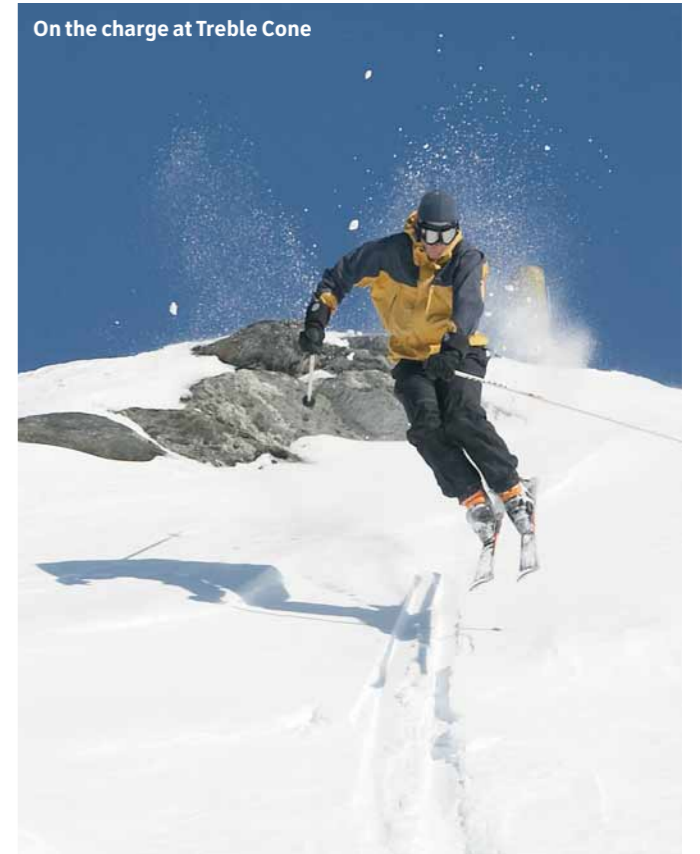




On the charge at Treble Cone



THRICE BLESSED

New Zealand's Treble Cone ski resort is one world-class winter wonderland.

WORDS MICHAEL SHAFRAN

ROB SKINNER PLUMMETS down a steep chute, charging his skis downhill with a smoothness and confidence that confirms his idea of this being an easy run (easy for him, that is). As for the several other – considerably younger – skiers and snowboarders trying to keep up with him, this sandwich between two opposing rock faces is more like a battery test for the adrenal glands. It only takes a few more challenging, visually beautiful runs like this for the 50-year-old Skinner to drill home his point: Treble Cone is as good an alpine destination as you'll find in the Southern Hemisphere.

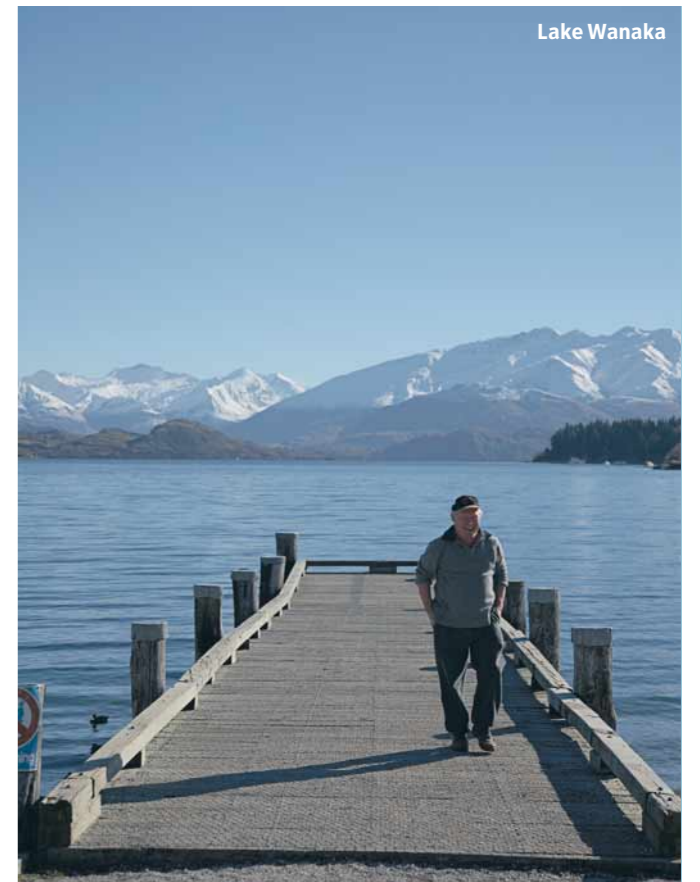
"It's like skiing in Europe, but three hours away," says Skinner, with a nod to the easy access from Sydney and Melbourne. If there's a hint of sales pitch here, it's understandable. Skinner – tall, silver-haired and fitter than many men half his age – is the director of Treble Cone. He also just happens to be – quick, cover the ears of the nearest Kiwi – an Australian.

Not that the former investment banker has to really sell Treble Cone, or "TC" as the locals call it. It's easy to be impressed by the stellar views of Lake Wanaka and the Matukituki Valley, or by the largest ski terrain and longest groomed slopes in New Zealand, or the fact that some of the world's best pinot noir is ripe for the après-ski picking. Just 26km from the snow-lubbing paradise of Wanaka, Treble Cone is also a mountain with 90 per cent advanced and intermediate terrain that seems poised to become a true global destination resort, especially once a planned gondola – a first for a major New Zealand resort – is built.

Since Skinner and his investment group took over the reins here some years back, the mountain has seen a \$NZ14 million (\$12m) >

PHOTOGRAPHY: CAROLINE WEST

Lake Wanaka



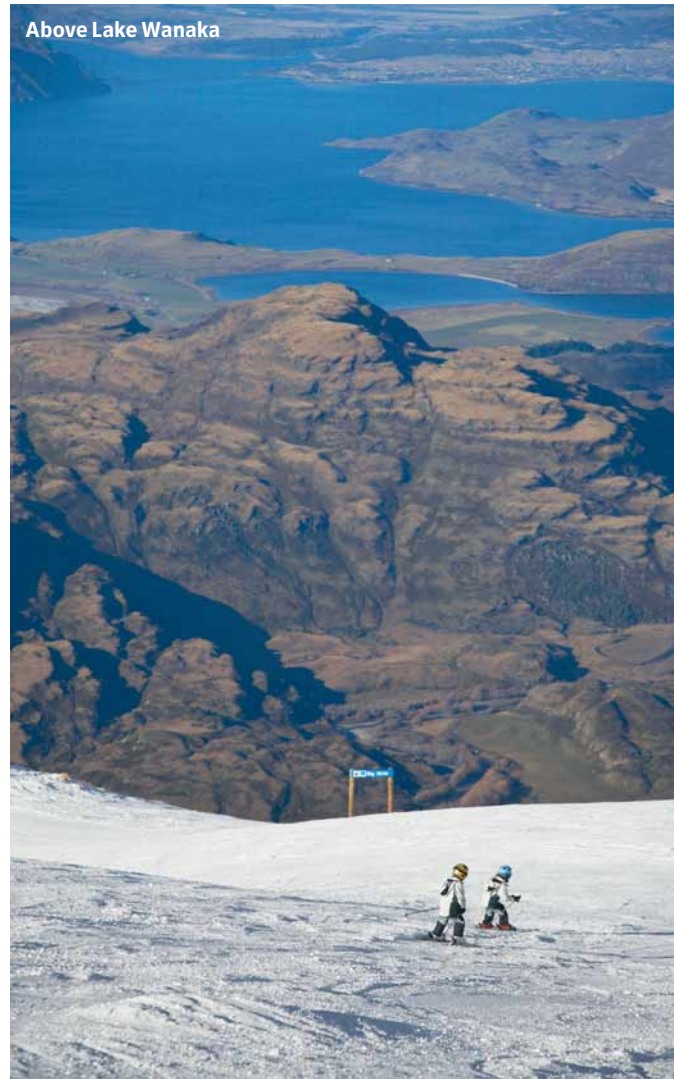
makeover, adding a high-speed quad chairlift to provide access to Saddle Basin's 45ha of new, manicured terrain plus hundreds of additional hectares off-piste. That's not to mention grooming equipment and snowmaking, a quality kitchen for the base lodge and such improved options for alpine novices as the widened, mellowed, 3.5km-long Easy Rider trail.

It's not just Kiwis and Aussies who've been appreciating the improvements. For the last five years the infinitely successful Austrian ski team has made this their Southern Hemisphere home, as reportedly did half of the ski medal winners in preparation for the 2006 Winter Olympic Games.

While progress has meant that the old "ConeHeads" T-shirts have disappeared from the gift shop, many of the classic experiences remain. The oversized, green, parrot-like keas still ogle your meal at base lodge's outside deck and eat just about anything that's rubber, including the padding on the chairlifts. The vibe is still laid-back and you can still hike off-piste to Treble Cone's 2000m summit for those amazing 360-degree views.

Adding to the lure of TC is Wanaka, the small-town alternative to the endless bars and big development of Queenstown. Wanaka is getting its share of new restaurants, housing and bars, but on a much smaller scale – the town can be measured in blocks, not kilometres. It also sits within Central Otago, the world-renowned pinot noir winegrowing region. So when you've had enough of the slopes, it's easy enough to trade snow trails for wine trails.

Wine may soon be on the mind of the crew following Skinner on this sunny afternoon, so he drags his tiring followers to the far side of TC, a quiet spot called Viewpoint. It lives up to its name. From the precipice – just on the off-piste edge – are endless, unspoilt mountain-tops, including Black Peak and the towering 3027m Mount Aspiring. Like Treble Cone's growing attractions, the view is world-class.



Above Lake Wanaka

EAT

THE WHITE HOUSE CAFE & BAR

**33 Dunmore Street, Wanaka.
(03) 443 9595.**

Although notorious for its eccentric chef, the quality food proves there's method behind the madness. OK, so the tables are screwed into the floor (the chef reputedly didn't like people moving them around), but what you get in return is an extensive and excellent by-the-glass wine list and skilled Mediterranean/Middle Eastern cooking. The green-lipped mussels are a must and, with entrees topping out at \$21, "quirky" sounds better by the minute.

SARGOODS

**Sargood Drive, Lake Wanaka.
(03) 443 8311.**

www.edgewater.co.nz/resort/restaurant

Pray he stays; US chef Andrew Spiegel is boundlessly talented and should be going places. Luckily, for now he's content to work at the Edgewater Resort where he shows the experimental gastronomic prowess he learned at New York's Aquavit, Nobu and WD-50. For dessert, Spiegel lets loose with inari sushi: a roll of green tea and wasabi ice-cream with chocolate "soy" sauce and pickled fruit. >



Andrew Spiegel, Sargoods



Kea at Treble Cone

NEW ZEALAND SKIING

DRINK

BARLUGA

Post Office Lane, Wanaka.
(03) 443 5400.

Groovy wallpaper, leather couches, a blazing fire and first-rate wines and cocktails make this the classiest and swankiest of the town's watering holes. For less-refined (read: cheaper) drink options and harder partying, head to the rowdier Woody's next door.

RIPPON

246 Mount Aspiring Road,
Wanaka. (03) 443 8084.
www.rippon.co.nz

The largest Central Otago winery near Wanaka, on the shores of Lake Wanaka. Does a ripper pinot noir (2003 was particularly outstanding) and a solid array of cool-climate whites including sauvignon blanc and gewurtztraminer. Winter hours 1.30pm-4.30pm.



FELTON ROAD

Felton Road, Bannockburn.
(03) 445 0885.

www.feltonroad.com

Bannockburn, an hour's drive from Treble Cone, has the area's most prestigious wineries. Felton Road should top your list. Its pinot noir is outstanding, especially the mind-blowing Block 5. The overshadowed chardonnays are equally impressive. Pinot standouts Mt Difficulty and Carrick are also must-visits.

WANAKA BEERWORKS

State Highway 6, Wanaka.
(0800) 273 9754.

www.wanakabeerworks.co.nz

Award-winning pours, including the "Vienna-style" Cardrona Gold lager, "bohemian-style" Brewski pilsener and "German-style" Tall Black black beer.

STAY

OAKRIDGE RESORT GRAND MERCURE

Cardrona Valley & Studholme
Roads, Wanaka. (03) 443 7707.

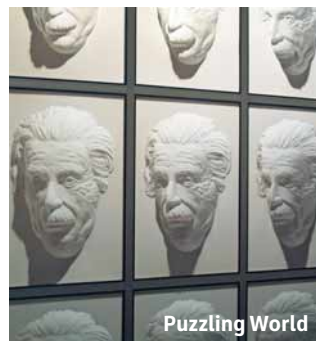
www.oakridge.co.nz

Seven open-air hot spas to soak in after bashing yourself silly on the slopes. Spacious suites, good mod-NZ eating at The Hub restaurant and a killer fireplace in the hotel lounge.

For resort information and live webcams visit www.treblecone.co.nz

For airfares call [Qantas on 13 13 13](http://www.qantas.com) or visit [qantas.com](http://www.qantas.com)

For holiday packages to New Zealand call [Qantas Holidays on 13 14 15](http://www.qantas.com).



DO

PUZZLING WORLD
(03) 443 7489.

www.puzzlingworld.co.nz

If you've got snow grommets, take them 2km out of town to Stuart Landsborough's fascinatingly bizarre complex of mazes, puzzles and mind-boggling architecture.

Oakridge Resort Grand Mercure



RIPPON PHOTOGRAPHY: PHOTONEWZEALAND.COM