

Middle EARTH *Musings*

Take off to the land of the mythical Hobbits, stay in an old-world, lakeside Queenstown hotel, tour the majestic Milford Sound, jet through narrow canyons on a speedboat, and discover unspoilt hiking trails, writes **Kishan S Rana**

Few Indians travel to this outstanding New Zealand holiday destination, highly attractive in its own right, and a tourism hub as well. The town's resident population is barely 10,000, but that swells to over 50,000 in the main holiday seasons, both during the southern hemisphere's autumn and summer (October-March), and the winter (June-August). The latter becomes a time for snow sports, especially drawing Australians.

New Zealand (home of 'Middle Earth', the mythical setting for the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which was shot there) is a long way from India, but it is an amazing place, in its scenery, ethnicity, and history. It is also a jump-off point for cruises to Antarctica. It was uninhabited till the Polynesians arrived about 1,300 years back – they are today's Maori people. In its fauna, it has virtually no predators, nor snakes. The country is acutely conscious of its bio-security, striving to keep out foreign insects and viruses, or food-borne viruses.

Queenstown is on the country's third largest lake, Wakatipu, a flooded glacial valley, as is the norm with many lakes in NZ, with waters that are cold round the year, seldom above 14°C, and at a depth of over 300 metres, so no swimming or watersport is practiced on these pristine lakes. As we saw, rimmed on all sides by mountains that bore snow on their peaks even as summer

Queenstown is on the country's third largest lake, Wakatipu, a flooded glacial valley, as is the norm with many lakes in New Zealand, with waters that are cold round the year.

approached in October, rising to 1,500 to 2,000 metres, the scenic beauty is incomparable, enhanced by the pure, clean air.

We stayed at the old-fashioned, commodious Copthorne Hotel, overlooking the lake, barely 500 metres from the town centre. The latter features a small marina that takes visitors on cruises on Lake Wakatipu, and a profusion of souvenir shops, gourmet restaurants and food outlets, pubs and travel agencies. We saw large numbers of Chinese tourists, often shepherded in groups, but also a lot of young Chinese couples, independent, savvy, and of course fluent at English.

Milford Sound, about 180 km from Queenstown, is a must-do excursion. The road runs along a profusion of sheep and cattle farms. Un-



Top: View of the mountains surrounding Queenstown; Below: The old-world Copthorne Hotel





The next day's excursion was to Skippers Canyon, for a journey on the Shotover River in jet boats, which is a dizzying and even scary experience; the skilled pilot repeatedly spins the small, manoeuvrable boat, carrying 15 passengers, in 360° turns, rotating on the same spot.

times going along the very edge of the shore, where the cliff-like mountains descend into the fiords. The ship then went out to the mouth of the Sound, where it meets the Tasman Sea, with a lighthouse at that point. We saw a few seals sunbathing at the foot of a cliff and a few other marine species, but alas no whales or big clusters of sea mammals. On the return leg, the cruise ship went right to the foot of a waterfall, dousing us with spray.

The sights of those high cliffs and mountains, arrayed in a series of overlaps, is magnificent, the more as they are wreathed in clouds that shift all the time. The wind was cold and the hot Indian vegetarian lunch that the travel agent in Delhi had organized for us was all the more welcome; whatever the delicacies of different lands, one always craves for that taste of home.

The next day's excursion was to Skippers Canyon, for a journey on the Shotover River in jet boats, which is a dizzying and even scary experience; the skilled pilot repeatedly spins the small boat, carrying some 15 passengers, in 360° turns, in effect rotating on the same spot. These boats are highly manoeuvrable, and are deliberately taken along the rocks that line the river, literally inches from disaster. These boats, powered by jet engines, can ride in water as shallow as two to six inches, with amazing manoeuvrability in the midst of rocks and shallows. The entire journey lasted about 30 minutes, with all of us clutching with white knuckles the rails along seats. The mandatory lifejackets are a reminder of the potential for disaster.

Almost as thrilling as the boat ride was the 40-minute journey each way, along the canyon road, which was carved about 140 years back by the gold miners, who thronged to this river bed, in pursuit of the nuggets of gold that the river brought down. Just a few skeletons of the hotels and structures built by those hardy miners survive today. But that road is a marvel – it has no guardrails and is so narrow that vehicles can pass only at a few points. That makes the drive a test of skill. At places, the wheels of our small bus were literally a few inches from the edge. The road surface is dirt and rock, with no tarmac at all for the entire eight-kilometre distance. Many TV commercials for cars are made on this road; *Top Gear* also recorded an episode here. Many of the iconic scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* were filmed on this riverbed – and at the fiords of Milford.

With barely four million people, concentrated in cities, towns and rural areas, New Zealand has vast tracts of forest and nature trails. Hiking trails abound. One can travel on foot for weeks on some hiking routes without encountering anyone, if one wishes. ■



Clockwise from left: Bungee-jumping spot above the Shotover River; A deep gorge of the Shotover River; Thrilling speedboat ride over the Shotover River



usually, among these are also some deer farms producing venison for the table, and export. The road traverses a major lake, forest reserves, and finally crosses a 1,500-metre pass, going right up to the snow line, before descending to Milford. The region is sparsely populated and apart from tourists, few locals are to be seen.

Milford is a hub for a small cluster of cruise ships, and our journey on one of these, along that series of bays took about two hours, some-