

New Zealand »



Lorna Subritzky says you don't need to be a star to stumble on to the movie set that is our southern playground in its autumn splendour

John Travolta once said, "Whenever I feel stressed, I just want to hop on a plane to Queenstown." Well, if it's good enough for my childhood crush, it's good enough for me. And if my frantic life doesn't warrant some active relaxation, the dire peak-hour traffic on the way to the airport certainly ensures I need to release stress (there's another flight just an hour later. No biggie. Breathe).

Previous visits to Queenstown have been in summer and winter, the peak seasons. So I'm curious to see how our southern playground shapes up in autumn, and whether there will be enough to do for someone not keen on throwing herself off bridges, out of planes or down mountains.

As it turns out, autumn is now my favourite time to visit. The weather is divine: a mix of crisp mornings, warm afternoons, and clear nights to revel in stargazing without the interference of light pollution. The streets are less crowded, the pace more sedate. And the landscape? Queenstown and its environs always make me think I've stumbled on to a movie set, so dramatic and

breath-taking is the view wherever you turn. However, an extra magical element is added as the leaves turn autumnal — as if a giant paintbrush has daubed at the set backdrops using a fiery palette. It's a different side to Central Otago and one with which I instantly fall in love.

I decide to ease into the outdoors with a walk around Lake Hayes, arguably the most photographed lake in the land. Understandably so, with picture-perfect selfie spots around every bend. I'm so busy drinking in the reflection of the mountains in the lake's mirrored finish that I barely notice I've walked 8km — but it's an easy amble, taking about 90 minutes (and burning more than 500 calories, according to my Fitbit, although I intend to replace those quite soon).

It's like a tasting plate for the region: exquisite vistas, a boardwalk protecting local wildlife, historic cottages and a close-up view of some of the area's most beautiful homes. I spot one lakeside residence up for auction, and a later Google search reveals it could be mine — as long as I win Powerball this weekend. And maybe go halves with a friend. You don't have to be wealthy to enjoy yourself here though: the Lake Hayes loop hasn't cost me a cent.

The following day I feel I should challenge myself a bit, so I book a half-day supported bike tour along the Arrow River Trail (\$139 at aroundthebasin.co.nz). I'm picked up early from my accommodation by Hamish, an enthusiastic

young man who proves New Zealand is a village when we discover he took my friend's sister to his school ball. He even keeps smiling when I reveal I haven't ridden a bike in 10 years and I'm rather nervous. After assuring me I'll be fine (easy for him to say, he's a multisport pro who's mountain biked on the world stage — if I tried that, I'd wobble off the stage and into the orchestrated pit), Hamish explains that it's a flat, 15km off-road trail and people with less ability than me have conquered it. I also remind myself there is wine tasting at the end — and with that, we're off to the start of the trail in historic Arrowtown.

We are issued with well-maintained bikes, helmets, maps and water, and we're offered gel seats (which I accept gratefully, although I will later discover it doesn't really save my butt as much as I'd hoped). I am writing this standing up) as well as polypropylene gloves, in deference to the crisp morning. Thorough directions and trail tips are also given, and it's explained there is driver and vehicle support at designated points throughout our ride. Reassuring. And we're off.

From Arrowtown we follow the beautiful Arrow River Trail downstream to where it meets the Kawarau River, somehow keeping an eye on the path while soaking up the scenery. A highlight is riding across two suspension bridges before joining the original miners trail that crosses the Kawarau bridge. We stop to watch intrepid adventurers hurtle towards the river

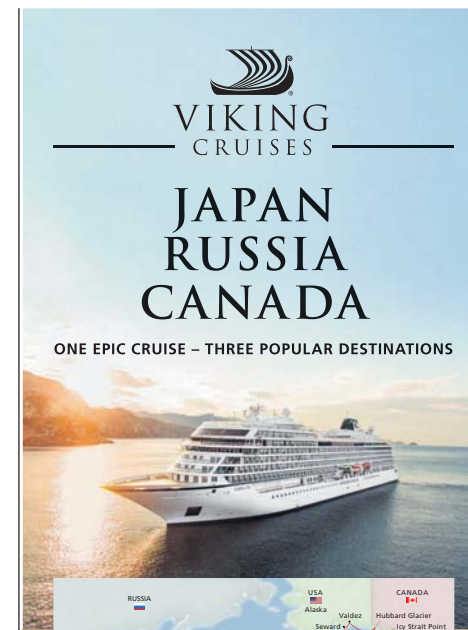


with just a bungy cord attached to their ankles. We finish our ride with wine tasting at Gibbston Valley. I opt for two local pinot noirs and, with a nod to the end of the golden weather, a rose. There's just time to nibble some delicious samples in the neighbouring cheesery before Hamish drops me back in Queenstown: a little dusty, a little sore, but very pleased with the way I've spent the past four hours.

Would Travolta cycle around Queenstown? Hard to say, but I'm pretty sure he'll be visiting Reds on his next trip. Ahead of QT Hotels opening the first five-star designer hotel in the resort town later this year, its signature cocktail lounge is already shaking and blending. Reds combines nostalgic alpine and apres-ski ambience with equally impressive views across Lake Wakatipu to The Remarkables. Eames-era chairs, along with pops of bold colour, provide design highlights. Resident DJs play late into the night, and an extensive cocktail list showcases a twist on the modern and forgotten. It's the perfect place to unwind after time in the great outdoors; I opt for a delicious concoction named after the mountain range I'm overlooking, and reflect on a wonderful couple of days.

If active relaxation was what I was after, I've found it. Turns out the perfect autumn getaway is just a short plane ride away — and it's a place equally accessible to a mum from Auckland as it is to a Hollywood celebrity.

Clockwise from left: Lake Hayes in autumn, Gibbston Valley, Lorna Subritzky on the Arrow River Trail, Reds cocktail bar, Queenstown. Pictures / Supplied. Lorna Subritzky



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