

In High Places

In the run up to the Queenstown Adventure Festival on 19 March, we're celebrating Queenstown's adventurous heart and pioneering history. Today we remember how the mountains have shaped our spirit.



View of Lake Wakatipu from the summit of Ben Lomond 5,747 ft - No. 249 - Morris - S. R. Ryan, *The Development of the Tourist Industry in Queenstown*

For many hundreds of years getting to Queenstown was an arduous journey. Cut off by gorges and hemmed in by mountains, the rugged isolation of the area made it impenetrable for all but the toughest travellers.

Māori people were the first adventurers to discover the area in the 13th century, settling at Tāhuna on the site of Queenstown, at Te Kirikiri (Frankton) and at Puahuru (the junction of Kawarau and Shotover Rivers).

When Europeans arrived in the region in the mid-19th century, Kai Tahu were visiting in summer to gather kai, taramea, and pounamu, before returning home to coastal settlements.

The first European settlers William Rees and Nicholas von Tunzelmann crossed the Crown Range in 1859. It was a rough journey. Rees wrote: "Speargrass, often more than three feet high, and masses of matagouri constantly impeded us, especially in the gullies. Our trousers from the thighs downwards were filled with blood."

In 1862 gold was found in the Arrow River, sparking the Otago gold rush. Miners embarked on epic journeys, scaling mountain passes and fording rivers, and Norwegian goldminers introduced the community to skiing, using homemade skis to reach their snowed in diggings.

The gold rush started a visitor influx to the region, and in the 1880s Queenstown began to blossom into a resort town.

One of the area's first guides, Kitty Greig from Kinloch was "renowned through all the lake country as a daring and accomplished horsewoman ... Bred and reared amid these rocky pastures and wild solitudes, she knows every foot of the country and is as fearless, and independent as the winds that whistle round Mount Earnslaw."

It seems that Queenstown breeds and attracts people like Kitty, tough adventurers with an entrepreneurial spirit.

One company played a key role in opening the mountains up for adventure. In 1912 Rodolph Wigley founded the Mount Cook Tourist Company, offering a weekly Cadillac service between Queenstown and Mount Cook. Later he diversified into buses, hotels, flights, skiing, and package holidays, becoming one of the largest tourist operations in New Zealand.

In 1947 Rodolph's son Henry Wigley and his friend Bill Hamilton installed a rope tow at Coronet Peak and created New Zealand's first commercial ski resort. People flocked to the mountain. Roads were cleared and, in a few years, Queenstown had become a winter destination.

Sue Knowles started skiing Coronet Peak in 1958, aged 11, when the Mount Cook Co. offered the local school a free day on the slopes. Smitten, she became a regular and recalls, "Every year in the August school holidays you'd meet the same people in the queue for the tow, from ski clubs in Alexandra, Invercargill and Dunedin. It was a very nice atmosphere. Although that rope tow was an ordeal!"

In the 1950s Henry Wigley made his second mark on winter tourism when he invented a special ski-plane to take enthusiasts for back country ski experiences. Today 16 companies offer

heli-skiing and almost 60 fly people to remote locations for a taste of wilderness.

For years Queenstowners talked about building an attraction to carry visitors to the top of Bob's Peak. The next development to bring visitors flocking came in 1967 when a group of local investors built the Skyline gondola.

Former chair of Skyline Enterprises, Barry Thomas remembers how the gondola "virtually put Queenstown on the map, it was the first gondola in New Zealand, the first in Australasia, there was nothing like it."

Now hundreds of visitors ride the gondola up Bob's Peak every day. They admire the panorama, before climbing into a luge and letting gravity take them for a ride or plunging down the network of trails on a mountain bike.

Mountain biking is a newcomer to the Queenstown scene. But it's fast becoming a favourite after work adventure.

When Vertigo bikes founder Tim Ceci rolled into town in 1997 there were no official trails. Tim started out offering heli-biking trips into the Remarkables, but soon realised Bob's Peak was an opportunity in his backyard. He negotiated access to run guided tours from the gondola and built the Vertigo trail.

In 2003, the Queenstown Mountain Bike Club came together. Today 700 committed locals work with DOC, council, landowners and the community to build and maintain around 60km of trails. Their hard graft is a gift to our town, just one more example of the grit and vision that makes Queenstown so unique.

Tim says: "Now people come to Queenstown to ride our network of spectacular trails. Biking's all about freedom and independence, and people come to Queenstown to push boundaries."

- Elizabeth Davidson

QUEENSTOWN
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Queenstown
NEW ZEALAND

Thin air. Wild rivers.

In the run up to the Queenstown Adventure Festival on 19 March, we're celebrating Queenstown's adventurous heart and pioneering history. Today we soar above Wakatipu and ride the rivers wild to tell a story packed with adventure firsts.

Because of our remote and inaccessible location, Queenstowners took to the air early. The Queenstown airport was granted a license in 1935, two years before commercial flights began in Auckland, and five years before Christchurch airport was founded.

For those first aviators, landing in Queenstown was an adventure itself. The paddocks of the old Queenstown racecourse were the airstrip, and landing depended on the prevailing wind.

Local pilot Jules Tapper became an early pioneer of flights to scenic locations when he co-founded the Hollyford Valley Walk in Fiordland National Park with Viv Allott in 1968.

Jules recalls, "I always liked the outdoors, so when an opportunity came up in the national park, we went for it. It was so remote we had to use aircraft and I flew hundreds of trips to Hollyford Valley." In 1976 he applied for an air service license, flying passengers in to hunt and tramp.

The Mount Cook Group brought the first commercial flights into Queenstown in the 1960s. In the 1980s, Jules went to work for the group, first heading up their flightseeing team, then becoming regional manager, and finally leading the company.

The story of the Mount Cook Group and its many initiatives is inextricably bound up with Queenstown's evolution as an adventure destination. Although Jules refers to himself as a "tooth in the cog

of the gearbox," his New Zealand Order of Merit for his services to aviation and tourism gives a truer indication of the role he's played.

While young Jules Tapper was learning to fly, brothers Alan and Harold Melhop were introducing Queenstowners to a new kind of thrill on the Kawarau River.

Engineers by trade, their Invercargill firm was the agency for the new Hamilton Jet. In 1958 Alan and Harold demoed a jet boat to a potential customer on the Kawarau Falls Dam. They soon found that whenever they did a demo, they made a sale. Not only that, but everyone wanted a go.

As trustees for the Lakeland Christian Camp, Alan and Harold were always trying to come up with ways to raise money. In 1959 they started jet boat joy rides for five shillings a spin, with huge success. Recognising a good business opportunity, the brothers persuaded the other camp trustees to invest in a jet boat, and the world's first commercial jet boat tour was born.

Kawarau Jet Services (or KJet as they're now known) proved so popular that the council invited them to move their berth from Frankton Jetty to the Queenstown Pier.

You can see a new generation of jet boats out on Lake Wakatipu. Hydro Attack's dramatic semi-submersibles are another world-first for Queenstown. Like a cross between a jet and torpedo, they hit



Kawarau and Kawarau Two on Lake Wakatipu – Image courtesy of KJet.

speeds of 80kph, diving beneath the surface and breaching into the air.

In the 1970s, Kon Tiki Rafts introduced thrill seekers to white water rafting with New Zealand's first commercial rafting experience. Queenstown's two rivers offer a full spectrum of rafting experiences, from the serene reaches of the mighty Kawarau River to gnarly grade 5 rapids on the Shotover.

Parasailing combines the excitement of jet skiing with epic views. For 30 years Queenstown Paraflights have been elevating people 600 feet above Lake Wakatipu for panoramic vistas of the snow-capped Remarkables.

Paragliding was introduced to Queenstown in 1987 by Rene Schwaller. Rene visited his family in Switzerland to find people leaping off mountains for fun. He returned home to Queenstown equipped with two modified parachutes and a new skill, which he demonstrated by riding up the Skyline Gondola and jumping off Bob's Peak.

In the early 90s Queenstown became home to a hard-core group hiking up tall peaks and flying off them. It wasn't long before visitors wanted to have a go too, and commercial operators started offering hang-gliding and paragliding experiences.

Rene taught local Olympian Bruce Grant to paraglide. Bruce then invented the first tandem paragliders and the duo set up G Force Paragliding off Bob's Peak in 1991.

Queenstown is also the New Zealand birthplace of tandem skydiving. NZONE Skydive's drop zone at the foot of the Remarkables is described as "one of the best places in the world to jump out of a perfectly good aeroplane".

Bruce Grant died on an expedition to K2 in 1995. Before he left for his last adventure he said, "set your sights high, the higher the better, and wonderful things will happen." His philosophy could be the motto of all those who've made Queenstown the home of adventure.

– Elizabeth Davidson

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An extreme scene

In the run up to the Queenstown Adventure Festival on 19 March, we're celebrating Queenstown's adventurous heart and pioneering history. Today we investigate the extreme scene that lures adrenaline junkies to our door.

One of the idiosyncratic things about Queenstown is that there's a community of people committed to scaring you senseless. In fact, there's a whole industry founded on it.

When Henry van Asch and AJ Hackett started driving around Central Otago looking at bridges in the late 1980s, tourism in Queenstown was in its adolescence.

In 1985, international tourist arrivals to New Zealand had just cracked half a million. Last year more than three million visitors came to Queenstown. Our reputation as adrenaline capital of the world has played a key role in that growth.

Back in 1988, van Asch and Hackett set up the world's first commercial bungee jump operation on Kawarau Bridge, attracting global media attention. It brought a much-needed boost to the local tourist market, which was feeling the effects of the 1987 stock market crash.

It also consolidated Queenstown's growing reputation for extreme thrills. Jet boating, white water rafting and winter sports already attracted dare devils. Bungee took that buzz, turned the volume up, and the world came to play.

Van Asch thinks that New Zealanders are uniquely suited to extreme adventure. "Kiwis are bloody good at doing adventure. We deal with adversity and the environment well. It's in our DNA. And we're very safe. With bungee we showed it was possible to commercialise an activity perceived to be dangerous, on

a large scale, and I think we gave other businesses confidence."

That first bungee kicked off a proliferation of adrenaline adventure activities in Queenstown. Commercial paragliding, skydiving, downhill mountain biking, and a raft of bigger, scarier bungies, ziplines, catapults, and swings.

Canyon Swing helps 20,000 people a year throw themselves off the world's highest cliff jump, 109 metres above the river.

Another world first for Queenstown, launched in 2002 by Hamish Emerson and Chris Russell, a couple of climbers who'd been jumping off cliffs for fun for years and wanted to share their love of the experience.

General manager Stu Cordelle says: "People come for all sorts of reasons, for the thrill, to conquer the fear, because they've been challenged, or cajoled. The thing we hear most is, 'that's the best thing I've ever done. I've never been so scared in my life, but you made me feel so safe.'"

Calm amidst fear is a recurring theme with adrenaline activities.

Another Queenstown pioneer, NZONE will fly you up so you can feel the wind on your face at 15,000 feet and then throw you out of a plane above the Whakatipu Basin. You might think that the overwhelming feeling associated with skydiving would be terror, but when you read their screeds of five-star reviews, three words jump out repeatedly. Safe. Calm. Peace.

One jumper writes: "I've never felt so peaceful, free and confident." Another: "As I was up in the air, I experienced so much appreciation and gratitude, plus an overwhelming feeling of calmness and peace."

They are tapping into a phenomenon: Adrenaline zen.

University of Otago PhD researcher Patrick Boudreau analysed research conducted on extreme athletes since the 1970s. He found motivations for doing adrenaline activities included "entering a meditative-like state called flow ... when a person's skills are equal to the challenge at hand," the person is "completely engaged and immersed ... finding deeper meaning akin to spirituality".

Trent Yeo, founder of Ziptrek Ecotours, is also thinking about what visitors to Queenstown take home. He believes the most important part of travel is the thing you bring to your own life from your adventures.

Ziptrek Ecotours offer a thrilling ride on the world's steepest zipline, but their purpose is to send people away with an understanding of place, environment, and how businesses can have a more

positive impact. They harness emotion and storytelling and wrap it all up in an adrenaline experience to create sticky memories.

Yeo sees the future of adventure as embracing the stories of the place and points to KJet's Time Tripper as an example of immersive storytelling that enriches visitors' understanding.

Today Queenstown's allure isn't only our jaw dropping scenery, or the cosmopolitan vibe of our city centre, it's the sheer wealth of adventures people can experience.

Here adventure is our life force, our mountains home to men and women who push limits and inspire those who seek to explore beyond their own frontiers.

The godfather of adrenaline Henry van Asch said: "Life is short, take every opportunity to make the most of it: live more, fear less."

Here in the home of adventure, we're a crucible for experiences that change people's lives.

- Elizabeth Davidson



Kawarau Bungee first issued by Standards NZ, 1991. Image courtesy of AJ Hackett Bungee NZ.

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