

To really experience the resort town of Queenstown in the Southern Lakes district of New Zealand and live like a local, take a walk up the hill at the back of the town.

You won't find a glossy brochure on the Time Walk among those on Jet Boating and Bungy Jumping - just insist to be shown the Short Walk up the hill (1 ½ -2 hrs) on a map of the town at the Visitor's Bureau.

Drive or walk to the marked entrance near the top of the residential part of the hill. Follow the path through bush, as it rises steeply towards dense green pine trees – and is blocked by a tall wrought iron gate. Intertwined curved iron letters state: “Time Walk.”

Push through the gate and pause to read a placard beside the path:

“This pathway leads to our future. With each step we seek the guidance and wisdom of those who have gone before us: we walk with a sense of hope, that those beyond the year 2000 can do so with the same sense of pride and protection for this beautiful place.”

The words are a foretaste of this walk through Queenstown's past...telling the story of the Waitaha people who came in 1100 in search of food... followed in the 1600's by the Maori Ngati Mamoe people – looking mainly for the moa (tall flightless bird) and sacred pounamu (greenstone).

As you ponder the history and mystery of the mountain, you are swallowed by the pine forest – the only bright spots the clumps of exotic fungi– bright red and white spotted, yellow and orange with brown centres, dotted through the brown pine needles on the forest floor...and glimpses of the movie set below...Lake Wakitipu - Loch Ness in “The Water Horse,” children's film... framed by jagged shaped mountain range, The Remarkables – the location for the Lord of the Rings.

The forest gives way to a clearing and a rocky outcrop, with a slab inscribed:

This hill was once known as Te Tapu– noi – a hill which signifies sacredness.”

And an environmentally-aware placard: “When European settlers arrived they did not realise the Ngati Tahu had already achieved a balance of land and resource use, which they had perceived as unoccupied and unused.”

At every turn, the panoramic vistas invite you to linger and contemplate 9000 years of human habitation in this spectacular environment.

Strategically placed placards continue the story... of the first European settlers' arrival in search of grazing land for sheep in 1860 ... and the discovery of gold two years later, which brought people and progress so that “the solitude of the lake, uninhabited gullies and lonely mountains had passed away for ever.”

Reading of the opening up of land for grazing and the advent of transport - steamers on the lake (T.S.S Earnslaw, is still operating as a tour boat), rail and air, draw you closer to the present ... and the open land toward the summit.

On the exposed brow of the hill, a massive iron, "Basket of Dreams" crowns the panorama below. Sculptor Caroline Robinson has inscribed:

"The basket's spiral of steel follows you inward

To reflect

To draw inspiration from the mountains and lake and those who are with you outward

Time flies – eternity waits. '

As I read, light snow begins to fall, biting my face and obliterating landmarks. Pulling up the hood of my jacket, I encounter another climber, a former Californian who climbs the mountain several times a week. We share our exhilaration and the words of the last placard before hurrying down the hill:

The silent valleys that greeted tongata whenua nine centuries ago have given way to the roar of jet's continuous drone of cars, tour buses and courtesy coaches.

Despite the 20th C surge of technology that has allowed this heavenly place to become truly international -

We remain forever in awe of its majestic landscape within our history is our future well being."

You can learn more about the Maori people of the region at the Kiwi Haka Cultural experience at the foot of the Gondola in Queenstown.