

It's the game of the name



You need mates with names such as Chubb and Eye Candy to hang out in the ski town of Ohakune, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**

NO ONE goes by their real name in the ski town of Ohakune on New Zealand's North Island.

You may have been christened Andrew, Mike or Steve, but you're more likely to be called Smithy, Big Head or Statue.

They're names that beg an explanation and come with a story.

In one day I skied with Eye Candy, had instruction from Mountain Man, hung with K1 and his 2IC K2 in the terrain park, bought ski boots from Chubb at the Snow Centre and had a drink with Johnny Ride, only he's now Johnny Quick or Johnny Walker or Johnny Quick Walker without a Ride, depending on who you talk to in town.

Ski towns are notorious for attracting those wanting to escape their real lives and pseudonyms ensure that Inland Revenue doesn't come knocking.

Second names are optional in Ohakune, shortened to "Kuni" by the laid-back locals who don't have the energy to deal with four syllables.

Even my hosts, Annie and Pete, at Miro Ridge lodge are known as Pippi and The Giant.

Only 1246 people live in Ohakune year-round. In summer much of the town is closed but come the first snowfall in June, doors are flung open, with 5000 beds to cope with the influx of Aucklanders.

Mt Ruapehu, on whose base Ohakune rests, rises from the Central Plateau in the Waimarino district.

It's an active volcano in Tongariro National Park with a peak of 2797m, an average snow base of 3m and a ski season that remains open as late as November.

It's divided into Whakapapa ski field on the northwest side and Turoa ski field on the southwest.

Combined, they make up the country's largest ski resort with more than 1000ha of terrain.

With all of these figures, it's surprising I have the only Australian accent in town. I'm not complaining.

It's an old-school ski town where elderly folk wear retro all-in-one suits in primary colours and still ski on "toothpicks".

The new generation of boarders and freestyle skiers get air in the Turoa terrain park with plateau views, and big-mountain skiers salivate over "front stage" and "back stage" in the Whakapapa Pinnacles.

Nights are spent at the junction end of town on Thames St, where the local bars have their own nicknames.

The Powderkeg becomes the Keg and fills up with ski-industry types; Turoa Ski Lodge is dubbed The Creche on Tuesday staff night; and the next-door Projection Room is The P Room.

P could stand for Projection or Paul (also known as Little Hands) who owns this funky industrial glam joint.

Ohakune is the last place you'd expect to find the world's finest selection of high-end vodkas, but the Projection serves up Medos, a honey vodka from Poland that when poured on ice tastes as though an entire colony of bees has made this nectar just for your tastebuds.

It's also the last place you'd expect to meet a "boot psychic".

James Bell is a man so obsessed by feet that he travels the world reading people's bunions, calluses and prolapse.

THE DEAL

→ **Getting there:** Air New Zealand flies daily from Melbourne to Palmerston North or Taupo via Auckland or Wellington. Ph: 13 24 76

Avis car rental has depots in Palmerston North and Taupo. Ohakune is a two-hour drive from either location. www.avis.com.au Ph: 13 63 33

→ **Staying:** Miro Ridge in Rimu St is \$NZ85 a night. www.miroridge.co.nz

Families can rent a self-contained chalet through Ruapehu Chalet Rentals www.ruapehureal.co.nz

High-end folk can try Ruapehu Golf and Country Lodge (from \$NZ245 a night). www.ruapehu.golfodge.co.nz

→ **Skiing:** A \$NZ76 daily lift pass covers both ski areas. www.mtruapehu.com

He reads his clients' past and changes their future with one foot fondle.

He tells me I edge with my left foot and slip out with my right, that I suffer from sciatica in my right hip, my left knee falls inward and my rising sign is Sagittarius.

He's right about all of them.

An hour later and my ski boots have been adjusted, stacked and canted to ensure my body is in the perfect stance for style and safety on the hill.

Hearts are big in Ohakune — there's little the townsfolk won't do for you.

Visitors may come for the snow, but return for the people. But be warned: you're not allowed back in for the second time without a nickname.

Mine? Arrested Woman, thanks to a night of hilarity playing pranks on new best Ohakune friends with men dressed in uniform.



Wat a sight: the dramatic Khmer temple ruins at Wat Phu.

Khmer and have a look

The Khmer ruins at Wat Phu are worth the bone-jarring trip, writes **Juliet Coombe**

THE DEAL

→ **Getting there:** Intrepid Travel runs exploratory trips to this area. Ph: 1300 360 887.

BREAK into a coughing fit as the bus hits yet another hole on the road to Pakse. The dust is so thick it is difficult to see the truck ahead of us until we are right up its backside.

"Don't worry, there are worse roads ahead," a headman says as I tumble into his arms.

Everywhere the bus stops, women appear with trays of banana leaves and green parcels of sticky rice. Rat and chicken kebabs are served on skewers and cans of cold drinks are pushed through the windows.

Plastic baskets of chicken wings, painted eggs, snacks, medicine and colourful cloth are paraded through the centre of the bus as if it is the morning market. Bird eggs and french sticks seem to be the most popular choices.

As the babies start to scream and my well-worn seat sinks further, I begin to wonder if I have made a terrible mistake catching the bus from the Laotian capital, Vientiane, to the southern centre of Pakse. The \$200 flight may have been a bargain.

The reason for my trip is to visit the small town of Champassak and the Khmer ruins at nearby Wat Phu. The ruins date from the 5th and 6th centuries, which make them 200 years older than Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

No one could have been more delighted when the bus finally arrives at Pakse and the owner of my hotel suggests a 90-minute boat ride down the Mekong to the Champassak ruins instead of continuing by road.

The boat makes several stops before

arriving at Champassak's makeshift landing point.

At the jetty you can hire a tuk tuk to do the last 10km to the Khmer temple.

Once at the main gate the site seems fairly basic. A long promenade flanked by broken statues of Nagas and lions connects the buildings and I feel like Alice in Wonderland as I wander through the ruins.

From the base of the mountain it is difficult to believe there is anything farther on, just beautiful green foliage rising up into the clouds. But as I walk on I discover a staircase hidden away behind a Dawk Jampaa plumeria, Laos's national tree.

It is well worth the long hard climb just to see Wat Phu temple and much of its original carvings of Shiva and Vishnu.

After the long uphill walk, I find a place to sit in the shade of the sacred cave and enjoy some bread and cheese I have bought from street vendors at the harbour.

It is the ideal place to escape the harsh midday sun and enjoy the serenity of the ancient ruins.

Whether by bus, boat, or tuk tuk, Champassak is well worth the trip.