



Go with the flow

Among its many outdoor attractions, New Zealand's South Island offers breathtaking scenery and world-class white-water rafting. Having first stocked up on wine, Rachael Oakes-Ash dips her paddle and heads downriver.

Johnny Two Combs is an eco-sexual, a hardy Kiwi South Island mountain man with matted dreadlocks who is addicted to the outdoor life. You won't find him at any swanky cocktail bar swapping stock-market tips. Instead, it's beer from a bottle and hand-rolled cigarettes all the way.

I'm handing my life over to Johnny as my river guide in the great white-water wilderness of New Zealand's Landsborough Valley, in the Southern Alps, a two-hour drive and a 20-minute helicopter flight from Queenstown. Scream out 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, because 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 less than noble intentions. New Zealand's wilderness may be devoid of the deadly snakes and spiders of its Aussie cousin and it might seduce with thrusting mountains, glacial lakes and azure blue rivers, but danger lurks on every corner. Spend too long in the near-freezing waters of the Landsborough River and you could die from hypothermia. If you fall out of the boat, and it happens, don't stand up in the river, we're told by Paul. If you find your foot caught between riverbed rocks you may be pushed over by running water, unable to release your feet, and drown before you can say "squeal like a pig". Not even the full-body wetsuit, life jacket and waterproof buoyancy jacket will help you at this stage, except to keep you warm while the air is sucked out of you. The safety kayaker might save you, but that's not the point.

I have always been addicted to drama, choosing adrenaline sports over bridge and croquet. The idea that death or disaster is just around the corner makes me feel alive and it appears I am not alone. Ten clients, or "victims" as the guides refer to us, are taking on the mighty river. Chad, an American from Mississippi, is "pumped" to be on the river, having already rafted in four other countries. He's so "pumped" he's brought his laptop computer, SLR camera, iPod and GPS device so he can track every current, mark the co-ordinates and download them each night onto his hard drive. He's moved heaven and Google Earth to be here and he wants boasting rights on film.

On day one we chopper in with supplies, over cobalt river waters and glaciers clinging to mountains that are worthy of Frodo and his mates. Camp No 1 is a wide expanse of woodland and open clearings. The sun doesn't go down until 11pm out here and there's nothing more than a campfire and a "chilly bin" full of wine to keep us amused.

Pictures: Rachael Oakes-Ash

Whizz is handy with a ladle, which is why we rename him Martha Stewart; for that and his marinated chicken and triple chocolate cake, all prepared over the campfire. Dinner done, it's only 8.30pm and there's one deck of cards; unless I want to play snap with a 13-year-old American girl experiencing corn-syrup withdrawal I'd better pop a cork.

Wilderness bonds people – and so does wine. We soon learn Peanut is from Maine and that Maine is the toothpick capital of the world. It has the lowest income per capita in the US, the biggest Somalian contingent and is the home of horror writer Stephen King. The last bit I could do without, especially because I have forgotten to bring a torch and must use the light from my mobile phone to stumble to the toilet tent in the middle of the night.

Paul's morning safety talk scares the bejesus out of me, and not just because his voice is loud and my head fragile. Apparently we must look death in the eye before we begin. I already feel like death so this is no problem.

Johnny is our raft guide, leading myself, a Dutch couple and a Kiwi gal. The Americans are in the other boat with Whizz, Paul is in the safety kayak and Peanut rows alongside with supplies. We hit our first rapid and Johnny screams instructions: "Paddle left!"; "Paddle right!"; "Paddle backwards!" We do what he says and we survive, beaming with adrenaline and applauding our courage.

By rapid No 3 we're old pros. And it's then that two victims are flung from Whizz's raft as he negotiates a hairy bend on the river. One clings to the rubber boat and is dragged back in, the other bobs over rocks with her head going under. It doesn't look good but the guides spring into action as only a well-oiled safety team can. Paul heads for the drowning client, shouting instructions to straddle his kayak, Chad takes photographs, checking the GPS to ensure he plots the exact location at which his wife has fallen in ... the same wife now almost lost in the river.

Paul deposits her beside our raft. Johnny is standing on a rock ensuring the boat is held still until the rafter is in. He fires off a volley of commands – "Grab your mate, haul him in! Grab his life jacket!" – before comforting the rafter, who is now face-down and semi-comatose in the back of the boat. "You'll be right, Chad," he says, not yet knowing it's Mrs Chad we have on board.

We say nothing, too busy paddling forward, back and sideways on his instructions to clear ourselves from the rapids and back into safe waters. By the time Johnny turns over the rafter's limp body we all know he's a she. We witness his shock as he says, "You're not Chad!" and for a moment think he might throw her back in.

Everyone is happy, especially Chad's wife, who is alive.



Clockwise from top left: the sublime Landsborough River; a rafter takes a dip; the view from the helicopter; raft guide Peanut steers the gear boat.

Her husband has his data and the rest of us are content to be on dry land, swapping our water stories come dinner time. It's time for a drink and the wine starts flowing again. Glow worms in a nearby grotto provide a light show and we feast on homemade blackberry crumble.

We're having a ball and don't want to leave, but there is only one more day of canyons, secluded waterfalls and picnic lunches by emerald green waters before we're back on the minibus heading for Queenstown. The guides make the trip and it's only fitting we thank them for our lives by shouting them beers back in town.

We drama addicts and adrenaline junkies know it's no fun if you're dead. You can't boast from the grave and the evening is spent outdoing each other's travel stories over beer from a bottle and hand-rolled smokes.

Getting there: Air New Zealand (www.airnewzealand.com) flies from Hong Kong to Queenstown via Auckland. Queenstown Rafting (tel: 64 3 442 9792; www.queenstownrafting.co.nz) offers a range of excursions including meals, transfers and camping and rafting equipment.