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## CONSIDERED DESIGN

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IMAGINATIVE TRANSFORMATION OF A CHELSEA TOWN HOUSE



# ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND

SOPHIE CAMPBELL EMBRACES THE PIONEERING NEW ZEALAND SPIRIT AND CLIMBS, CYCLES AND SAILS HER WAY THROUGH THE BREATHTAKING LANDSCAPE



**T**hrow a stone in Wanaka on New Zealand's South Island and more than likely you will hit an Everest summiteer. 'We've got about seven within a mile of our house,' said Laurel Morrison, dangling in her climbing harness from a narrow plank-and-wire bridge. 'The biggest concentration outside Nepal,' she added, making a star shape with her arms and legs to convince me just how safe our seemingly precarious position was.

About 250 metres below us grazed thousands of red deer - venison for New Zealand, antlers for China - and the bright dots of hikers could be seen traversing the valley floor. A skein of water twisted and bounced down the schist, crashing into a pool far below.

What is it about Kiwis, I wondered, twirling in space above the country they call 'Godzone'. The cheery can-do attitude that got me up here - having ticked the scared-of-heights box - is what also drove Laurel's husband Mark to build the via ferrata of steel rungs that marks our climbing route. The same pioneering spirit gave women the vote in 1893, conquered Everest, bred the All Blacks, turned bungee jumping into a business and built a modern wine industry in 50 years flat. Resourceful. It must be something to do with having a tiny population of 4.5 million in a country bigger than Britain and at least 1,000 miles from anywhere.

Now, even the isolation is no longer a problem. It recently transpired that at least 92 of the world's super-rich own boltholes here - perhaps in anticipation of a future Armageddon - receiving fast-track citizenship in return for investment. For the rest of us, a new generation of ultra-long-haul aircraft reduces the pain of arrival: Qatar Airways' flight via Doha is no picnic, but our flying time was a frisky 23 hours - compared to anything between 25 and about 100 in the past.

Thus, a dizzying day and a half after leaving home, I was cycling in the valleys of Marlborough, through vineyards as flat and evenly striped as green corduroy. The grapes hung pendulously in purple clusters and, apart from the odd farmer's pickup followed by eager dogs, I was entirely alone. So much so that I started worrying about Armageddon, too, and scuttled back to The

Marlborough Lodge, an exquisitely expensive clapboard hotel that started life as a convent in nearby Blenheim (it was moved in five pieces in the Nineties).

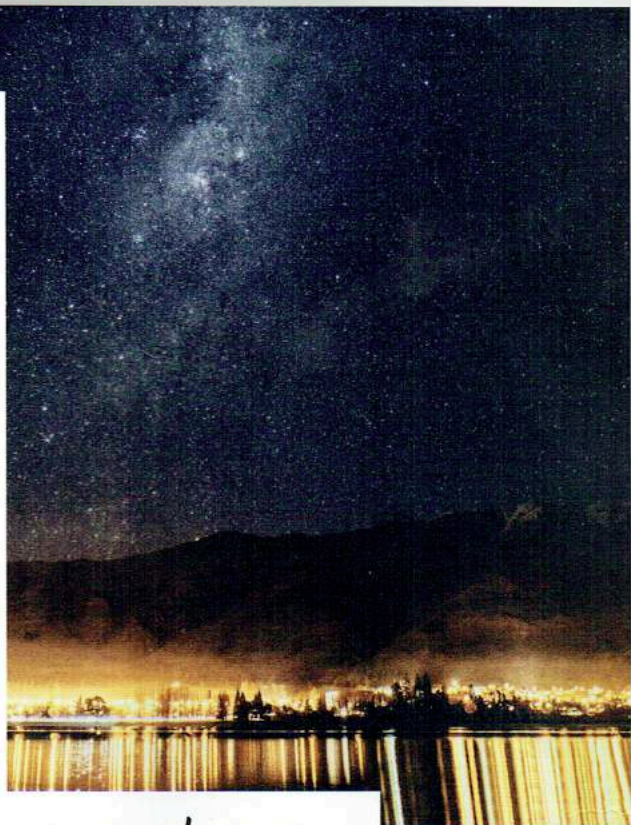
Those first quiet mornings, spent marvelling at lush foliage nearly like home but not quite, gave way to crazy activity. This entailed jumping into cold Queen Charlotte Sound as blue-lipped mussel shells, legitimately chucked from lunch, spun glinting to the seabed, and watching mountain bikers crash down from the Queenstown gondola station on prototype bikes so secret they wore black covers. Then there was tackling what I thought was going to be a gentle twin waterfalls walk in Wanaka and finding myself in climbing gear, eating the freshest food, washed down with clean, stony wine.

A three-hour drive north-east of Wanaka is Aoraki Mount Cook National Park, which encompasses New Zealand's highest mountain, with a chisel-shape summit that turns blue at sundown. It is one of the original breeding grounds of the resourceful Kiwi: this is where a young Edmund Hillary trained, long before he ever saw Nepal, and where, in 1921, an adventurer and entrepreneur called Rodolph Wigley took over the lease of a failing, government-owned hotel 60 kilometres from the nearest railway station and welcomed tourists to 'Mount Cook and the Sunny Southern Alps'.

Today, the hotel, called The Hermitage, is an alpine playground where you can hike, go on boat trips, drive off-road in an all-terrain vehicle or even land on the glacier in a snowplane. It has a museum dedicated to Hillary and a planetarium stocked with telescopes and stargazing experts, who helped us drink in the immensity of the southern night skies.

I still cannot get over the clarity of the landscape: in a bath-duck-yellow boat driven by 22-year-old Emily (shortly off to Europe to work on the backpacker buses), we pattered around newly carved icebergs, shorn from the edges of the glacier. 'Our glacier is receding at 80 metres a year,' she said, apologetically. 'Twenty years ago you could walk onto it - now it's becoming a lake.' We floated at a safe distance from the sullen blue wall, remnant of a mighty ice river grinding 100 kilometres down the valley, leaving behind a rubble of moraine. It was like a geology lesson. In fact, the whole country was like a gigantic natural sciences practical, populated with fit, brown Kiwis in shorts and fleeces, being active.

Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, where I spent two days on the North Island before my flight home, calls itself 'City of Sails' because there are more boats per head of population here than anywhere else in the world. I went sailing on one of two retired America's Cup yachts, sharing a winch with a guy from a local sailing club. 'Lived in London for years,' he said, as we frantically wound our handles in opposite directions. 'Doesn't compare, does it?' 'That's my home town you're talking about,' I thought. He had a point though □



## ways and means

Sophie Campbell travelled as a guest of Tourism New Zealand ([newzealand.com](http://newzealand.com)) and Qatar Airways ([qatarairways.com](http://qatarairways.com)), which has daily flights to Auckland via Doha, from £879 return. She stayed at The Marlborough Lodge ([themarbloroughlodge.co.nz](http://themarbloroughlodge.co.nz)), Lakeside Apartments ([lakesidewanaka.co.nz](http://lakesidewanaka.co.nz)), The Hermitage ([hermitage.co.nz](http://hermitage.co.nz)) and Skycity Grand ([skycityauckland.co.nz](http://skycityauckland.co.nz)). Wildwire Wanaka ([wildwire.co.nz](http://wildwire.co.nz)) charges from NZ\$189 (about £105) for a three-hour beginners' waterfall climb.



Opposite from top: The trail to Mount Cook. The Marlborough Lodge. Auckland's busy harbour. This page clockwise from top: The Milky Way over Lake Wanaka at night. A red deer. Waterfalls on the Rob Roy Glacier Track. White water rafting on the Clutha River. Walking to Aoraki Mount Cook National Park

