

EXTREME ZEAL

By KATHRYN BONN



*A bungee jumper bounces hundreds of feet above Queenstown, New Zealand.
- New Zealand Tourism*

July 10, 2001 – ON my first day in New Zealand, I'm standing out on a metal platform, off a gondola that dangles over a yawning valley.

I try not to look down at the jagged rocks and a trickle of stream hundreds of feet below.

Before I have a chance to back out, I hear the countdown: "Three, two, one," and then I dive.

I shriek into the wind as the jutting rocks whirl around me. I'm flying, so dizzy with adrenaline I feel like I might faint.

Twirling upside down, I yank the bungee cord attached to my leg to pull me upright. Utterly exhilarated, I mentally repeat my new mantra: "I can't believe I did this!"

The guys in the gondola reel me in and I'm suddenly back inside, being congratulated by my fellow jumpers.

It's all in a day's vacation in Queenstown, New Zealand. Nestled in the snow-dusted Southern Alps and fronted by a sparkling azure lake, Queenstown is an adventure-lover's Disneyland.

Located in the southwest of the South Island, I've flown here from Auckland. It's mid-July, the height of Winter Festival - the Grand Prix of cold-weather fun here.

Foursome," a package offered by a group called Totally Tourism.

The combo also includes a jet boat and a helicopter ride and a white-water rafting trip.

Next up was the boat ride, during which a jet boat hovers above the Shotover River, careens around sharp corners, comes within inches of the side and soaks everyone (slickers are provided).

Tame, compared to what came next.

A helicopter flew us upriver and into the valley, where we assembled for white-water rafting down the Shotover.

We suited up in neoprene from head to toe and listened to instructions from the guides.

Soon our raft of eight was hurtling through the rapids. We paddled furiously as our guide shouted "Left! Right" and then a reassuring "Too easy!"

My fellow Foursome participants were in their 20s and 30s, except for a Scottish woman in her 60s.

As she paddled along with us, her husband was happily panning for gold 20 minutes away in Arrowtown, an old mining village with little miners' houses and the sad remnants of a Chinese workers' settlement.

If you decide not to try the Awesome Foursome, there are plenty of other Winterfest activities to watch in downtown Queenstown.

For the Birdman contest, wildly costumed competitors catapult themselves into glacial Lake Wakatipu, aided by any contraption that will keep them airborne, from bicycles to home-made wings.

While you watch the zaniness, surrounded by dramatic peaks, you'll also see more successful fliers swooping onto the beach on hang gliders.

Outdoor evenings include the Mardi Gras festival, a street party with music and food from local restaurants.

*** Air New Zealand flies daily from LAX to Auckland; from there, it's a two-hour flight to Queenstown.**