards from the compact town center. As we investigate the town, we wander past historic 19th century buildings, enjoy the quiet of Queenstown Gardens and explore the pedestrian-only streets and alleyways lined with boutiques and restaurants. Each place we dine delivers delicious food, be it Roaring Megs' rack of lamb, Winnies' gourmet pizza or Fergburger's meal-in-a-bun burgers. With the current exchange rate, bargains abound on local wool outerwear, day-spa massages, and handsome shearling coats and gloves.

After a day of pampering and retail therapy, we are primed for one last rush. We join Routeburn Canyoning for a half-day of canyoneering just outside of town. Susan and I once again don wet suits, life preservers and helmets. We follow our guide up a canyon ridge to a permanent course of ziplines and ropes, then begin to navigate our way back down.

We ride a zipline across a gorge, then rappel a canyon wall to a river. We climb into the flowing water, slide down chutes, leap into pools, rappel the face of two waterfalls and swim through narrow passageways.

While Susan and I drop from a zipline into a refreshing pool swirling at the base of a waterfall, I know other travelers in the area are visiting award-winning wineries, enjoying a nature walk or savoring a good meal. Yet all I can do is think about the adventures I still want to try: skydiving, hang gliding, parasailing, hiking the Routeburn Track, heliskiing, riding the luge. ... I can't wait to return to this land of kindred spirits. ▲

Rob Dunton writes from San Diego.

GETTING THERE



Use Mileage Plan miles to visit New Zealand via partner airlines Air Pacific, American Airlines and Qantas. For more information or to enroll in Mileage Plan, go to alaskaair.com or call 800-654-5669.