

Wanaka girls' retreat

Beside your deep dark lake, pamper me, pamper, pamper me... The area around brooding, majestic Lake Wanaka may be best known as this country's adventureland but it caters just as well for those seeking chill not thrill.

BY BRONWYN SELL

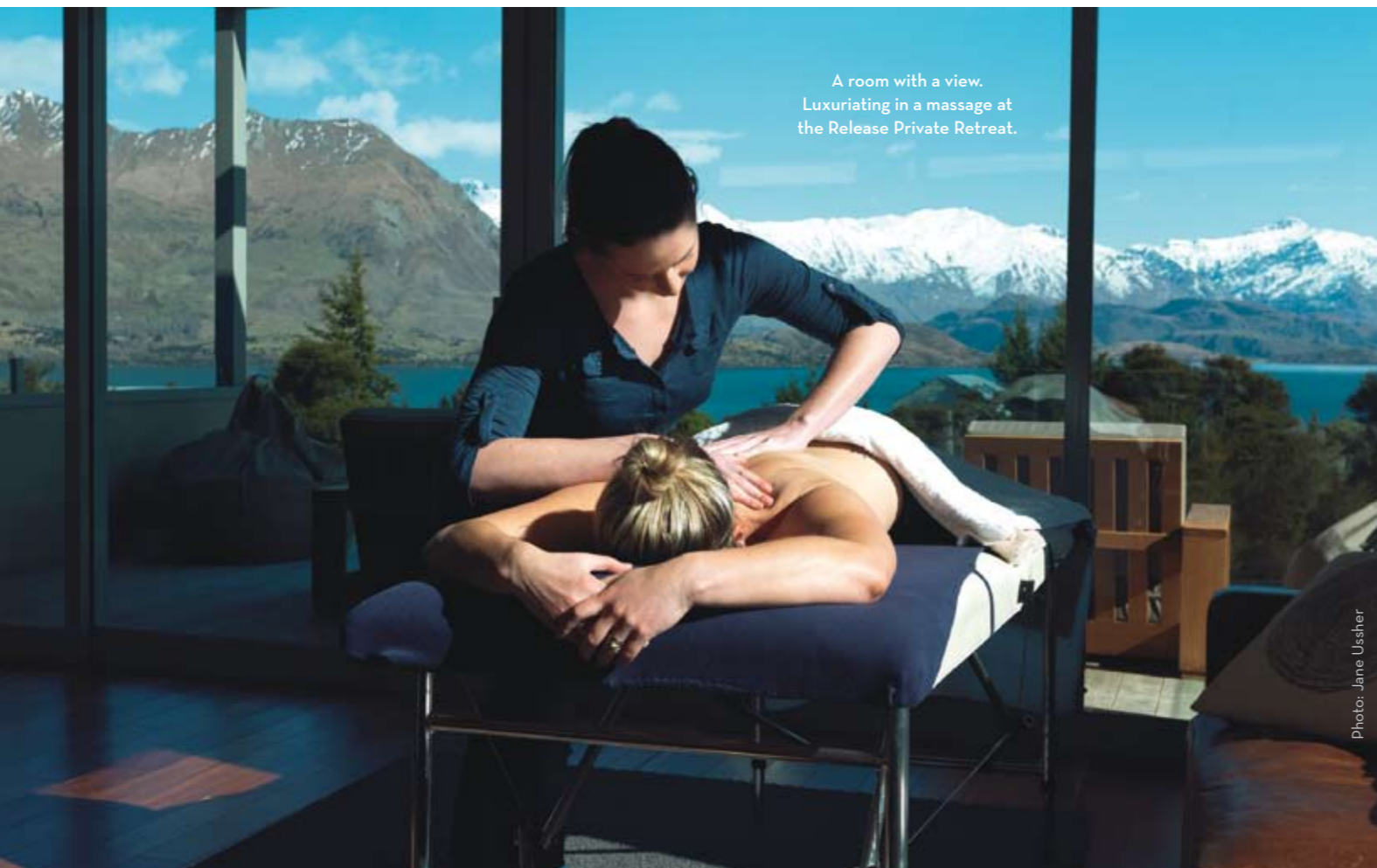


In winter, summer or in between, Wanaka is one of New Zealand's favourite escapist destinations.

Photos: Aaron Mclean



Bronwyn (left) and Christine stroll past the lakeside eateries.



A room with a view.
Luxuriating in a massage at
the Release Private Retreat.

Photo: Jane Ussher

I'M BATHING IN WINE. I'M LYING IN A darkened bathroom studded with candles at a pristine private retreat in Wanaka and I'm immersed in water that's coloured purple by a grape-skin and vine-leaf extract. It's supposed to "recharge, purify and rebalance" me. I'm happy to buy into that.

In the next room my friend Christine is having a hydrating facial, clawing back some of the moisture that was whipped out of our skin an hour or two ago by a jetboat ride on Lake Wanaka and the Matukituki River. Outside the sun is setting, and soon we will head out for a leisurely dinner in town, the lake vast and black outside the restaurant's windows, the mountains silhouetted against the darkening sky.

When you're a mother of preschoolers who runs a business from home – as we both are – even an uninterrupted shower is a rare occurrence. A girls' long weekend away, with no children and no laptops, is an unprecedented indulgence. Three days focusing on ourselves after four years focusing on nappies and deadlines... ah, bliss.

Wanaka promised to be the perfect host for our R&R retreat.

It was a whole island away from the little people but close enough that we could have breakfast at home in Auckland early on Friday morning and be knee-deep in snow in the Main Divide by lunchtime. (For the record, we can't help feeling just a little bit bad.)

A few days earlier I had made the mistake of telling my young son what was likely to be the highlight of my weekend escape. He cried. And not in that easily dismissed floor-flailing, fists-beating way but in a silent, eyes-welling anguish. I could almost hear the snap as his heart broke.

I said: "Oh sweetheart, next time I go on a helicopter ride up to the snow, I'll take you, I promise."

I didn't tell him that, for most of us, a helicopter trip is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. He thinks it should be as commonplace as a miniature train ride, and wonders how he could be so unlucky as to have reached the almighty age of four without having been in one.

I had been in a helicopter once before, as a young journalist covering a quadruple-fatal plane crash near Taumarunui. It was a brief and eerie experience, and not something to be enjoyed. Christine had never been in one.

But there we were at midday on Friday, hovering in a capsule



up over the Matukituki River and heading for the white wilderness above and beyond Wanaka. It wasn't until I realised the black dots below were cows, and the tufts of tussock were stands of willows that it became apparent how high we were.

Far below, the concrete-coloured twists marking the path of the braided river gave way to charcoal rocks punctuating the snow. Within minutes the view was nothing but undulating white. We hovered over the blue-tinged ice of a glacier. It was a surprise, then, to see a hut – perched at 1700 metres on the side of a white peak, looking towards Mt Aspiring. Charlie, our pilot, took us down.

It was a chalet, owned by the Australian grocery magnates Martyn and Louise Myer. We crunched through the snow for a bit of a nosy. It didn't look much different from one of those newer and flashier Department of Conservation huts but you can fly up to this chalet in a chopper for the night, with a personal chef and mountain guide, for \$5000. And we thought our weekend was indulgent.

Charlie dropped us off by the side of the river, where we had a picnic lunch with our jetboat driver, Kelvin, before the sandflies chased us back into the boat. Kelvin had that cheeky Kiwi sense of humour that you just knew overseas tourists lapped up.

"Please don't reach out and grab anything because we might leave something behind – and that creates a whole lot of paperwork," he had said after picking us up from a lakeside jetty in the morning.

He then blasted us across the lake and up the river to our helicopter rendezvous, with more than a few stomach-flipping, cheek-rippling "Hamilton spins" along the way. Christine and I had

Bronwyn (left) and Christine blow away the city cobwebs with a jetboat-fuelled blast down the Matukituki River, followed by a helicopter ride onto the Main Divide, landing in knee-deep snow for the obligatory snowball fight.

opted to sit in the hot seat at the back of the boat, where the G-forces were strongest, to jolt away the city cobwebs in preparation for a weekend that would otherwise involve multiple forms of chilling out.

"I love doing that," Kelvin said after slamming the boat into a doughnut for the seventh time, hurtling us towards the stony shore. "That's how I drive my car, too, by the way. Know those skid marks around Wanaka? They're mine."

Away from the boat's ripples, the deep lake looked like a liquid tarmac, with mountains, clouds and islands floating in the smooth charcoal water. In the hazy distance it was hard to tell where the lake ended and the mountains began. It was the kind of scenery that seeps into your soul.

After a hectic few months, capping a crazy few years, it felt great to just sit still and drink in the magic of the moment.

When Christine and I were in our twenties and childless, a



TOURS

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INDULGENCES

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Phone: 03 443 1711 or 021 502 043, email: fulton.jk@gmail.com

Nirvana Retreat. Offers beauty therapy treatments. Phone: 03 443 2242 or 021 464 527, www.nirvanaretreat.co.nz

Stellar Yoga. Phone: 0210 655 259, www.evesart.co.nz



Ah, who needs skiing? Chilling out, Wanaka style (clockwise from top left): boutique shopping; tasting at Pisa Range Estate Vineyard; eating out; sampling a spot of street entertainment; a little more to eat.

girls' long weekend away used to involve a gruelling adventure – a death-defying canoe trip down the flooded Whanganui River, a tramp in the Abel Tasman National Park in 30-degree heat while sensible people were kayaking in turquoise water... Boy, am I glad those days are over.

Perhaps Christine is too, for it wasn't hard to convince her that what was required from this weekend was a bit of pampering, a slosh of wine, good food, uninterrupted conversation and a lot of sleep.

Wanaka is probably best known for its adrenalin-pumping pursuits, particularly up on the ski fields. But, perhaps because it has the atmosphere of an après-ski resort, it also caters very well for relaxation. So on this trip we skipped the skiing and went straight for the après.

After ticking the pampering, food, conversation and sleep boxes in the first 24 hours of our break (as well as fitting in the aforementioned heli-jet adrenalin rush) we resolve to spend day two filling in the wine box.

I'd always wanted to do a wine tour of Central Otago, but in my previous visits to the region I had been either with-child or with children. So I am as excited as a four-year-old going on a helicopter ride when our wine tour guide, Deane, pulls up in our driveway in his beloved russet 1974 Citroën DS.

Deane and his partner Julie started their boutique tour business about four years ago, combining their love of Citroëns (they



have five) with their love of the region.

Their custom tours usually revolve around wine, food and art, with a spot of shopping if you wish. We choose wine, with a side serving of food.

You can't help but relax when you spend a day driven around Central Otago in a car so comfy it could be a sofa on wheels, stopping in at boutique vineyards to swirl a bit of pinot noir and pinot gris and chat to the owners.

We pull in for lunch at Mt Difficulty vineyard in Bannockburn, with its sweeping view of the rugged valley and dramatic mountains beyond, and Christine

and I fall uncharacteristically silent while we marvell over our meal. I challenge you to read the following without salivating: "Risotto cooked in pinot noir with chanterelle mushrooms, grilled artichokes and mascarpone cheese, topped with wild thyme olive oil".

With the food and wine boxes well and truly ticked, it is time to give the pampering box a bit more attention, so it's back to our accommodation for a massage each (we'd earned it, I swear!), followed by a quiet evening on the couch.

We counter our day of indulgence with a light dinner of Japanese takeaways and,




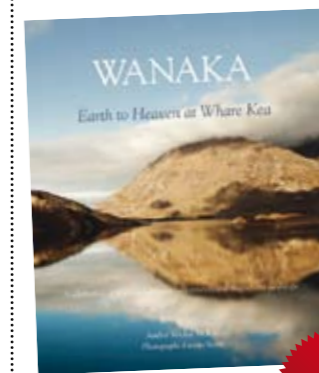
Wanaka's jaw-dropping mountain backdrop is one of its biggest selling points; relaxing at the Release Private Retreat; stretching out those city-weary muscles at Stellar Yoga.

the next morning, a light yoga session with a local instructor, as light snow falls outside. As we sit in lotus pose we both vow to get back into yoga when we got home – a small regular indulgence to retain that blissful sensation of escape we'd found in Wanaka. (Well, it's that or pour a bottle of merlot into the bath.)

And do we? No. We fly home straight into the pudgy arms of children who've magically hatched bugs while we've been away, as if to punish us for our selfishness. And, bam, we're right back into our crazy lives.

A few weeks later, Christine and I are putting in a day's work together on a Saturday while our husbands entertain the kids. Around mid-afternoon we put our laptops down long enough to open a bottle of Pisa Range Estate Pinot Gris, a souvenir of our wine tour. If we can't transport ourselves back to Wanaka, at least Wanaka can come to us. We clink glasses and say, "Remember when?"

Bronwyn Sell was hosted by Lake Wanaka Tourism. See www.lakewanaka.co.nz for information about events, accommodation, travel and activities, and to book your trip. 



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