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A Marathon Fit for a Queen

This lifetime bucket list event combines mountains, vineyard trails and the perfect running climate for the ultimate marathon experience

By Tania Haas

With 70 per cent of the fairly flat and easy course on hard-packed trails, the speed-focused runner may plot this race for a personal best. But an accelerated pace is likely to be forsaken to take in New Zealand’s majestic landscapes and raw nature. From the soaring heights of snow-dusted indigo mountains to clear glacial lakes and blooms of lavender and lupin, New Zealand’s South Island in the spring unveils wonder after wonder.

Underpinning the external beauty is an authentic hospitality driven by the locals, whose affability has been likened to the warmth and humour of Canadian Maritime communities. The relatively small Queenstown contains the energy of a bustling city and lives up to its reputation as a well-managed adventure hub with a cosmopolitan feel. The marathon’s route, however, requires no thrills. It’s simply stunning to behold.

Starting in the tree-lined historic gold mining village of Arrowtown, racers watch morning unfold on the manicured grounds of a 500-acre resort framed by the Remarkables and Crown Range mountains. The wheat farm turned luxury hotel and golf course is nestled in a valley where low-hanging clouds hover over European-designed chalets.

The marathon continues along the lush Arrow River track then encircles Lake Hayes. Observant runners may glimpse the tāmanu, a protected diving water bird with a slender neck and distinct tuft of feathers on its head.

The route passes over the rushing Shotover River where jet boats and rafts speed at the base of towering rocky canyons. The river’s Māori name, Kimi-ā-keu, means ‘searching for the coast’ and refers to ancient times when it was used as a trail for stone hunters trekking to the Tasman Sea for treasured New Zealand jade.

Runners bank their final kilometres around the turquoise Lake Wakatipu, a familiar setting in movies involving magical rings and big-footed hobbits. The country’s longest lake is distinct for its heaving water level that rises and falls throughout the day. The Southern Māori refer to it as the heartbeat of a sleeping giant. The marathon ends after a vivid section through the blooming Queenstown Gardens.

Last year’s sold out race was made up of 14 per cent international participants representing 39 countries. One visiting runner I talked to, who ran with a camera, said the greatest challenge was fighting the urge to stop and have a picnic by the lake.
Getting There
For Canadians, it makes the most sense to fly from Vancouver to Auckland. Air New Zealand offers overnight service, departing from YVR in the early evening and arriving in AKL early in the morning, allowing for a same-day connection to Queenstown. Another option is to rent a vehicle or take a tour bus to the South Island. If you are driving, be sure to watch the Drive Safe NZ videos to ensure you don’t become one of the many tourists who cause or are involved in traffic accidents.

Where to Stay
RVs and camping are popular and accessible options for tourists. The race has partnered with Sofitel, St. Moritz, Novotel and Mercure hotels. The Millbrook Resort and the Azur are consistently ranked the top luxury choices with the Dairy Private Hotel as the top mid-range option.

What to Do
Thrill-seekers can go tandem parachuting, paragliding, jet boating, rafting, kayaking and four-wheel drive exploring.

There are equal opportunities to slow down and rest. Visitors can sip a sunrise coffee from a mountaintop, explore gentle forest trails after lunch and dine alfresco lakeside in time for the sunset.

The marathon’s official charity is the Queenstown Trails Trust, which supports the maintenance of over 100 kilometres of cycle paths hugging shorelines and steep cliffs.

Queenstown is also the jumping off point to explore the country’s most popular attractions. The Milford Track is known as one of the finest walks in the world. If spots are full, alternatives include the Routeburn, Caples, Greenstone and Hollyford tracks, along with highly recommended visits to Milford and Doubtful Sounds, Aoraki Mount Cook (the country’s highest mountain) and the retreating Franz Josef and Fox glaciers. Mount Aspiring National Park is best viewed by helicopter or small plane.

Not to be missed is the magical town of Wanaka, an hour-drive away, where good food, other adventures and a calmer energy await. It’s where Kiwis vacation.

For holistic relaxation in a deluxe setting, book time at the intimate and eco-conscious Aro Ha Wellness Retreat, which is secluded in the mountains 45 minutes from Queenstown.

What to Eat and Drink
Chase the world-renowned vine in Central Otago. In Wanaka, stop by Rippon’s lakeside property and sip pinot noir while learning about the vineyard’s biodynamic process. In Cromwell, try Misha’s Vineyard.

In Wanaka, visit Kai-Whaka-Pai on the main strip for breakfast or brunch, Francesca’s Italian for lunch and The Landing or The Spice Room for dinner. In Queenstown, tourists are spoiled for choice.

Tania Haas also did an Ironman 70.3 while visiting New Zealand.