



LAUGHTER IN THE PARK

Giggles of delight ripple around Blanket Bay.

STORY CATHERINE MCGREGOR

I WOULDN'T CALL myself a particularly mirthful person: no one's ever accused me of excessive jollity or glee. What, then, was this odd sound I heard myself making at various points during my stay at Blanket Bay luxury lodge? It sounded a lot like... could I really be... *giggling*?

It first hit within seconds of my arrival. I swung off the Queenstown-Glenorchy road under an icy, silent dusk. The gates opened; the car rolled forward then stopped. Below me, beyond fields still tinged with brown from the harsh southern summer, the gentian blue of Lake Wakatipu gave way to the dark snowy peaks of the Humboldt Ranges, dissolving into a glowering sky. I turned off the car stereo, sat for a moment, and broke out in awed laughter.

It happened again when I was shown to my room, the felicitously named Paradise Suite (a reference to the valley of the same name 15 minutes to the north). The roaring fire! The bathroom the size of my living room at home! And through the windows, that same immense, imposing view. On came the giggles. I fear I may have briefly skipped.

Composing myself, I headed downstairs for cocktails. Drinks are served in the vast Great Room, the heart of the lodge, or by the bar in the gentlemen's club-style Den next door. Ruth and Lucy, my servers for the evening, filled me in on local news and gossip. Don't

try to get them to spill on the boldface names who have helicoptered in and out over the years, though: 12 years on, there's still an official refusal to confirm or deny that Brad and Jen honeymooned here.

Instead, the big story in these parts is the proposed Milford-Dart tunnel, which would cut through 11.3km of DoC land, connecting Glenorchy with Milford on the West Coast. The people round here cherish their "end of the road" community and are mobilising to fight the privately owned, tour-bus-only tunnel that they say would significantly increase bus traffic and desecrate the entrance to the world-famous Routeburn track.

While I sip my martini, Ruth brings me the evening's menu. Tonight, the five-course menu from executive chef Corey Hume and his team includes roasted beef with celeriac rémoulade and oxtail ravioli, monkfish fillet with fennel and prawn risotto and Pernod velouté, and warm toffee fig pudding. Dinner at Blanket Bay is a perpetual "for one night only" affair: tomorrow, the menu will be completely fresh.

With morning comes a chance to explore. On entry, the lodge seems deceptively small; step futher inside and it expands, Tardis-like. From the entrance hall, a balcony affords a view over the Great Room, with its double-height schist fireplace and deer-antler chandeliers, and across to the lake and

mountains. Another storey down is the spa, gym, pool and secluded private-dining wine cave — ideal for just-married megastars.

Despite being open just 12 years, Blanket Bay has old bones. Most of the floorboards are recycled matai from disused industrial buildings, including woolstores. The rafters were salvaged from wharves and long-gone railway bridges: their names — Kingston, Blackball, Hyde — resonate with gold-field dust and the sound of steam.

It's a clear autumn day, perfect conditions for a helicopter flight over the mountains. In a place with so many activity options — fly-fishing on one of the 17 rivers in the vicinity, trekking on horses from Blanket Bay's own stables, jetboating on the Dart River, even sky diving (landing slap bang on the lawn outside) — lodge manager Philip Jenkins says the helicopter trip is the "must-do" excursion: "I've seen people come back in tears, it's so beautiful."

We take off from the lodge's lawn and head northwest, skirting over ancient valley forests and through tight alpine passes. Glacier Southern Lakes provided aerial photography services for *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, and pilot Steve points out Lothlórien, Isengard and Amon Hen on our way to Milford.

Clockwise from opposite page: Milford Sound; the Great Room; Blanket Bay lodge; Josh Emmett and Fleur Caulton at Rata; the lodge's jetty.

Before we know it, we're on the West Coast, landing first on a wild and empty beach, and then at Milford township to pick up more passengers. We swoop down the length of the sound and then up, up, to the Mt Tutoko glacier summit, where we spill out to take photos, wordlessly grinning at each other in astonishment at the heart-stopping views.

That evening I'm back on the road to Queenstown. It feels wrong, very wrong, to be passing up a gourmet dinner at one of New Zealand's most luxurious lodges, but I've arranged to meet friends at Rata, Josh Emmett's brand-new restaurant — his first in New Zealand. Tucked away in the former post office building, Rata, like the man himself, is good looking but unflashy. A giant lightbox photo of native rainforest covers one wall — Emmett and business partner Fleur Caulton (ex Amisfield Wines) have been upfront about their desire to create a "uniquely New Zealand restaurant" that will appeal to overseas visitors. But this is no quick-turnaround tourist trap: the cooking is restrained, inventive and big on Central Otago flavours. Our table fights for the last meltingly tender scrap of seared wagyu beef and agree to return sometime soon to share the whole roast rack of venison with osso bucco pie.

Late that night, on my drive back to Blanket Bay, I pull over at a lookout point and get out. Across the lake I can just make out the mountain ranges' hulking form in the dark, the snow lying like a luminous blanket on a sleeping giant. Above, a glittering ceiling of stars. Alone in the dark, coldness biting the tip of my nose, I start to laugh.

BLANKET BAY: Ph (03) 441-0115, blanketbay.com. Until October 15, Blanket Bay is offering a special nightly tariff to New Zealand guests of \$455 per person, double occupancy. Includes pre-dinner cocktails, dinner and breakfast.

GLACIER SOUTHERN LAKES HELICOPTERS: Ph 0800 801-616, glaciersouthernlakes.co.nz

RATA: Ph (03) 442-9393, ratadining.co.nz

CATHERINE MCGREGOR STAYED AS A GUEST OF BLANKET BAY.