

Poles apart

Heading for the piste? Antipodean resorts are offering discerning types the chance to learn their turns with parallel skiers, writes Rachael Oakes-Ash.

Throw a group of strangers together and they will bond according to age, background and economic standing. Throw a group of strangers together on a ski slope and you have a level playing field, especially if they're all first-timers on the piste. There's nothing like sliding down the baby slopes on your butt to bring people together.

However, even skiers like to stick with their own and resorts in Australia and New Zealand have taken note, offering special events and activities where like can ski with like. No more mixing with the wrong crowd. With categories including female, gay, lawyer, over 30 and men in uniform, the resort activity sheets start to read like personals columns.

Not sure which category you fall into? Read on and book your Antipodean ski trip accordingly.

Ski like a girl No hunky beefcakes on skis here. No ma'am, just a friendly all-female environment where women learn from women. Apparently, women ski differently from men – something to do with the centre of gravity, or the hips.

Thredbo resort, in the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales, Australia, offers a three- and five-day Women's High Intensity Programme (WHIP for short) that emphasises technique rather than strength, with five hours of skiing and tuition daily. Groups are small – no more than seven skiers in each – and everyone receives a free WHIP T-shirt and a video analysis of their performance. There's a party at the end of the course. Three days cost HK\$3,870, with courses starting on July 29, August 5 and September 2. Five-day courses, costing \$5,450, are scheduled for August 8, 15 and 22.

Nearby, Perisher Blue ski resort has a similar three-day schedule, creatively titled The Women's Programme, for intermediate and advanced skiers, running from August 9-11 and August 23-25. Coaching and mountain pass cost \$3,507.

Further south, Falls Creek resort in Victoria runs the original Mim Sodergren Women's Programme from August 1-5. The price of \$5,845 includes individual and group assessment, video analysis, a five-day lift pass, après beverages, a celebratory dinner and loads of girl-to-girl encouragement. Next door at Mount Hotham, L'Oreal Paris has muscled in on the action with Visible Results, a five-day female fest of women-only ski coaching, massages, beauty treatments and pamper packs. Your \$4,458 gets you a lift pass, welcome breakfast, massage, beauty session and pamper pack. The fun takes place from July 25-29.

Chooks (that's Kiwi speak for "chicks") across the Tasman Sea on New Zealand's North Island can enjoy Ladies Week at Whakapapa and Turoa ski fields. Courses run from August 1-4, August 15-18 and September 5-8 with complimentary coffee and muffins on day one. Did I mention the week is sponsored by Lindauer, so you can be sure of some bubbly? All in for \$1,486 a person.

Be a man! Why should gals have all the fun? For male downhill bonding Whakapapa offers Men's Week, sponsored by Speight's Ale. The programme is the same as that for the women, including the muffins. The cost is \$1,486, with the course running from August 15-18.

Teen extreme New Zealand's South Island resort of Cardrona has got it goin' on. That's teen speak for "it's wicked". Phat Freeski and Phat Freeride three-day camps for 13- to 17-year-olds run from July 12, July 19, September 20 and September 27. Drop them off and run for \$895 a teen, not including lift pass.

Act your age Calling all thirtysomethings: Thredbo Masters Programme runs a five-day training camp from July 26. For \$5,560 you get daily training from 7am-1pm and all-day lift passes for five days.

Meanwhile, 50 is the new 40 at Whakapapa and Falls Creek, which cater for the more mature with their Over 50s Ski Weeks. This is a week of dinners and cocktails for those on the right side of 50. Senior instructors put small groups through their paces for four hours each day. Beginners and above are welcomed at Whakapapa from August 22-26 for \$1,486, and at Falls Creek from July 25-30 for \$4,294, which includes video analysis, après ski and lift passes.

Disabled? Not a problem Falls Creek and Cardrona lead the field in adaptive skiing for the disabled, in which specialised equipment is used for private and group lessons. Discounts are available at Falls Creek for Disabled Skiing Association members, with 50 per cent off snowsports school lessons and lift passes. Disabled Snowsports New Zealand members also receive 50 per cent off lift passes at Cardrona, where lessons are one-to-one and cost \$285 an hour, or \$686 for a two-and-a-half-hour lesson.

Big wigs Lawyers will be at the bar at Thredbo for a sundowner on Saturday, August 20. Not content with a simple schuss over the powder, they hurl themselves into competition, from slalom to masters skiing, in a bid to beat each other. Don't race the divorce lawyers, they'll be splitting hairs at the finish. With sponsors including Rossignol and Volvo, there is loads of loot up for grabs and the weekend ends in a brawl – I mean black-tie ball. Participants must arrange their own accommodation. For more information visit www.lawski.com.au.

Rainbow runs All that schussing, carving and grooming would have Carson from *Queer Eye* salivating. Blacks and blues turn to rainbow runs (gay skiing) at Thredbo on July 22-24. For \$8,195, accommodation, breakfast, dinner and lift pass are included. There will be more of the same at Gay Ski Week in Perisher from August 14-21. Expect to pay \$8,195 for accommodation, breakfast, dinner, welcome party and discount lift tickets. Visit www.scog.asn.au for information.

Meanwhile, New Zealand gets in on the act with gay spring skiing in Queenstown, where \$1,657 will get you a gold pass to all the Gay Ski Week events (welcome party, dinners, shows and White Out dance party). The partner hotel is the award-winning Grand Mercure St Moritz. There, \$5,254 buys you seven nights twin-share in a deluxe studio room, a five-day interchangeable lift pass for four ski fields, ski bus pass and free night skiing at Coronet Peak for one night. Visit www.gayskiweeknz.com or www.valuetours.com.au for package details.

Night bird? Ski under the stars on Wednesdays and Saturdays at Mount Hotham, Mount Buller and Falls Creek in Victoria. New South Wales resorts offer the same on Saturday nights at Thredbo and Tuesdays and Saturdays at Perisher Blue. Coronet Peak in New Zealand offers night skiing on Fridays and Saturdays. Lift-pass prices vary.

Fact file All booking information for the specialised programmes can be found at the resort websites.

Australia: accommodation is offered in the ski villages of all Australian resorts so you can ski in and ski out. The ski fields of Victoria are about a four-hour drive from Melbourne; Mount Hotham has its own airport. Visit www.hotham.com.au; www.falls-creek.com.au and www.mtbuller.com.au for further information. The ski fields of New South Wales are a six-hour drive from Sydney or two-and-a-half hours from Canberra. See www.perisherblue.com.au and www.thredbo.com.au for details.

New Zealand: you can't stay on the mountains in New Zealand except in Cardrona, which offers limited accommodation. Car hire is recommended, although ski buses traverse the mountains to neighbouring towns daily.

South Island: Coronet Peak (www.nzski.com/coronet) is a 30-minute drive from Queenstown; Cardrona Alpine Resort (www.cardrona.com) is an hour away.

North Island: Whakapapa (www.whakapapa.co.nz) and Turoa (www.turoa.co.nz) make up the combined resorts of Mount Ruapehu. The town of Okahune, mid-way between Auckland and Wellington airports, is where you'll find all the action at the end of the day.



Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathaypacific.com) and Qantas (www.qantas.com) fly from Hong Kong to Sydney and Melbourne. Qantas offers connecting flights to Hotham and Canberra airports. Cathay Pacific flies daily from Hong Kong to Auckland, with Air New Zealand operating connecting flights to Wellington, Wanaka and Queenstown. For land-only ski packages to Australia visit www.skimax.com.au. For land-only ski packages to New Zealand visit www.skiexpress.com.au. Value Tours offers comprehensive ski packages to both at www.valuetours.com.au.