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May 27, 2010
Volume 228 Issue 9

Jewish EXPONENT

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Taking the Plunge in Queenstown

Bungy jumps are but one of the royal riches to savor in this New Zealand spot
May 20, 2010 - Elyse Glickman, Jewish Exponent Feature

As your Air New Zealand flight touches down in Queenstown, the heart of the South Island's fertile Central Otago Valley unfolds before you magnificently.



It is immediately obvious why Oscar-winning director Peter Jackson built much of his "magic kingdom" for the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy down here. Though coastal cities Christchurch and Dunedin echo New Zealand's British influence, Queenstown's larger-than-life expanse stands alone, whether you have come for outdoor sports, a gastronomic experience, majestic views or just clean air.

This side of paradise and a fleet of promising business opportunities attracted European Jews to this area in New Zealand's early days in the 19th century. Though some of these pioneers went on to establish a solid Jewish community in coastal Christchurch, German-born Jew Bendix Hallenstein (1835-1905) made it his own, opening several textile and clothing businesses, and later, becoming mayor of Queenstown.

Though there is currently no official organized Jewish community in Queenstown, what made it worth the trip back then still makes it attractive to Jewish explorers today. Just ask business/entertainment industry mogul Rich Frank (former president of the Paramount Television Group; chairman emeritus of talent agency The Firm; and founder of Napa, Calif.-based Frank Family Vineyards).

Frank's love affair with Queenstown and the Central Otago began a couple decades back, when he was on location with a crew shooting a family film for Disney.



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This passion continued into the new century when Frank's son, Paul, introduced him to entrepreneur Geoff Ross. At that time, 2004, Ross had launched 42 Below Vodka, and Frank wanted in, especially as the opportunity to join the new brand's board meant that he could make frequent visits.

He also relished shooting spectacular documentary footage of the company's first-ever "Cocktail World Cup." From Frank's entertainment-industry perspective, what better place to stage a free-wheeling bartending competition than a place best known for its status as both the birthplace of bungee-jumping and breathtaking geography?

Indeed, Hallenstein would be proud.

High-end restaurants such as the Postmaster's House, the Bunker and Tatler, as well as artisanal shops like Patagonia Chocolates in nearby antiques haven Arrowtown, continue to offer sublime food-pairing companions to wine-seekers. The drives to and from the wineries, as well as up and down the Remarkables mountain range (also known as the Southern Alps), are sensory feasts in their own right.

Though business and pleasure has brought Frank back to Queenstown multiple times since 2004, the luxury hotel he says stands above all others is Eichardt's Private Hotel www.eichardtshotel.co.nz. "It is the best located, nicest hotel in the world, and I have been in lots of them," he says. "It is staggeringly gorgeous."

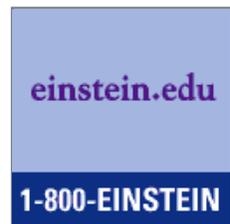
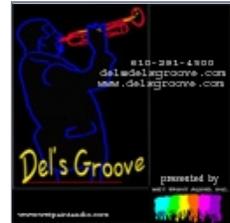
In terms of more moderate dwellings, the Heritage Hotel Queenstown suits the Central Otago's personality perfectly, from comfy rooms to sprawling breakfast buffet to a quaint bar well-stocked with local microbrews.

Unlike other ski hamlets around the world, such as Queenstown's sister city Aspen, Colo., the concept of luxury in Queenstown is built upon warmth and comfort rather than status. Even with a random Louis Vuitton boutique and Pounamu Pearl's posh fine-jewelry salon, "outdoorsy with uptown flair" dominates both fashion and food storefronts lining the pedestrian-friendly downtown area and waterfront.

Au Naturel is more informal than Pounamu, but stocks distinctive, locally crafted sterling silver pieces. Local institution Fergberger may be a sandwich joint at first glance. However, its royalty-sized portions, fresh ingredients and an irreverent menu (with a falafel sandwich called the "Bun Laden"; a "Holier Than Thou" tofu sandwich; a "Codfather" fish sandwich; and "The Little Lamby," made from, of course, New Zealand lamb) explain long lines and waits. They are well worth it.

Though you probably won't be asked to make the perfect martini in mid-flight, you can still earn bragging rights of your own by throwing caution to the wind at the various non-ski outdoor-activity hot spots.

While the most popular draw is A.J. Hackett's Kawarau Bridge Bungee, the original 43-meter bungee jump (where the set-up has you diving head first then bouncing back), the eager but more hesitant (myself included) can still get that rush in a slightly more controlled variation at the Nevis and Canyon Arc Swing sites (falling right-side up before springing into a gentle, scenic swing).



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And while getting wet is optional when customizing your bungy jump with the Hackett crew, chances are that you'll get drenched on the Shotover Jet Boat rides -- and love every minute of it.

Helicopter, Heli-skiing and stunt-plane rides are popular modes of transportation as well. The Skyline Gondola and Luge rides near downtown Queenstown, meanwhile, deliver thrills and scenery in an easier-on-the-stomach manner.

As for Frank, though he did get a rush from his Shotover Jet experience, he admits that he turned down the chance to bungy-jump during the 2004 Cocktail World Cup. At 63 at the time, he felt that he'd done everything he set out to do -- including enjoy a great Sauvignon Blanc back at Amisfield Winery.

Cheers, indeed.

For Queenstown highlights, go to: www.queenstown-nz.co.nz.

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