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Descend into an alpine meadow for an exclusive experience at Minaret Station; enjoy 180-degree views of Lake Wakatipu from Eichardt's penthouse.

PICTURES: SUPPLIED

MINARET STATION

Queenstown is the adventure capital of the adventure nation. From here you can snow ski, heli-ski, water ski, parasail, paraglide, jet boat, shark boat, raft, climb, canyon, mountain bike, e-bike, heli-bike, hike, hunt, bungy, zip-line and skydive – and capture your adrenaline rush on Go-Pro for bragging rights. Frankly it's tiring just contemplating which thrill to seek.

Or, like me, you can just go to lunch.

Admittedly, this was not just any lunch. Our passive adventure would take us to an exclusive location so elevated and secluded, it's accessible only by helicopter.

FLIGHT OF THE CONVIVIAL

Minaret Station alpine lodge sits remarkably unobtrusively at the head of a glacial valley, a 25-minute breathtaking helicopter ride from Queenstown or Lake Wanaka over the South Island peaks and fjords. We hop mountain tops and descend into an alpine meadow of lush grass and

streams and our seven-seat chopper sets down on a timber platform no bigger than the average sun deck.

Minaret has to be New Zealand's most isolated exclusive getaway, with just four luxury chalets plus the Mountain Kitchen lodge for fireside chats and communal dining. Add in a balcony for alfresco occasions and Minaret is surely one of the most peaceful and harmonious travel experiences anywhere in the world. From here you can explore the valley on newly created boardwalks.

Produce including lamb, beef and venison is sourced locally from Minaret's 20,234ha high country farm further down the valley. Everything has to be flown in and out by chopper, including staff, so it's good to know the lodge does its best for sustainable tourism by using hydropower from the nearest waterfall. Drinking water is pure melted snow.

TOP END OF THE LAKE

We're here to discover a collection of exclusive experiences centred on the shores of Lake Wakatipu and Lake

Hayes. Starting at the top, here's what \$6000 a night gets you.

Five minutes outside Queenstown and viewed from the road, The Elms on Lake Hayes is an underwhelming sight and deliberately so – privacy is paramount for the occasional celebrity guest. All this changes when you step downstairs past the

chandelier made of wine bottles and into one of three lavish villas. It's 300sq m of superbly styled indulgence by highly regarded hotel interior designer Virginia Fisher, who also remodelled Eichardt's Private Hotel in town with its famous cubicle bar (a must for visitors).

The three and four-bedroom villas are cleverly configured for privacy from fellow guests or, perhaps for families, they can be interconnected into a single residence.

Step outside onto the huge patio and it's the silence that hits you (powered water craft are banned from this part of the lake). You may hear a cyclist swoosh by on their way to the pretty village of Arrowtown just 10 minutes away via the lakeside track.



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Amisfield vineyard and its cellar door sales are 100m away.

But the real joy is the view. On a chilly day, you can grab a hot water bottle with its possum fur cover, position yourself by the patio fireplace and take in the mountain tops of The Remarkables ski field.

VIEWS WITH A HUGE ROOM

Eichardt's Private Hotel and The Spire Hotel are Queenstown's five-star boutique experience. The suites – nine at Eichardt's and 10 at The Spire – are each the size of a small apartment, with stone fireplace, super king bed, top-of-the-range multimedia system and thoughtfully stocked bar (all wines are local). Even the soap is made locally and exclusively for these two hotels.

But once again it's the views that are priceless. At The Spire, the sweeping alpine landscape can be seen from the bed, bath and balcony, with a possum fur throw for extra warmth when venturing outside (according to the hotel, some guests never leave their suite.)

Eichardt's also offers the ultimate stay – a 240sq m penthouse with floor-to-ceiling, 180-degree views of Lake Wakatipu and the alpine range. Like Elms on Lake Hayes, it comes with personal chef and Land Rover and driver to explore Central Otago. If you want to cruise the lake in luxury, the hotel also hires out Queenstown's only superyacht, *Pacific Jemm* – chartered daily or for overnight stays.

DINE IS THE GLORY

Both hotels offer fine dining in casual urban-style surrounds, Eichardt's at The Grille and The Spire at No5 Church Lane. The Grille signature dish, Te Mana lamb, is raised in the high country and fed on chicory for a unique taste. It's served on a tasting board of 100 per cent local produce.

But No5 Church Lane is the surprise. In a region where lamb, beef, venison and blue cod are staples, No5 has taken a slightly rebellious direction. The focus is on healthy eating, with multiple choices for vegetarians featuring seasonal fruits, vegetables and herbs. Do not leave without tasting the banana blossom.

All wines are from the Otago region and the pinot noir is probably the pick

(if you're fussy and/or a wine snob, they will send someone around the corner to Eichardt's to get you a specific label from elsewhere – but there really is no need).

AFTER-DINNER GLOW

To end the evening, there's really only one place to be: Eichardt's bar and parlour. Settle into one of the sumptuous leather booths in front of the fire. Whisky never tasted better.

The next morning, the stunning views and mountain air are free.

THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF THE IMPERIUM COLLECTION

IF YOU WANT TO CRUISE THE LAKE, THE HOTEL ALSO HIRES OUT SUPERYACHT PACIFIC JEMM





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ESCAPE ROUTE

QUEENSTOWN

GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand, Qantas, Virgin and Jetstar fly direct to Queenstown from most capital cities. The airport is 10km from town.

THE LUXURY SUITE

The Imperium Collection offers Eichardt's Private Hotel and apartments, The Spire Hotel, The Elms on Lake Hayes and the *Pacific Jemm* superyacht. Eichardt's apartments start at \$1150 per night, suites at \$1250 and the penthouse is \$9000 per night. The Spire Hotel suites start from \$630, including breakfast. The Elms on Lake Hayes starts from \$6000 a night.
imperiumcollection.com,
eichardts.com
Minaret Station is part of The Alpine Group. Chalets start at \$2200 a night and helicopter transfers are \$1750 per adult return. minaretstation.com