



PARADISE IN PROGRESS

While its breathtaking vistas are one thing, the Queenstown Lakes District's beating heart lies in the people and places propelling its development into New Zealand's most desirable region.

Words by Albert Cho, Margie Cooney and Mina Kerr-Lazenby



Dragonflies by New Zealand sculptor Mark Hill on The Hills Golf Course.

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SIR MICHAEL HILL

to find an assortment of dogs (and the occasional horse) tied up outside the clubhouse, “it’s hilarious,” he says. The golf course and clubhouse is also able to be utilised by a small number of non-member guests who can spend a day experiencing everything The Hills has to offer, including its exceptional array of food and wine. This unorthodox, inclusive attitude is also seen in the proprietor’s passion for collecting art and installing various pieces to preside over holes on the green, rendering it is as much an outdoor sculpture park as a world-class sporting venue — a hybrid Sir Michael says isn’t often seen. The comprehensive collection of art includes a 12-foot-high bronze man by Sean Henry by the first hole, while elsewhere on the course sit pieces like Paul Dibble’s The Calci Scythe, Max Patté’s dramatic cast-iron horses and Liu Ruowang’s The Wolves Are Coming — a 110-strong bronze-cast wolf pack that swarms the run up to the 18th hole.

For Sir Michael, the golf-course and lodge (occasionally available to rent to private guests) allow him to share his love for the idyllic South Island town he calls home with people from all over the world. “When you fly here and you come over the mountains and the Sounds... you realise that it’s just the most extraordinary place on earth,” he exclaims. “I don’t think there’s anywhere quite like it.” And really, it’s thanks to people like him, striving to conserve intriguing pockets of land and culture in Queenstown that these enchanting, otherworldly qualities remain safeguarded for future generations. **MC** www.thehills.co.nz

JONATHAN AND TOBY WALLIS

Minaret Station, Alpine Helicopters & Southern Lakes Heliski

Presiding over Minaret Station, Alpine Helicopters and Southern Lakes Heliski, Wanaka-based The Alpine Group’s elevated experiences deliver unique luxury with a dose of quintessential, Kiwi hospitality. A family-owned operation, the group is now run by brothers Jonathan and Toby Wallis after their father, Sir Tim Wallis, pioneered the use of helicopters for backcountry access and heli-skiing in the early 60s. As such, helicopters have remained at the heart of the business. Offering scenic flights and charters for companies and individuals all around the wider Queenstown and Wanaka districts, Alpine Helicopters is a ubiquitous presence in the area. For their signature helicopter touring experiences, including through Fiordland, they place experienced guides on board, which affords guests appealing flexibility, and means that each flight goes beyond simply moving people from point A to point B.

Similarly, Southern Lakes Heliski offers a range of daily and charter heli-ski experiences with access to over 800 runs across 17 different mountain ranges. And while the picturesque flights and thrilling day-trips draw visitors to engage the company’s services, it’s the Alpine Group’s personal approach that keeps them coming back.

With notions of family driving much of the Wallis brothers’ ethos, their welcoming, inclusive attitudes have contributed massively to the sustained success of their business. As Jonathan Wallis explains, “we just

Jonathan and Toby Wallis
Photo: Ned Dawson





treat everyone, no matter who they are, with respect, a handshake and a smile. The ‘luxury’ we offer is really all about the authenticity of the experience and the genuine, warm service — which is what Kiwis are all about.” And in an industry where authenticity is the difference between an okay experience and a memorable one, the Wallis’ rise above the rest. “We genuinely enjoy what we do,” Wallis says, “which makes the business of sharing these incredible experiences a real pleasure.”

But the jewel in the crown would have to be Minaret Station. The Alpine Group’s 50,000-acre high-country farm

is the secluded site of the Alpine Lodge, where guests are treated to unprecedented, off-the-grid luxury and privacy. Accessible only by helicopter, the lodge is made up of four, two-person chalets, meaning there can only ever be a maximum of eight guests on the property. It is incredibly intimate, and as Wallis explains, gives even the more seasoned travellers access to “some of the most remarkable scenery they will have ever come across.”

The whole experience at Minaret Station is about immersion in nature. From the Mountain Kitchen, that sources much of its protein, like Te Mana lamb, from the

property itself, to the day-trips, to the way the lodge prioritises sustainability, it offers access to a world of nature that, for many, would feel utterly foreign. “For us,” Wallis says, “it’s about delivering things and taking people to places that we feel are incredibly special and have something about them that is unique and compelling.”

The group’s Dusky Sound experience, one of its signature trips, exemplifies this. Located in Southern Fiordland, the Dusky Sound is one of the lesser-visited areas in the tourist hotspot, with Wallis explaining how the group had to set-up its own barge there in order to

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Alpine Helicopters'
Dusky Sound
experience.



give helicopters somewhere to land. From the barge, guests are taken fishing by experienced guides and given unimpeded access to nature's bounty. For the Wallis brothers, these personal, interactive experiences that transcend simple sightseeing, are crucial. "New Zealanders need to be aiming for quality of experience over volume of visitors," explains Wallis, "and for us, that's where we sit — trying to deliver incredibly good service and special, deep experiences over pure volume." It's a refrain that is being echoed by others in the industry, as operators come to realise that 'bespoke' and 'boutique' are the most sustainable ways forward for tourism in Queenstown and its surrounding areas.

"Our reputation is your assurance," Wallis articulates, "Queenstown and the Southern Lakes region provides a fantastic platform from which to embark on our unique adventures. Unique in New Zealand. Unique to the world." **MC**
www.alpineheli.co.nz