



# Height of isolation

**Craig Tansley** flies deep into the Southern Alps for comfort and adventure at the country's first luxury tented lodge.

**H**e'll fly us as soon as he tucks his shirt in." Minaret Station managing director Matt Wallis issues the order as his youngest brother, Nick, sheepishly attempts to smooth down his unruly blond locks while tucking in his shirt. Little matter that Nick's about as brave and capable a helicopter pilot as you'll find in this ridiculously rugged region of New Zealand's South Island; when four brothers form a business, someone always gets to boss someone around. (And who are you going to complain to? Mum?)

From this tiny airport on Wanaka's outskirts, Nick flies us just above the emerald-green placidity of Lake Wanaka. A sudden rain squall hits us side-on as gusting thermals join in from the Southern Alps above us; the helicopter bucks and heaves and my stomach lurches. "A couple wee bumps is all they are," Nick says calmly. "Just

think of them as potholes in the sky. You can fly in anything in these. It's people who'll give before the helicopter will."

We journey along the edge of Lake Wanaka; below us, rugged plains of brown grass and schist rock give way to sweeping valleys of beech forest and twisting, turning rivers where waterfalls cascade over gigantic, smooth boulders. Above, falcons circle while deer, cattle and sheep balance on giddy, sloping, high-country farmland.

While the ski mecca of Queenstown attracts most international kudos, it's the South Island's rugged back country, and the hard-as-nails folk who have made it home for generations, that could be New Zealand's biggest tourist attractions. They're descended from migrants from Scotland (mostly) who moved to one of the Earth's most challenging landscapes and etched a living. A century and a half later, the new brigade might have fancier toys – such as helicopters –



but they have as many new challenges: farming, after all, ain't what it used to be.

There's no better example than the four Wallis boys, whose father, a pioneer of high-country deer farming, bought Minaret Station, 22,000 hectares of high-country farmland 15 minutes' flying time out of Wanaka. To diversify their business, the brothers teamed up to build New Zealand's first luxury tented lodge. They also must still keep tabs on 26,000 head of deer, sheep and cattle.

The tented lodge idea came about from the Wallises' shared love of camping as kids. The four brothers used to camp out here together in

deserted valleys surrounded by 2500-metre-high mountains in the tallest reaches of their farm.

"This is just our life, where we live," Matt says as we sweep in low over high alpine forest. "But look at it. We wanted to show people a part of the South Island no one else gets to see."

As if on cue, the helicopter rises over a gorge to a huge valley dissected by a slow-moving river. Below the sudden rise of sharp, surrounding mountains, canvas tents with timber bases and decks are spread out evenly among the tussock.

"It took 20 months to build," Matt says. "Absolutely everything had to come in by helicopter, including 100 tonnes of concrete."

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