

New Zealand Travelogue 2004

Installment five: Queenstown

March 11-14, 2004

Queenstown has been called the adrenaline capital of New Zealand, if not the world, and I will say that this reputation is well deserved. Although small, it's an exciting city, with some amazingly inventive ways to entertain a tourist - and separate him from his hard-earned retirement fund. I'm just bleeding cash in this place. And if I'm not careful, the bleeding could become literal.

Thursday evening, 11 Mar 2004

I got in about 6:00 after a gorgeous ride through the aptly-named Remarkables, pumped and in a mood to explore. I grabbed a beer and a booth in The Loaded Hog by the waterfront, just a block from my hostel and within view from my room, and paged through my Rough Guide and a stack of brochures for some ideas. I finally sorted it out and returned to the hostel to do some bookings. Alas, I was a bit late - everywhere had closed for the night (it was after 8) so I had to wait until morning, which meant, no Nevis (134 meter) bungy jump in the canyon (bus leaves at 8 AM).

So, dinner. I found many full restaurants, finally opting for a somewhat less-busy Indian place, Freiya's. Well, now I know why it wasn't so busy. It wasn't bad, just bland, which is the last thing you expect from Indian. Especially since most of the customers there were Indian. In fact it looked like there was some sort of family reunion going on, as half the restaurant was arranged to support two very long and obviously connected tables of Indian people, a few of the males standing and jabbering as more family members (particularly the women) came in, telling them where to sit (or so I deciphered, in my impeccable understanding of whatever the hell language they were speaking).

Friday 12 Mar 2004

Early morning bookings were more successful. By 9:30 I was standing on the dock for my first adventure.

Now, think back a minute. I'd already bungy jumped, which involves leaping off great heights tied to a giant rubber band and hoping they've measured correctly. I'd already sky-dived, which involves jumping out of a perfectly good airplane, but safely attached to a perfectly good parachute. How could I possibly heighten either experience? You got it: you combine them. Jump out of a perfectly good parachute (actually, parasail) attached to a bungy cord, over a 300M deep glacier-fed lake.

Usually they take 2 passengers at once, but the other person who booked quite sensibly failed to show up, so I was on my own. A fast motorboat jetted out onto Lake Wakatipu at 10 AM with

me, the driver (Ben), and my parasail tandem partner/photographer, a Spanish guy whose name I never could quite make out; it's something like Ozzie, so we'll call him that. Once out in the middle of the frigid, ice-blue lake, they inflated the sail, then strapped me into the chair. The chair bounced merrily on the deck as they attached the harness, in spite of the boat's relatively slow speed at this point, as the wind whipped the bright red sail behind us. Ozzie and I lifted into the air as the boat picked up speed, and we took in some wonderful views of the city, mountains, and lake in the soft morning light. "We're not high enough," he said, unbelievably, as we soared higher and higher over the expanse of blue water below. Ozzie snapped a few photos, then began unbuckling me - a very unnerving experience - and repeated the instructions one more time. Yes, that's right, instructions on how to leave the safety of this parachute and begin obeying gravity's law once again, from 180 meters up. That's about 550 feet, folks. And it looked it. Meanwhile, the bungy had been loosed from the chair, and it dangled below, pulling on the harness around my waist, demanding that I follow.

The moment came. The last buckle came undone around my waist. "I'll count to three, then you lean forward and have a great time," he said, pounding out fractured Spanglish syllables in my ear.

"Wait," I objected. "This strap is tangled around my leg." He looked down, saw that this was true, which could make for a very uncomfortable - and very short - jump, at least for the majority of my leg, which would have remained with the chair. He yanked hard twice, finally freeing it, as my teeth chattered and I blanked my mind from the possibilities of what might have happened. He gave me the thumbs up, and while he hadn't thus far inspired a lot of confidence, I decided it was safer out of that chair. I leaned forward -

and swallowed a whole lot of air. The wind roared in my ears as the lake raced toward me. I whooped, laughed, and spread-eagled, until the bungy slowed me to a stop about 30 meters above the lake, then bounced me lazily upwards. I bounced a few times, then stopped, about 15-20 meters over the water. As instructed I loosed the 10-meter rescue rope to the companion jetboat below, whose crew pulled me to safety, just moments before my sneakers would have skimmed the lake's surface. "Great jump!" they said. "Few people can carry it off like that!" Whether obligatory or sincere, it felt true, and I was already wistful that the experience was over.

I ate a second breakfast (Frodo would be proud), ravenously, in a funky little cafe called the Vudu, and did a little shopping as I killed time before my next activity: the Triple Challenge. The Triple is often paired with the Nevis 134-meter bungy, but due to my booking issues, I had had to fashion my own; the parabungy filled in nicely for that, thanks. What was left for me, then, was a jetboat ride on Shotover Canyon, then a 10-minute helicopter ride upstream over the 100+ meter sheer canyon walls, to the launching site for an amazing white-water rafting ride.

The jetboat is a kiwi creation, essentially a souped up motorboat with lots of passenger seats, originally invented for navigating the treacherous windy lanes of Southern Alps rivers, and now largely used to soak the wallets of thrill-seeking tourists. Count me among them now. The drivers undergo 120 hours of training so that they can navigate them within inches of the sheer canyon rock walls at high speed, make 360 degree "turns" for the pure recreational value of it, and meanwhile make constant witty jabber as only a kiwi can, all without showing the slightest

concern. We made several thrilling turns, then a slower one that led me to turn off the filter between brain and mouth. "Aw, you can do better than that!" I challenged Philip, our driver. "Are you ready for a double, then?" he asked the entire boat. "Yes!" several of us chorused while the others, whose English was not quite so good, stared at us open-mouthed. They may not have understood literally, but they knew from the tone that the adrenaline level was about to get kicked up. Philip roared the boat into a 540-degree turn, then, disappointed, explained that he needed shallower water for a complete double. We managed a 1 3/4 that doused us all with welcome coolness in the hot sun, then zoomed back to the unloading dock for the inevitable hawking of commemorative photos.

The heli ride was fairly uneventful. Keith, a 50-something South African with the gift of gab, now living in Australia but claiming US citizenship, joined me from the raft in the heli, along with George, a young Frenchman, and 3-4 others I hadn't met. It was uneventful and not even very exciting, although it did provide excellent views of the canyon. So that was my first heli ride. I had expected some sort of swooping air gymnastics or something I guess. But probably it's best we didn't.

The rafting was awesome. The canyon was gorgeous and my fellow rafters were a ton of fun. In front was Julie, a 20-ish American student studying exercise science in Australia, and our most experienced rafter. Next to her and in front of me was Bevan, 50-ish quiet Brit, whose 14-year old son Tom was in the row behind me. Next to me was another Brit, Mick, in his mid-20's or so. Behind me, Julie's classmate Lisa from South Dakota. Karen, Mick's wife, sat with Mark, our guide, in the last row. Mark gave us some very quick but thorough rafting lessons in the early, "easy" rapids and got us working as a team before we hit the more challenging ones. Julie, Bevan and I even went in for a swim voluntarily so we could practice rescue methods. Even with a wetsuit, that water was cold! Yet Julie went in again, this time riding a rapid feet-first. On purpose.

We made it through most all of the rapids with ease. Then came the "Mother Rapids," four in a very short sequence, with #3 and #4 being the hardest of all. We made it through #1 and #2 unscathed. At #3, our raft was pushed to a "bad" side of the river. We got stuck on a rock. Mark worked us off, but then we were out of position for the rapid, and suddenly we had three swimmers - Bevan, Mick, and Karen. I pulled Bevan in to the floor below me, Julie and Mark rescued Karen into Bevin's seat, and Lisa and Tom pulled Mick back into his own seat. Karen now helped Julie lead us through #4, which Bevan experienced flat on his back. Yet this was considered a successful run, as nearly all rafts lost passengers, and one flipped entirely. No casualties, however.

The final few highlights came shortly thereafter. Mick and I moved to the front of the raft, and Mick was chosen to lead us through the Tunnel. The Tunnel is very narrow and not very high. All of us except Mick had to squat down low in the raft while Mick knelt in front, steering to Mark's commands with his paddle to avoid us crashing into the walls and bashing our heads. We emerged from the tunnel, jumped into rowing position, and were thrust immediately into a long rushing waterfall, with the mountain's runoff splashing our faces and running down our backs. A minute later we were on shore at the ride's conclusion, hugging and laughing and amazed that we were all in one piece.

I had heard that a good band, dDub, was playing in Hard Rock Cafe, so in spite of its being a campy chain, I went there for beers and dinner. I ran into Joe and Stephi, a German couple who had been on the jet boat and rafting trip, then waited for the band to come on. Two hours late - about 11 PM - they began plinking out some simple reggae. With four beers and a full day already behind me, I decided to call it a day. One stop in the gents' first... but as I entered the restroom, the fire alarm went off! The place was evacuated. A complete bust. I thought the whole situation very humorous, but then, I did have 4 beers in me.

Saturday, 13 Mar 04

An early rising day. Around 7 AM a shuttle bus picked me up at my hostel, McFee's, and drove about 6 blocks (which of course I could have walked) to wait for the coach for the drive to Milford Sound. The bus arrived and I followed a 50-something father and 20-ish daughter onto the bus. We were the youth contingent. Outside of the young gal and I, the average age on this bus was about 100. And that's in metric years, so it was probably more like 160 American.

Feeling a little out of place, I settled back in my seat for what I hoped would be a nice snooze. Not so. Jonesy, our driver, had a microphone, and he sure knew how to use it. He regaled us with dozens of boring anecdotes that he apparently thought were quite funny. The guy had no off switch. His comments, just to give you a few examples, included an explanation of elk mating, a description of the bus's 6 braking systems, and the history of farming. Yow. Thank heaven for my MP3 player.

By the time we pulled into Te Anau for tea 2 hours later, I was ready to hijack another ride. I seriously considered flying back to Queenstown from Milford Sound. However, that didn't turn out to be an option, as the weather was too poor for planes to fly. Thankfully, after Te Anau, Jonesy's commentary turned to identifying landmarks we were passing, which was a whole sight more interesting. We had a few photo stops, drove through the famous 1-lane tunnel (which now has lights and a signal, as of a few days ago) and then reached the pier at Milford Sound. We boarded the cruise ship and pulled out into brown water in misty grey drizzle, well-known to we Oregonians. But it didn't dampen the sights. Milford Sound is exquisitely gorgeous, whose shoreline is a scraggy scribbled line of colorful rocky cliffs almost perfectly vertical, like walls to a magnificent natural atrium, decorated episodically by white draperies of waterfalls varying in height from 50 to a few hundred meters. One was claimed to be three times the height of Niagara Falls. I don't know how that compares to Multnomah Falls but let me tell you, these are whoppingly tall, skinny waterfalls.

The ride back was quieter as Jonesy was content to let us listen to his choice of "beautiful" music (crooners from the 50's and 60's) and then a somewhat campy video promoting New Zealand tourism. Preaching to the choir, obviously, but it reinforced my conclusion that a 3 week trip is just too short. All the things I won't be able to see...

I had a wonderful pizza dinner at Winnie Bago's on The Queenstown Mall, the Zuccha, a tomato-based 'za covered with feta cheese, pumpkin, olives, spinach, tomatoes, red pepper chunks, and lord knows what else. I still have half of it. Sounds like tomorrow's lunch.

Sunday, 14 Mar 2004

A more civilized starting time today - 9:30. This time the shuttle brought me and two others to Arrowton for some fresh air and exercise: paragliding lessons. David and Laurie, twenty-something guys from London, and Michael, 40-something from Holland, were led through a series of running drills by Hugo (nice cop) from Britain and Shai (bad cop) from Israel while attached to our wings until we were about exhausted. We learned how to inflate, turn, and stop by lunch, and even got slightly airborne a few times. Then it was off to the training hill, a 70M somewhat steeper slope over a generous landing field of plush green, plopped between an inviting lake and a much less inviting hillside.

I was second to fly. I inflated the wing. The straps slammed against my biceps. "Run hard!" Shai shouted. I pumped my legs, lifted my arms, released the "A" straps, and suddenly I was airborne! Shai, then Hugo (waiting in the landing field), continued to give instructions via radio, coaching me through a turn over the lake and again onto the field, then braking to a soft running landing. What a rush! They coached us on how to improve and we each did it three more times, each time except the last collecting and carrying our wing higher up the 70M hill in the hot sun, eventually at the very top, anxious to jump again.

Returning to town about 3PM, I had time for a leisurely lunch, which I took on the balcony of the kitchen just over my room, looking over Lake Wakatipu, while a Scottish bagpipe and drum corps played in Lake Earnslaw off to my right. I wandered down there for a little relaxation in the warm sun, after discovering that the shop holding some souvenir purchases had closed at 3. And doesn't reopen until 9:30 AM. Ouch. I really need to be on the road before then. Hmmm.

At 4:30 I joined 7 others who boarded a van headed back to Arrowton and Shotover Falls for a little more of a thrill run. This time, a Canyon Swing. The Swing is a harness, attached to a cable across Shotover Canyon, right over where I rafted on Friday. I stood on a platform 109M high, this time with my heels hanging over the edge, cable attached with inch-thick metal clips to the harness around my midsection and legs. "You know John Travolta?" asked Alex, the Canyon Swing employee who strapped me in. "I want you to give that John Travolta 'Saturday Night Fever' stance all the way down." Silly but fun. They undid the safety straps and I leaned out backwards over the canyon. Gravity did the rest. The platform sailed away from me and my head eventually swung below my feet, allowing me to view first the canyon walls, then the Shotover River itself rushing closer. After about 4-5 seconds of free fall, the cable began curving me like a pendulum toward the white water, then back up between the canyon walls further away.

Did I maintain the John Travolta pose? You'll have to judge for yourself, when you see the camcorder footage, kindly provided by another jumper waiting his turn.

The swinging, then the trip back up via winch, is as wonderful as the fall down. They bring you close to the canyon walls, grandiose and forbidding and colorful, with sections of rock the size of tractors butting out here and there to punctuate the surface. Back on the platform, I declined a second discounted jump and watched others do their jumps, and consoled the new arrivals that they made the right choice today. Another wow experience.

Dinner was too. I had gado gado at the Vudu, a sumptuous treat, and several other customers made friendly conversation to help pass the time. A very pleasant finish to this exciting stay in Queenstown.

Tomorrow, back on the road to new adventures. Until then,

Good on yas, mates!

Gary