

AT LEISURE

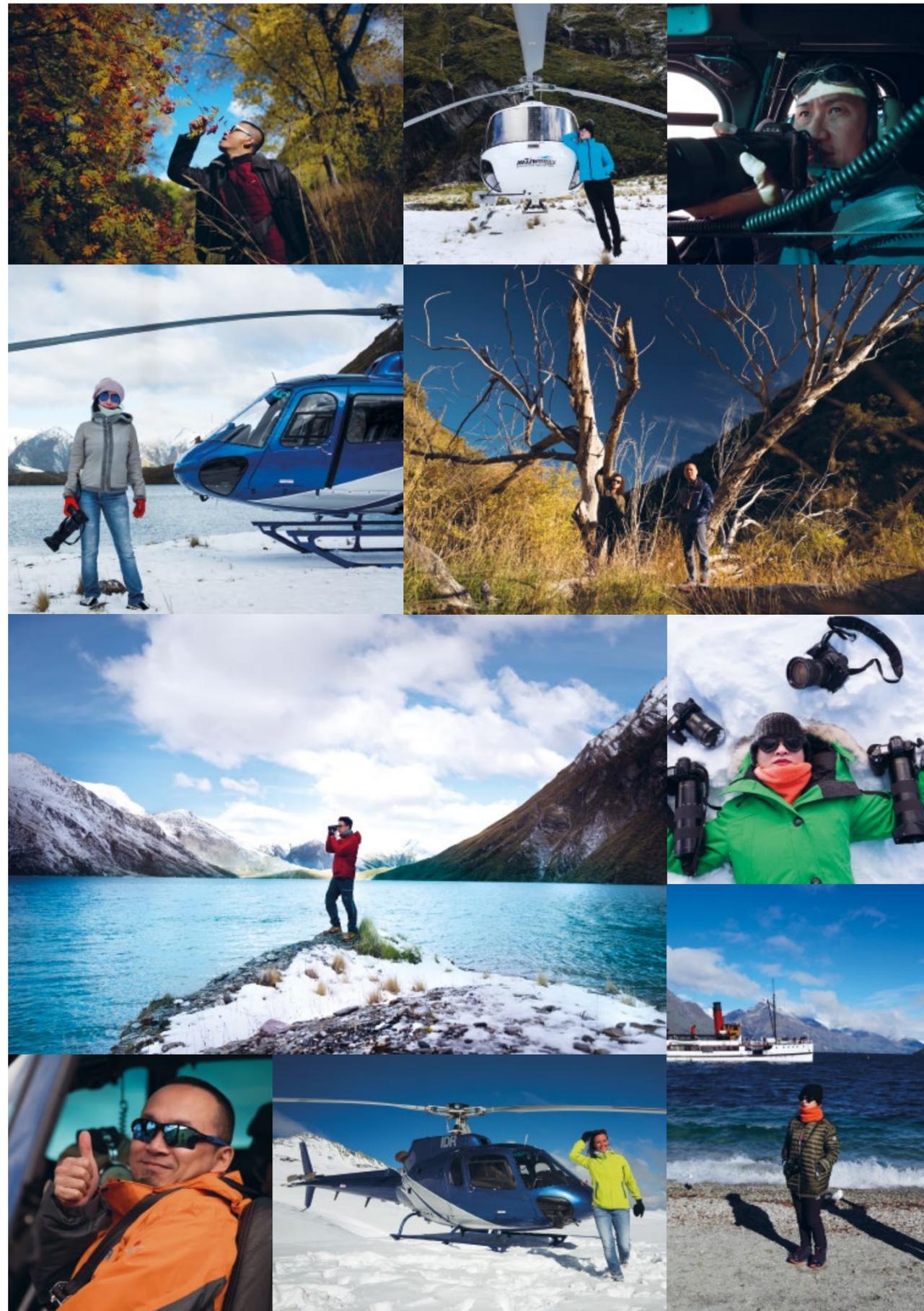
AUTUMN GOLD

NEW ZEALAND

Central Otago in autumn was quite the photographer's dream. The vibrant colors that made for an incredible Indian Summer down in the Southern Hemisphere blends perfectly into the stunning scenery that New Zealand is so famous for

BY SONJA PIONTEK

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEICA VIETNAM



We were recently in the South Island for a rather exclusive photography tour offered by Leica cameras, and for an entire week we were spoiled with the most exciting experiences, unexpected locations, and unforgettable memories.

Our home for the first few nights was Millbrook Resort, the acclaimed luxury retreat outside Queenstown, surrounded by the snow-covered peaks of the Crown Range and the resort's award winning 18-hole golf course.

Our first adventure was an exciting 4x4 drive up the Arrow River that took us from historic Arrowtown to the ghost settlement of Macetown, the heart of the legendary Otago gold rush. At its peak in 1862, over 1,500 gold miners worked in this remote alpine camp; some are said to have found quite some luck. For our group of passionate photographers, over 50 river crossings, steep climbs, deep gorges, glowing autumn colors and the vastness of this rather inaccessible part of New Zealand's South Island were just as good as gold.

The following day was focused on horsepower of a much more refined nature. We were invited to the newly opened Queenstown Polo Club. Owner and avid polo player Jonathan (Jono) Gabler had the vision of bringing the thrilling sport to this part of the country and was busy setting up quite a club on his 86-hectare piece of paradise. Although the first tournament will be played in November this year, we were able to get a feel for the horses and the field. Our friend Quoc Trung, a celebrated music producer from Vietnam, loved the ride on his polo pony "Vancouver" and later got into a nice horsy chat with Jono over a glass of champagne. Life could certainly be worse! To round off that eventful day, we took the cable car up to 'Skyline' where we enjoyed the sunset over Lake Wakatipu, learned how to do a traditional Maori Haka, and had a sumptuous dinner before heading back to our resort.





Jetboats are one of NZ's many ingenious inventions and one of Queenstown's most popular activities so we clearly needed to join the fun. It was amazing how fast those boats could go, how crazy fast and tight they could turn, and how much fun this was. But there was more to come.

Up into the air was the motto of the rest of the day as we soared into the sky. Equipped with our cameras and all the right lenses, we set off on a spectacular chopper trip deep into the Southern Alps. We took two helicopters so everyone could have a window seat, and we could take cracker shots of each other flying over the majestic snow-capped peaks.

Our first photo stop was Tyndall Glacier, a spectacular spot for some serious show-off shots in the snow. How often do you land on top of a glacier with two helicopters and picture perfect snow after all? From Tyndall we flew to Loch Nagar, a glooming dark alpine lake surrounded by steep, rocky peaks. We appreciated having private helicopters so we could stay until the last shot was in and we decided

to move on. One final stop was the mysterious Earnslaw Burn where we did a shooting right in front of a waterfall.

We drove to Cardrona Hotel where we spent the night. The small boutique hotel is another relic from the 1860s gold rush, and probably has the most photographed façade in New Zealand.

Next stop was St. Bathans, the legendary gold mining settlement that appeared frozen in time. The little town once hosted thousands of gold miners. It is said that over 80 tons of gold were found here. Today, St. Bathans isn't much more than a few authentic houses, the infamous Vulcan Hotel and the original prison cell. Much to our delight, one of us was allowed to spend the night in prison (and yes, it can only be locked from outside!). Everyone else slept either in the Vulcan Hotel or shared a little cottage down the road. This was clearly not your normal five-star accommodation, but an experience like no other. After a great meal, we completely took over the bar. Jude, the owner of the Vulcan, showed Quang how to pour our own beer, and Trung worked the old Jukebox. We played pool against the



only two locals in the pub, danced, sang, and eventually fell into our beds. If only we knew which room was said to be haunted. St. Bathans is quite a remarkable place and one we would certainly never forget.

Back in Queenstown, we checked into our Villas at Millbrook again before taking off on board Queenstown's icon, the TSS Earnslaw (built in 1912). It was nice to cross the lake on such an old vessel, even more so as our group was allowed onto the bridge. We stopped at Walter Peak Station for a sheep shearing demonstration and a barbecue lunch. On the way back, we were quite surprised to get spoiled with yet another treat. We had our own private speedboat that allowed us to take stunning shots of the old lady as she crossed the lake. That's what I call a bespoke travel experience.

After a week of unforgettable experiences, money-can't-buy-moments, hundreds of million-dollar-shots, and newfound friends, this unique photography tour came to an end. The memories however will stay. The photos will be treasured and shared. And New Zealand will be forever in our hearts. [P]

ABOUT THE TOUR

This unique tour was designed and executed by Sonnenkind Pte Ltd Singapore, which specializes in creating unforgettable experiences for B2B and B2C customers in some of the most amazing places in the world.
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The next NZ photography tour in conjunction with Leica Camera will be offered in late 2018.

Queenstown has an international airport and can easily be reached from Asia via Sydney, Auckland or Christchurch. Millbrook Resort is considered New Zealand's leading golf resort.