DESTINATION WANAKA
A fierce burned orange sky crept above the Crown Range as full- and half-distance athletes, teams and families crowded the alpine lake. The 10th edition of Challenge Wanaka, New Zealand’s largest triathlon festival, was set to launch, but the day’s first spectacle was already underway. Even the most focused triathletes couldn’t help but be enchanted by the scene before them.

As the sun made its slow ascent, low-hanging clouds cast shadows on the rolling hills circling the lake. Summer snow could be seen on the peaks at the edge of Mount Aspiring National Park, located 30 km away. Even closer were dramatic rolling hills carved by major glacial systems and the lapping of the pure glacial water on the shore’s rocks and racers’ booted feet. Lake Wanaka offers a glorious playground for nature lovers, photography junkies and adventure seekers. It’s a special place, and every visitor felt it.

With over 1,630 participants from 29 nations, 900 junior athletes and a world-class elite field, this Kiwi challenge rewards the destination racer with one of the world’s most scenic triathlons, which also happens to be well run, fun and welcoming.
Lake Wanaka is an adventure town with international appeal – a less congested and easier-going pace than nearby Queenstown. Arriving well in advance of the race will help you to acclimatize to elevation and jet lag. There are plenty of easy to advanced hikes, bike rides and trail runs to get you warmed up. If you plan on sticking around, there is a wide spectrum of activities to help you decompress and enjoy this magical region.

**WHAT TO DO**

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**TIRED LEGS? SCALE HIGH-ALTITUDE FARMS IN A 4WD**

Ridgeline Adventures offers an authentic wildlife tour of high country stations. Opt for the longer tour to understand the region’s rich agricultural, indigenous and economic history while witnessing wildlife from the private back roads and hilltop resting stations on one of Wanaka’s most scenic farms.

**Challenge Wanaka**

A gnarly glacial swim, climbs in New Zealand’s Southern Alps and an alpine-lake run that’s 75 per cent off road. This tough and scenic course is perfect for those who want to race and vacation in one of the world’s most magical mountain towns.

**Destination**

Lake Wanaka, the Central Otago Region of New Zealand

**Distances**

Full and half distance, children’s races

**Website**

challenge-wanaka.com
MILFORD SOUND, DOUBTFUL SOUND OR MOUNT COOK
Lake Wanaka is a natural base from which to explore the surrounding regions. Link up with Lake Wanaka Tourism where they have a live chat feature to discuss South Island itineraries including the Southern Circuit, five-day west coast explore or coast-to-coast self-drive tour. Be sure to stop by the i-SITE Visitor Centre on the main strip for information and booking excursions.

Lake Wanaka
lakewanaka.co.nz
Wilkin River Jets
wilkinriverjets.co.nz/heli-flights

SEE CONSERVATION IN ACTION – AND VERY CUTE BIRDS
The Lake Wanaka island of Mou Waho is an island sanctuary for the endangered weka bird along with other birdlife threatened by the country’s introduced pests such as rats, stoats and possums (these are the country’s predators). The island enjoys special protection by the New Zealand Department of Conservation as a scientific reserve and is the focal point for the actions of a community-based conservation group. Native birdlife including bellbird, fantail, falcon, wood pigeon, tomtit, grey warbler and the wax eye are common and can be seen at close quarters on Mou Waho.

HIKER’S DELIGHT
Wanaka is a walker’s heaven and there are many routes to choose from depending on your desired intensity and duration. Take a look at the Blue-Young Link Track or the Rob Roy Glacier Trek to whet your appetite. Or, if you want a Canadian connection, ask a local to direct you to Canadian singer Shania Twain’s former high-country sheep station. It was donated to the country’s National Trust and allows public access to 21 tracks and trails across the properties.

MAKE WANAKA YOUR FIRST OR FINAL NZ DESTINATION
If New Zealand has always been on your bucket list, make it happen in this lifetime. Do it yourself with a camper van or join one of the incredible bus tours available. The country has mastered the art of tourism. TourismNewZealand.com is a helpful and inspiring resource for cross-country trip planning.

FOOD & DRINK
Kai-Whaka-Pai coffee and bakery on main strip for coffee, brunch and mince pies
Francesca’s Italian fransitalian.co.nz
The Landing thelandinglakewanaka.co.nz
The Spice Room Wanaka & Queenstown Indian Restaurant spiceroom.co.nz
Red Star Burger Bar facebook.com/redstarwanaka
FLYING
For Canadians, it makes the most sense to fly from Vancouver overnight into Auckland for a same day, early morning connection to Queenstown. Air New Zealand offers roomy options in premium economy and business premier to facilitate good sleeps.

BIOHAZARD RULES AND PACKING NUTRITION
Be careful that what you bring in your luggage is in line with New Zealand bio hazard rules. Claim everything and the border guards will appreciate your honesty and likely not toss anything or fine you. Removing food out of original packaging will increase likelihood of confiscation. Save weight and purchase nutrition at Wanaka’s Racers Edge upon arrival. You can also get your bike tuned up there.

DRIVING
Arrange a pickup or rental in Queenstown for the hour drive through the Crown Range to Lake Wanaka. Be sure to watch the DriveSafe.org.nz videos to ensure you don’t become a tourist traffic hazard – driving on the left side of the road requires a lot of focus, especially on the numerous winding roads.

- Camper Mate campermate.co.nz
- Jucy jucy.co.nz
- Ace Car Rentals acerentalcars.co.nz
- RentADent rentadent.co.nz/branches/queenstown

CYCLING
Travelling with bikes is familiar to this adventure town and your transportation company should be able to accommodate. It can be a hassle to transport bikes between international and domestic flights, so be patient.

- Wanaka Taxi yello.co.nz
- Connectabus connectabus.com
- Alpine ConneXions alpineconnexions.co.nz
Wanaka has a handful of hotels, B&Bs, budget options and rental units that accommodate racers and sell out quickly. I stayed at Edgewater, a classic resort hotel with a Catskills flavour, lake views and a 20-minute stroll to the race marquee. All around Wanaka service staff displayed a genuine concern for client comfort and well-being.

Edgewater edgewater.co.nz
Tin Tub tintubwanaka.co.nz
Luxury Rental Homes releasenz.com
Budget Hotel YHA yha.co.nz/hostels/south-island-hostels/yha-wanaka

Be wise when preparing for a trek, trip or drive. Acclimatize properly, pack accordingly, ask questions and prepare. It’s a fascinating country with unforgiving geography and conditions.

Tania Haas is a freelance journalist and triathlete from Toronto.

AUCKLAND HOSTS WORLD MASTERS GAMES

Looking for an excuse to head to New Zealand next winter that doesn’t involve a long-distance race? How about a standard or sprint-distance race in Auckland?

The World Masters Games is the largest multi-sport event in the world. In terms of athlete numbers, it is bigger in scale than even the Olympics. Auckland will host the event from April 21 to 30, 2017, welcoming 25,000 athletes who will compete in 28 sports across 45 competition venues.

Founded in 1985, the first World Masters Games were held in Toronto. The last two Games were held in Sydney in 2009 and Torino in 2013.

You don’t need to qualify for the games, as long as you are over the minimum age for your chosen sport and meet the minimum disability classification requirements, in the case of para-sports, you can take part.

Registrations for the Games close on Jan. 31, 2017. Information about the Games can be found at worldmastersgames2017.co.nz.