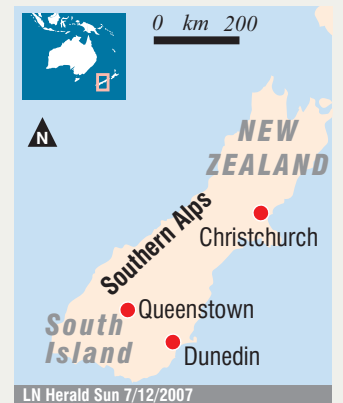




Mountain man: river guide Johnny Two Combs.

THE DEAL



→ **Getting there:** Air New Zealand fly direct Melbourne to Queenstown weekly during summer and daily via Christchurch. Flights from \$377 one way. www.airnewzealand.com

→ **Rafting:** Landsborough Wilderness Experience runs until March 31. \$1040 a person includes all meals, transfers, campsite and rafting equipment.

→ **More information:** www.queenstownrafting.co.nz

A raft of excitement

A wild rafting ride demands an equally wild guide.

Rachael Oakes-Ash finds both in New Zealand

JOHNNY Two Combs is a Kiwi ecosexual, a hardy South Island mountain man with matted dreadlocks who's addicted to the outdoor life.

You won't find him at any swanky Queenstown cocktail bar swapping sharemarket tips.

Instead, it's beer from a bottle and roll-your-own tobacco all the way.

I'm handing my life over to Johnny (the two combs is a reference to his abundant hair) as my river guide in the great whitewater wilderness of New Zealand's Landsborough Valley in the Southern Alps, a two-hour drive and 20-minute helicopter flight from Queenstown.

Scream here and no one will hear you, which is why Johnny has brought his mates: Peanut, Paul Bags and the big kahuna, Whizz.

What Whizz says goes. Stand on his toes and you'll be spitting chips for breakfast, literally. He doubles as lead guide and camp chef.

The movie *Deliverance* has done a lot for rafting.

When shown the map of where we are going I am reminded of inbred hillbillies with a penchant for dining on city folk like me for canapes.

NZ's wilderness may seduce with thrusting mountains, glacial lakes and azure rivers, but danger lurks around every corner.

Spend too long in the near-freezing waters of the Landsborough River and you'll die from hypothermia. If you fall out of the boat (and it happens) don't stand up in the river, we're told.

If you get your foot caught between rocks you may find yourself pushed over by running water, unable to release your feet and drowning before you can say "squeal like a pig".

OK, the safety kayaker will no doubt save you, but that's not the point. Ten "clients" (or victims, as the guides refer to us) are taking on the mighty river.

Chad, an American from Mississippi, is pumped, having rafted in four countries already.

He's so pumped he has brought his laptop, SLR camera, iPod and GPS system so he can track every current, mark the co-ordinates and download them each night on to his hard drive at camp. He's moved Google Earth to get here and he wants boasting rights on film.

Day one we chopper in with supplies over cobalt rivers and glaciers clinging to mountains worthy of Frodo and his mates.

Camp 1 is an expanse of fairy woodland and open clearings. The sun doesn't set 'til 11pm out here. There's only a campfire and a "chilly bin" full of wine to keep us amused.

Whizz is handy with a ladle, so we rename him Martha Stewart. He has mastered marinated chicken and triple chocolate cake, all on the campfire.

Dinner is at 8.30pm. There's only one deck of cards. If I don't want to play snap with a 13-year-old American girl with corn-syrup withdrawal symptoms, I'd better pop a cork.

Paul's safety talk in the morning scares me, and not just because his voice is loud and my head fragile. Apparently we must look death in the eye before we step into the raft.

I already feel like death, so this is no problem.

Johnny is our raft guide, leading myself, a Dutch couple and a Kiwi girl. The Americans are in the other boat with Martha. Paul is in the safety kayak and Peanut rows alongside with supplies.

We hit our first rapid, JTC screams "paddle left, paddle right,



Picturesque: there's more than water views.



Location: kayakers check the map after a day's rafting.



In the thick of it: rafters experience some wild rapids.

stop, paddle backwards". We do as he says. We survive, beaming, adrenalin-pumped and applauding our courage.

By rapid three we're old pros. But two paddlers are flung from Martha's boat as he negotiates a hairy bend.

ONE clings to the rubber boat and is dragged back in; the other bobs over rocks, her head going under.

The guides spring into action. Paul heads for one client, shouting instructions for him to straddle the kayak. Chad takes photos, checking the GPS to ensure he has the exact location of his wife's mishap.

Paul deposits her at our raft, which is now in a channel we don't want to be in.

JTC is standing on a rock, ensuring the boat is held still until the rafter is in. He shouts commands before comforting the rafter, now face down and semi-conscious in the back of the boat.

"You'll be right, Chad," he says, not knowing it's Chad's wife.

We say nothing, too busy paddling forward, back and sideways on his instructions to clear the rapids and get back into safe water.

By the time JTC turns over his rafter — who we all know is a she, not a he — we watch his shock as he says, "You're not Chad!" For a moment we think he'll chuck her back in.

Her husband has his shot, and the rest of us are content to be on dry

land, swapping our water stories as we anticipate dinner.

Martha's basting a lamb, and JTC earns the name Johnny the Ripper by stomping on a bush mouse, at which the 13-year-old bursts into tears. He throws the Kiwi pest on the fire for official cremation.

It's time for a drink. The NZ wine starts flowing again, glow worms in a nearby grotto put on a light show and the mouse is forgotten in the comforting sweetness of homemade blackberry crumble and cream.

The guides are what make the trip and it's only fitting we thank them for our lives by shouting them beers back in town.

Rachael Oakes was a guest of Queenstown Rafting