

Window to the wild

Sue White has a ringside seat for the dramatic fiords of the South Island.

With 1.2 million hectares of forests, fiords, mountain peaks and deep valleys, New Zealand's Fiordland is one of the South Island's most dramatic landscapes. Wilderness buffs have been drawn to this World Heritage area for decades – after all, it includes the world-famous Milford Track.

It's rumoured the area's wild beauty will be transformed into Tolkien's Shire, as one of the locations for New Zealand director Peter Jackson's new film *The Hobbit*. If so, it's likely that when Jackson puts his feet up after long days on set, it will be at Fiordland Lodge.

The natural surroundings of Fiordland are stunning but one of the joys of the 10-room lodge built in 2002 is that you hardly need to leave the building to feel connected to the land. Poised on a hill overlooking Lake Te Anau and the Kepler and Murchison mountains, large expanses of glass mean the views are never far away. Hundreds of oregon logs sourced from nearby Southland support the ceiling, a salvaged kowhai tree supports the mezzanine floor and a washed-up slab of rimu from the Fiordland coast serves as the bar and reception benchtops.

Guest rooms are spacious but not enormous. They're also impressively egalitarian – each of the 10 rooms has the same view of Lake Te Anau and the mountains beyond, while double doors from the bedrooms open to a long communal balcony. Bathrooms have heated floors and there's an appealing tea-and-coffee set-up if you're too lazy to join other guests for home-made afternoon tea. What's missing is a bath or a spa. There is, however, plenty of water in the vicinity.

"Inside the national park across the lake, they get seven metres of rain a year; our side of Lake Te Anau gets about half that much," says the manager of the lodge, Andy Cunningham.

As appealing as Fiordland Lodge is, the proximity of the fiords compels a traveller to explore further. For most, this means a day trip to Milford Sound, one of 14 fiords accessible by road. Day trippers can choose to leave from nearby Te Anau (Real Journeys is the main operator). If you've come with a car, however, this is a road trip worth taking slowly. It's only 110 kilometres from Fiordland Lodge to Milford Sound but signs indicate you'll need at least two hours and there are more than a dozen walks and lookouts along the way.

At Milford Sound, Cunningham suggests taking a 10.30am cruise to avoid the crowd. He says up to 135 buses a day travel the Milford Sound road in summer.

Boats cruise the 16-kilometre-long fiord, where sheer granite cliffs create one of New Zealand's most picture-postcard landscapes. The mountains are dotted with temporary waterfalls gushing down



Lookout ... Fiordland Lodge has views of Lake Te Anau and the Kepler mountains.

FAST FACTS

Getting there Air New Zealand has a fare to Queenstown from Sydney (3hr) for about \$575 return and from Melbourne (3hr) for about \$660. Car-rental companies operate from Queenstown Airport. From here, Fiordland Lodge is a two-hour drive south. Head towards Te Anau: the lodge is five kilometres north on the road to Milford Sound. If you're feeling flush, arrive by helicopter for \$NZ2490 (\$1925) for three to four people plus luggage.

Staying there Fiordland Lodge has various

packages. The scenic Fiordland package includes three nights' accommodation, all meals and day trips to Milford and Doubtful sounds for \$NZ3190 for two people (off peak). The lodge is closed in July; see fiordlandlodge.co.nz.

Touring there Numerous companies conduct day trips to Milford Sound from Te Anau. If you have your own car, the 119-kilometre drive is spectacular. Then join Real Journeys on its two-hour nature cruise, from \$NZ77; realjourneys.co.nz.

into the fiord's clear waters and as guides will point out, "they disappear as soon as the rain stops".

As spectacular as Milford Sound is, you'll be grateful to return to the warm (and dry) surroundings of Fiordland Lodge, particularly at mealtimes. The property prides itself on sourcing local produce, "what most guests are looking for", says chef James Musk. Typical offerings include venison hunted from the national park, fish caught in the fiords and off Stewart Island and vegetables from Otago.

Guests are also free to be fussy. An endorsement by Orvis, North America's leading fly-fishing company, requires, among other things, that visitors won't receive the same meal twice during their stay. It's the only lodge in New Zealand to gain the prestigious accreditation, which means when American

fly fishermen head to the southern hemisphere, Fiordland Lodge is at the top of their list. There are 40 rivers and streams within 90 minutes' drive and plenty of trout to be had.

After a few days of dishes such as Akaroa salmon fillet with cauliflower and radish salad, pumpkin puree, roasted seeds and lemon saffron dressing, you may start to wonder how meals this good can be created in such a remote locale.

"A fresh catch can come into Queenstown and I'll get a call from a supplier asking if I'd like an order. It gets packed into a container, stored on one of the day-trip buses [to Milford Sound] and I'll pick it up about four hours later," Musk says.

Sue White travelled courtesy of Tourism New Zealand and Fiordland Lodge.