

Rotary and fixed wing mix at Aoraki Mount Cook



John King

John King profiles a tourism development

Changes are afoot in the aviation tourism sector, driven by a number of factors. Climate change is one, as is the deepening economic gloom covering the world. Regulation changes also have an effect, along with shifting patterns in tourist groups and movements.

Many of those changes are difficult to plan for, particularly in the longer term, but Mt Cook Ski Planes has been continuously operating for well over 50 years within the Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park. It remains the only company offering fixed wing glacier landings within that and the adjacent Westland National Park on the other side of the Southern Alps, a unique operation in world terms where people can drive at low level to an airfield and be transported in minutes into a high alpine snow-and-ice environment.

The company recently expanded its operations to include helicopters, teaming up with Heliworks Queenstown Helicopters to offer an increased and more flexible service.

"It's a fully blended operation," says Alex Miller, Mt Cook Ski Planes CEO. "The fixed wing and helicopters use the same landing sites and the same fare structure, and there's just the one counter and group of staff in the terminal building for all flights.

"But the helicopters have greater tolerance in high wind conditions and give the opportunity to fly on more days. We flew helicopters almost every day in January, sometimes when the ski planes were grounded because of wind."

The ski planes — a mixture of Cessna 185s and Pilatus Turbo Porters — can operate in winds of up to 30kts at the base airfield on the river flats a couple of kilometres from the Mount Cook village, but realistic limitations are based on passenger comfort in mountain turbulence. A frightened and perhaps airsick passenger is not a good advertisement for such a unique operation, which otherwise has the potential to reduce passengers to tears of joy at the experience of standing in utter silence high in the Southern Alps.

Helicopters have previously been flown by the company, in the form of BK117s in the days when twin engines were the perceived answer to questions of reliability on passenger transport operations. Today's equipment is the much more passenger friendly Aerospatiale AS350 Squirrel with its spacious cabin uncluttered by structure.

Harry Wigley started it all off more than 50 years ago when he fitted a set of skis to an Auster. Skis had been fitted to aircraft in other countries for decades, but the requirement at Mount Cook, where the airfield is at an altitude of a little over 2,000ft and dry for most of the year, is for wheeled aeroplanes and so skis for snow need to be retractable. Some clever design work and trial-and-error testing resulted in the basis of today's continuing ski plane operation.

Austers were limited in payload and before long were replaced by Cessna 180s and later 185s, still to be found among the South Island mountains. The ski plane success led to the formation and expansion of Harry Wigley's companies which eventually became the Mt Cook Group with myriad interests in almost everything to do with tourism and aviation. The ski planes and topdressers were joined by other GA aircraft on the Queenstown–Milford Sound route, and the airline, which had grown out of the DC-3s used as aerial buses to feed the other components, became large enough to attract the interest of Air New Zealand. GA maintenance was centred in Queenstown, but the ski planes were otherwise autonomous.

But things are seldom static in aviation. Tourism Holdings Ltd, which had grown out of The Helicopter Line and later became plain THL, bought all the GA operations when Air New Zealand acquired the whole of Mt Cook Group and divested itself of anything to do with smaller aircraft. Some time later THL itself sold all its GA fixed wing components, and the Queenstown part is now Real Journeys, the maintenance side of which won the CAA director's award last year.

Mt Cook Ski Planes has also won a CAA director's award recently, for safety. The operation was bought at the end of 2002 by Alex Miller, a long-time ski plane pilot based at Franz Josef Glacier, and Christchurch businessman Richard Royds. Both are aviation enthusiasts with Cessna 180s and, in Richard's

case, also an Auster, but Richard's forte is the business area while Alex brings his years of experience into the operational side.

And there's no shortage of experience in Mt Cook Ski Planes. Among them the pilots total some 120 years of ski plane flying, and chief pilot Wayne McMillan has seen unbroken service since 1979.

Cessna 185 ZK-CBS has been around a bit, too. Operated from new in 1962 by Mt Cook, it first dropped poisoned carrots from a hopper against the rabbit plague and was put on skis at the end of its first year. In more than 18,000 hours, the equivalent of nearly 80 trips around the world, and some 11,000 ski flights it has carried countless thousands of passengers up on to the snows and glaciers of the Mount Cook and Westland National Parks.

The recent development with the helicopters came exactly six years after the change of company ownership. It's not just a simple matter of adding new aircraft types to the fleet, either — there are such things as variation in national park use for landing on snow to be sorted out. Westland National Park helicopter operations are still under discussion.

And operating off the Mount Cook airfield brings its own complications. On national park land and therefore under Department of Conservation control, it is leased by The Hermitage Hotel and therefore requires an additional tier of discussion and consent.

Denis Callesen, who first worked in the area 34 years ago and has been general manager of The Hermitage for 15 years, has seen many changes in business, tourist and weather patterns.

"The group market has changed forever," he says. "The ski planes and helicopters compete for the FIT (free, independent tourist) market. The weather patterns have changed, with more snow on the West Coast and different sites and opportunities.

"It's all completely changed, but there will always be a place for ski planes, although with high volumes no longer. The blended operation adds value. Not all passengers want helicopters, and not all want ski planes, but it puts choice in front of people. In terms of weather the helicopters can operate 30 percent or 40 percent more. It's a unique experience."

The Hermitage, which does 70 percent of its business between October and mid-March, has changed its focus from sales to a marketing strategy. Part of that is Glacier Explorers' 15-seat boats on the Tasman Lake at the foot of the glacier, but a major development is a planetarium and theatre showing 3D films, opened in December 2007. That may at first glance be an unusual thing to find in a tourist hotel with its emphasis on vigorous outdoor activities, but, as Denis points out, "It offers recreation inside for bad weather days and gives people more things to do."

(The 3D film showing the region's attractions is stunning, and it's hard to believe it's actual footage and not the computer simulation now taken for granted. Richard Royds is quick to state that the company's Porter flying over the glaciers is, in fact, the real thing.)

Perhaps the biggest impact on tourist patterns has come from the 9/11 disaster. "It's huge," says Denis Callesen. "Air New Zealand walked away from the scheduled service into Mount Cook after that. The Japanese fleet market has all but disappeared."

Other changes are happening, too, but it may take some time for the full effects to be seen. New Zealanders are now tending to stay at home and so the rest of the world, particularly Europe, has become the biggest market. The abrupt change to a low dollar and the world-wide recession is unusual and should lead to more overseas tourists next summer, given the natural time lag.

"It's all connected with discretionary spending, but it's been very hard this summer," says Denis.

The Hermitage, which also maintains the airfield, is part of Trojan Holdings, a growing group owned by two South Island families which, sources suggest, is quietly rebuilding almost the old Mt Cook group.



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Above: Two climbers, stranded at the Plateau Hut for three days by high winds. Below: Climate change has seen the development of a large lake at the northern end of the glacier. This sight is best appreciated at low level from the air.



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John Evans (centre), one of Harry Wigley's original ski plane pilots, tells Richard Royds (left) and Alex Miller how he was tasked with the responsibility of setting out the original Mount Cook airstrip, still in use today behind them.

One of those families is the Davies of Queenstown, and Heliworks also has strong ties with John Davies which may help explain why that's the helicopter company now working with Mt Cook Ski Planes. Heliworks' directors — Richard Hayes, David Kershaw, Robert Butson and Brian Hore — are all described as being passionate about aviation and the company has been working on the idea for more than a year.

Up to three helicopters are allowed at a time at Mount Cook, along with three fixed wing — with a limit on the number of landings — with one AS350 B3, ZK-IMK, permanently based there and others relocating from Queenstown as required. Brendan Hiatt, chief helicopter pilot with the new operation, says the B3 variant has more power at 870hp than the B2 and can carry an extra 300kg externally as well as having more and upgraded instrumentation.

Alex Miller admits it hasn't been an easy time. "The lack of snow last season had an impact on safe operations, but it's



winds, are picked up by the new helicopter service.
foot of the Tasman Glacier, with huge pieces of ice calving off the
m either ski plane or helicopter.



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been a little bit better this year and there's more snow on the western side of the Alps."

The management plan for the national park has always had provision for helicopter operations, but not for scenic landings, and so the new mix of ski planes and helicopters is a definite step forward.

But it doesn't mean the end of those Cessna 185s and Pilatus Porters. "There will always be a place for fixed wing ski plane operations," states Alex.

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