

Places to Go: Omarama

WHEN thinking of Omarama, many of us automatically think of Gliding. Omarama after all has hosted several world gliding championships and is considered to offer the best mountain soaring in the world because of the spectacular Southern Alps, the powerful weather conditions and the crystal clear air. Giant mountain lee waves are created by the North West winds and attract pilots from around the world to make flights over 30,000 ft high and more than 2,000 km long. Omarama is also where each year around July, our biggest aviation group, AOPA, hold their annual winter fly-in. It attracts people from all over NZ with people this year mooting it as being the best fly-in they had ever attended.

So what makes Omarama so special? It is spectacular and it is in the middle of everywhere! Surrounded by mountains and situated in a central area of the South Island called the McKenzie basin, Omarama is a straight forward place to fly to. Just NE of the Lindis Pass, pilots can stop

and refresh themselves or just wait for a front to pass. The runways are grass, 09/27 and are roomy and relatively smooth with ample parking at the western end. Winter does have its attractions because the weather is often stable and there are likely to be fewer people flying to share airspace with.

In the summer season there can be 50 or 60 gliders and several tow planes operating from the airfield. However they are well disciplined and it is easy to slip in and out. Powered aircraft are always welcomed. Within 5 nm of Omarama, all traffic including gliders operate 119.10 while further afield the gliders are usually listening on their chat channel, 133.55. Check your NOTAMS for

gliding competitions because at the end of the day when the gliders race home, the airspace does get busy. On the ground there is a very spacious terminal and avgas is available from the Z pump. There is a small landing fee of \$7 to pay.

If you live relatively close, then Omarama is a great day trip with just a short walk into town - a perfect excuse to take your partner or friend for a flight and a coffee. In summer there is the Kahu Café right on the field or the Winkley Rams Café is a short doddle down the main road. However if you live further afield, I would definitely recommend to spend a weekend there. It is something that I have done many times, winter and summer and it is a very relaxing and friendly pace.

A must do is a visit to the hot pools which are situated very close to the airport (www.hottubsomarama.co.nz). These outdoor wood fired tubs are unique because the water is changed and the cedar tub cleaned and re-filled between each use.

This means no chemicals in the fresh pure mountain water. Here you can relax and unwind while enjoying the huge landscape the McKenzie country has to offer. Run by a local couple, who thought of the concept and built the hot tubs, it is definitely worth a visit. Try a night time visit because the McKenzie night sky is reputed to be the very best star gazing in the world. I can confirm this because when I went there to watch Haley's comet in the 1980s there were tourists from all over the world enjoying the night sky.

If you have decided to stay the night there is a variety of accommodation from the Top 10 holiday park just along the road to the Countrytime Hotel, which is my pick because it is right on



1. Synonymous with gliding, Omarama offers some of the best soaring in the world. 2. Follow the leader. 3. Visitors from all aviation disciplines are welcome at the Kahu Cafe on the airfield. 4. Omarama Airfield. 5. Take a flight into the mountains with Gavin Wills from Glide Omarama. (All pictures by Gavin Wills)

the airfield itself. Check out www.countrytimehotel.co.nz with rooms from just \$85. Imagine waking up on a crisp morning, opening your curtains to the wide blue sky and your plane parked outside... a recipe for an early morning flight perhaps? It is actually one of the most magical places to fly first thing with the soft pink and blue hues on the surrounding mountains.

The town itself is small, quaint and rural, yet has an interesting array of shops, 5 restaurants, a local pub, a supermarket, two garages and a fine dining winery called Lady Bird Hill. The Totara Peak Gallery is a renowned old book store jam packed with collectibles. Nearby, the Clay Cliffs are a geological attraction which make for an interesting stop and if you can borrow a vehicle a trip up the river to the Ahuriri Conservation Park is a stunner. If you do go, take your fly fishing rod as the upper reaches contain old rainbow and brown trout.

But perhaps the most interesting part about Omarama, for us powered pilots, is the glider flying. About 10 years ago I began realising my dream to learn glider flying because as a powered pilot I had always wanted to understand more about the wind currents. What I did learn was that gliders are far more exhilarating than I could have possibly imagined and that flying a glider was not

restrictive in any way at all.

For power pilots, Gavin Wills and his team at Glide Omarama offer adventurous flights into the mountains in high performance two seat gliders with experienced instructors. This is from around October until end of March due to needing thermals and wave to achieve long flights. In 2.5 hours when the conditions are right you can soar around Mt Cook or Mount Aspiring and return to

Omarama all without the aid of an engine. Or if you want to hop in just for a taste, then try a half hour flight.

Glide Omarama also offer power pilots a 3 day mountain flying instructional package where one learns

and experiences how the mountain winds really work. It's a valuable add-on to a power pilot's experience. From my own experience, all power pilots should try to understand the challenging sport and fun of gliding. Check out www.glideomarama.com or contact Gavin Wills and his team on free phone 0508 58 55 88 for more information about what sort of soaring you may like to try.

Do consider checking out Omarama next time you are planning a flying trip away. As one of my pilot friends said the other day "Don't leave town until you've seen the country"! and we have plenty of great country with which to apply that adage to.



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