

Celebrity escape Central Otago, NZ

SAM NEILL

Heart is where the home is

Sam Neill's ideal holiday spot is the part of New Zealand where he grew up from the age of seven, writes **Angela Saurine**

SAM Neill read somewhere once you can like many places in the world, you can even love many places, but you can only be "in love" with one.

Whether that's true or not, he knows there's one place his heart lifts the moment he arrives – the Central Otago region on New Zealand's South Island.

Neill was born in Northern Ireland. But his father was a New Zealander and an army man and when he retired, when Sam was aged seven, the family moved back to his homeland.

While the actor grew up in Dunedin, Neill's holidays were usually spent camping, fishing or skiing in the Central Otago region, where he now lives for four or five months a year.

In those days it was a 10-hour drive, but it takes about three now.

When he needs a shot of city life it is only a three-hour flight to his other home, Sydney.

"I think a lot of people's idea of paradise is the place they used to go to for holidays and when you're lucky enough to end up living there you kind of fulfil a childhood dream," Neill says.

In the 1980s, Neill built a house between the ski and adventure town of Queenstown and the charming former gold-rush town of Arrowtown.

Neill, who has starred in

blockbusters such as *Jurassic Park* and is now filming the Fox TV series *Alcatraz*, also built a winery called Two Paddocks just down the road at Alexandria. It produces pinot noir and a little riesling.

"We're small by any standards – I think I have 23 acres (9.3ha) of grapes," he says.

"We make about four or five thousand cases of wine a year, and I drink a fair few of those myself.

"It started off as a hobby but now we really want to be the best."

While he admits it is hard to find, the winery has a cellar door and if you are lucky you will find Neill there pouring.

"If you ring up first there will be someone there," he says. "I'm there sometimes myself but I need someone else to handle the credit-card machine – it's a bit beyond me."

As well as Two Paddocks, he recommends checking out Rippon Vineyard at Wanaka, Felton Road at Cromwell and Peregrine at Gibbston Valley.

"I think there's 80-plus wineries in Central Otago now – it's ridiculous, but great," he says.

Neill is also a keen skier, and is lucky enough to be able to see three ski fields from his house.

From the front, he can see Coronet



WINE AND VIEWS: Rippon Vineyard in Wanaka in the Central Otago region of New Zealand, a favourite with actor Sam Neill (below).



Peak, from the back the Remarkables, and to the right is Cardrona.

But even when the snow has melted, Neill says there is always something to do in Central Otago.

He loves cycling the rail trail in the Maniototo and also recommends the three-day Hollyford Walk or a jetboat ride on the Dart River.

"That takes you into the most spectacular of the *Lord of the Rings* country," he says. "I personally fly-fish, but that's not for everybody."

Neill says the landscape in New Zealand is different from anything you will find in Australia and it also has more culture than you would expect.

"New Zealand is particularly blessed in the visual arts and art galleries are always worth checking out," he says.

He recommends the Nadene Milne gallery in Arrowtown and Milford Galleries in Queenstown.

As far as restaurants go, he likes a

little restaurant called Vknow in Queenstown, which has "simple, very delicious" food, French restaurant Solera Vino and the Vie restaurant at the Sofitel hotel.

"The Hilton recently opened in Queenstown and although I haven't been there yet, everyone is talking about the Wakatipu Grill. That seems to be the buzz at the moment," he says.

For a high-end dining experience, Saffron in Arrowtown is the place to go.

"You don't dress up and they don't have ridiculous tablecloths, but Pete is a very ambitious and accomplished chef," Neill says.

But the best way to see New Zealand, Neill says, is to hire a car and go explore it yourself.

"Get off the tourist trail and it's amazing what you'll find," he says.

Check out Sam Neill's blog at twopaddocks.com

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