

WHERE NEW ZEALAND



NO PLACE LIKE DOME

The Geo Dome is a captivating base for ski touring remote and pristine slopes, writes **Jim Darby**.

I'm ski touring with Guy Cotter; it's a bit like having Bruce Springsteen play in your garage band. Cotter has stood five times on the summit of Everest and that's only one of the seven peaks measuring 8000 metres or more he has climbed.

It's not a complete surprise he would feel the call of the mountains. His father was Ed Cotter, an exceptional mountaineer and a member of the pioneering 1951 New Zealand Himalayan Expedition, the one that helped blaze the trail for Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary's successful 1953 ascent of Everest. Guy grew up in New Zealand's South Island, within sight of the spectacular Southern Alps. Before long, their call was too strong.

"I left school when I was 16," he says. "I went to Mount Cook and went climbing. I had to work, but I went climbing." And he kept on climbing.

Fast-forward a few decades and Cotter has established himself as one of the world's most accomplished climbers and expedition leaders. His company, Adventure Consultants, has about 85 tents at Everest Base Camp alone. With more than a passing interest in gear, I ask him how many tents they own all-up: "I don't know," he confesses. There's one he knows inside-out though; it is the Geo Dome at the centre of a remote and inspired ski touring camp in the mountains above Wanaka, on New Zealand's South Island, a merger of modern technology and Kiwi can-do.

The dome is deceptively spacious, with a high ceiling giving it a bit of a Tardis-like feeling. A gas-powered kitchen runs along one wall, bunks on another. There's a dining table in the centre and a clear wall section

for some light and a view of the mountains or stars beyond. A solar panel charges a battery that powers LED lights, as well as the boom box and even USB ports for phones and cameras. The world's smallest wood-heater does its thing, with bean bags to fall into around the fire.

The toilet is outside and it is sheltered by a thick canvas cover over a structure that started life as a trampoline frame. Weight and efficiency are crucial in the whole operation – the camp is lifted in by helicopter and, under the agreement with the NZ Department of Conservation, has to be removed for a couple of months every autumn.

'LAKE WANAKA BELOW IS A HUGE SHEET OF GLASSY WATER AT THE FOOT OF THE SLOPES AND RIDGES THAT FALL INTO IT.'

We arrive by helicopter on a spring afternoon, with enough time for a pre-dinner ski tour. The area is known as the McKerrow Range and we are in the headwaters of Camp Creek.

"It's not ideal for heli-skiing as the runs aren't long enough," Cotter says. When you're climbing them yourself, they're plenty long enough. We make our way over a ridge beyond the camp for a spectacular view of Lake Wanaka below, a huge sheet of glassy water, flat as a table at the foot of the slopes and ridges that fall into it.

Water becomes a theme: Cotter's tip on finding the best line is a good one, "ski the

slope as water would flow down it", he says. I try my best and with the excellent snow quality my inner-creek is almost working.

Back at base, Cotter and his partner Suze Kelly pull another skill from the seemingly unlimited set that expedition specialists carry and create an exceptional three-course dinner with wine and whisky to accompany it. Don't overestimate the dome's heating though, we sleep in alpine-rated sleeping bags with beanies in place.

Cotter is the breakfast cook – coffee, fruit, cereal, eggs and bacon – we all chip in to clean up and help prepare lunch, put it in our packs and, under clear blue skies, hit the slopes of the McKerrow Range again. There is a delightful rhythm of touring up for 45 minutes or so, following a track set by Cotter, and gaining enough altitude for a spectacular ski down; fresh tracks on untouched snowfields. Later in the day, we return to the dome, pack our gear and huddle outside for the returning helicopter to give us an easy ride back to civilisation.

If they gave away expeditions and guiding, Cotter and Kelly could easily be chefs, or farmers, maybe even builders, such is the extraordinary depth and breadth of their skills, but I doubt they'll be leaving the mountains any time soon. With this uncanny dome among their homes, why would they?

Clockwise from main: The night sky above the Geo Dome at Adventure Consultants' Alpine Heli-Camp in the Camp Creek area of the McKerrow Range, above Wanaka; ski tourers set out on untouched snow; dinner in the dome – Guy Cotter is at right. PHOTOS: GEOFF MARKS/LAKE WANAKA TOURISM

TRIP NOTES

FLY

Air New Zealand, Qantas, Jetstar and Virgin Australia all have direct flights from Australia to Queenstown. Wanaka is about an hour's drive from Queenstown.

STAY

Edgewater, on Wanaka's lakefront, has a mix of rooms including self-contained suites from \$NZ349 in peak winter season. See edgewater.co.nz

TOUR

A two-day First Tracks Wanaka tour, staying at the Geo Dome and including heli-transfers, safety equipment, guided ski touring and meals starts at \$NZ1250. In the NZ winter, they also run an ice-climbing camp near Queenstown and seven-day glacier tours. See adventureconsultants.com

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Jim Darby was a guest of Adventure Consultants and Lake Wanaka Tourism. See lakewanaka.co.nz