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Travel

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Cold calling
The lowdown on

snow season 2008



Cover story

The piste makers

Hopes are high for a bumper ski season - with a little man-made help, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.

Snow is never known for its commitment. It may spread the love one season and forget to show up the next. Australia's snow-drought season of 2006 is spoken about in hushed tones, if at all, and is thankfully seen as history - while everyone prefers to remember the bumper season of 2004.

Odds are in our favour in 2008 if you believe the adage that a good southern season follows a good northern season. Colorado and Utah experienced the best snow in decades, with Utah's Snowbird resort recording 14 metres of snowfall in the season. Further north in Canada, Fernie resort received more than 11 metres.

Australasia's resorts are betting on a bumper season, and millions of dollars have recently been invested in ski fields across Australia and New Zealand. This season, expect lush new day lodges, improved snowmaking, more grooming and world-class ski and snowboard events designed to put the southern hemisphere on the international ski map.

Australasia's largest ski field, Perisher Blue, has forked out \$9.75 million just for snowmaking, with an upgraded pump station and 34 new



restaurants and cafes, a supermarket and fashion stores, is ready for this season.

The country's longest beginner trail, Falls Creek's Wombat's Ramble, will have continuous snow coverage on its two-kilometre-plus run, with extensive snowmaking equipment introduced for 2008.

Meanwhile, across the Tasman, the New Zealand resorts have been digging deep into their pockets, spending the big bucks to entice powder hounds across the ditch.

About 50,000 Australians ski in New Zealand annually and our Kiwi cousins are hoping to increase those numbers, providing competitive pricing to our own ski fields with all-inclusive air-fare, accommodation and lift pass packages.

Skiing in Australia and New Zealand differs. While the snow quality is similar (unless you heli-ski or go back country), New Zealand fields are above the treeline and most resorts don't have on-mountain accommodation, so expect to drive 25 minutes to an hour to reach the snow.

The upside is when there's a down day there's plenty to do and you won't be stuck in your lodge waiting for the storm to pass or the lifts to open.

automatic snow guns to add to the existing 154. This takes snowmaking coverage to nearly 44 hectares in popular areas, ensuring snow quality throughout winter.

The modernisation of the resort's snowmaking equipment makes it nine times more energy efficient but the environmental commitment doesn't stop there. Perisher's grooming fleet's carbon emissions will be offset with Origin Energy.

Thredbo Alpine Resort, the advanced and apres skier's favourite, is already known for its impressive snowmaking systems and has invested \$500,000 in a new Kassbohrer 600 winch cat snow groomer, taking its snow cat fleet to seven. This means more groomed corduroy snow for beginner and intermediate skiers.

But most of the season's new developments lie south of the Victorian border.

Mount Buller, which is less than three hours from Melbourne, is launching Australia's first high-speed six-seat chairlift, the Holden Chairlift Express, on the popular Baldy and Bourke Street runs. Run on 100 per cent GreenPower, the lift will carry 3000 skiers per hour over a kilometre in less than four minutes.

Seasoned Hotham skiers and snowboarders are itching to get into Heavenly Valley this season, with snowmaking equipment introduced on the popular runs of Imagine, Milky Way and Snake Gully.

The resort's management has paid \$3.3 million for the installation of tower guns and hydrant points that run on GreenPower.

For the first time in more than a decade the



Let it snow ... (clockwise from top left) Mount Buller's Bourke Street run; rise above it all on Buller's Hoqua chairlift; for a change of pace try a dog-sled tour at Hotham.

Joyce Brockhoff Hut will open its doors on Black Snake run, serving European-inspired winter warmer dishes. Think goulash, soup and fondue to keep the cold at bay.

But that's not all. The grommets will be treated to new kids' snowmobiling and dog-sled tours and supervised night sessions for seven- to 14-year-olds, no parents allowed. Then from

August 9 - 15 there's the inaugural Hotham Apres Festival, including a week of Hotham Idol and other such frivolities.

The pedestrian-only ski town of Falls Creek, known as the country's prettiest snow village, adds to its visage with the \$50 million Zacamoco-designed St Falls development.

The first stage, with 38 luxury apartments, new

Resorts are betting on a bumper season, and millions of dollars have been spent.

NZ Ski's Coronet Peak, 25 minutes from Queenstown, leads the ski fields with a \$NZ30 million (\$24.5 million) makeover of its tired base lodge.

The old building has gone, replaced by upmarket digs housing function rooms, four restaurants with an upgraded central kitchen, an enlarged

outside deck, expanded creche and new Snowsports School offices.

But that's not all - a further 148 automatic snow guns have been added to the existing 55 to ensure plenty of snow coverage on the resort's 280-hectare ski field.

Across the valley at The Remarkables, Burton Snowboards has developed The Stash, a kilometre-long run that makes use of the mountain's natural terrain with rock wall rides, log jibs, cliff drops and stone hut for jibbing, with no plastic or metal in site. It's only the third in the world of its kind.

The impeccably groomed Cardrona Alpine Resort, a family favourite between Wanaka and Queenstown, is opening a new high-speed detachable quad chair in Captain's Basin, 11 new snow guns in Main Basin, doubling the size of the pizzeria in Captain's Basin and adding three new



Leap of faith taking to the air at Mount Buller.

jumps to the freestyle area in the advanced terrain park. Phew!

Skiers and snowboarders at Wanaka's big mountain Treble Cone will be able to explore more intermediate terrain this season, while at Snow Park freestyle resort, beginner terrain park rats can improve their moves in the new Half Pint Park.

This new dedicated novice park offers thrillseekers the opportunity to progress into the world of freestyle snowboarding and skiing with Park School instruction.

Further north, but still on the South Island, Mount Hutt is an hour from Christchurch. This year the resort has improved snowmaking equipment and introduced a new mini terrain park for beginners. The nearby resort of Porters, the closest ski area to Christchurch, has doubled its snowmaking and the size of its terrain park.

The active volcano of Mount Ruapehu is home to the country's largest combined ski fields on one lift pass, Turoa and Whakapapa. Last year the resorts launched a new six-seater high-speed chair, this year they're opening a child-care centre with snow play for two- to three-year-olds and skiing for four- and five-year-olds.

Queenstown's Winterfestival officially kicks off winter on June 27 for 10 days of mountain mayhem and apres ski fun off the slopes (Air New Zealand is even doing a Winterfestival-themed direct flight from Sydney).

This year features a Winterfestival headquarters known as the Palace, a swanky marquee located downtown.

Program highlights include celebrity comedy debates, gourmet dining, mountain snow events and the Big Night Out music festival with Kiwi band Evermore.

MORE THRILLS CLOSER TO HOME

The ski world loves a helicopter and no more so than in New Zealand. The former snowcat-skiing operation, Mount Potts, has reinvented itself as a heli park. The private ski and snowboard lodge on a working farm is a two-hour drive from Christchurch and offers a stay-and-play experience. Bed down in the basic lodge with a cooked dinner and be airlifted to the peak of Mount Potts in the morning. Rather than pay for a full day, it's \$NZ200 (\$163) for the first lift; then ski down to the mountain-base hut and it's \$NZ75 for every heli lift you decide to take after that. You choose how much you want, and can afford, to ski or snowboard. Queenstown's Southern Lakes Heli Ski has upgraded its private charter heli skiing for those who are cashed up. For \$NZ1400 per person, you and three mates get a private heli ski guide, chopper and pilot, gourmet lunch and as many ski runs as you can fit into a day. Mount Cook will host the World Heli Challenge from August 9 to August 24. After a six-year hiatus, the event is back and features seven of the world's biggest ski brands and seven of the world's snowboard brands entering two athletes each to compete on 50-degree slopes, cliffs and couloirs.