



SKI sensations

With multimillion-dollar advancements in Australian ski resorts, the only question you'll need to ask this season is where to ski? STORY: RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

Australian ski fields have given the world Alissa Camplin, Dale Begg Smith, Jacqui Cooper and the original Malcolm Milne who was the first Australian to win a World Cup Downhill event in 1969 in France's Val D'Isere.

The average snow sports enthusiast may not be an international champion but with close to 2500 hectares of developed skiable terrain and a three-month snow season we can sure behave like one.

Multimillion-dollar developments in the

ski fields of New South Wales and Victoria and added snowmaking facilities mean that the question in 2006 is not "will I ski?" but "which resort will I ski in this year?"

NEW SOUTH WALES **Thredbo**

Home to Australia's longest ski run, a whopping 5.9 kilometres from Karels T-Bar to Friday Flats, Thredbo has the country's most impressive vertical drop of 675 metres and 480 hectares of skiable terrain. With two million dollars spent on the already

impressive snowmaking system there'll be more snow, more often in 2006.

Thredbo is known for its challenging runs but the truth is all levels are well catered for at Thredbo. Beginners have a dedicated ski area at Friday Flats with both a magic carpet and a chairlift.

Intermediates claim a mammoth 67 percent of the mountain and advanced skiers revel in the steep gradient of both black runs, tree runs and off piste. Three terrain parks also offer varying difficulty for free riders and boarders.



While Thredbo is often seen as an “adults playground” for its sophisticated dining scene, luxury ski-in, ski-out accommodation and intimate cocktail bars, families need not miss out. A childcare centre offers all-day care for bubs too young to ski and the ski school keeps the older ones amused while learning to snow plough. A free shuttle service takes skiers from the Thredbo village to Woodridge and the long-term car park at regular intervals and for first timers Toyota’s Mountain Hosts give free guided ski tours of the hill twice a day.

Perisher

Perisher Blue covers seven mountain peaks with over 1200 skiable hectares

making it Australia’s biggest ski field. There’s easy transition between the levels with the majority of the area dedicated to intermediates. Beginners get a good run with their fare share of green runs once they’ve graduated from ski school.

This field is known as the family friendly field with a crèche and day care as well as ski tubing for little ones who don’t ski. Parents can spend time out with their kids tubing the park under the lights after dark. There’s the annual Spring Carnival with excellent ski deals and hoards of entertainment.

The 95-metre Superpipe leads the country in terrain park and freestyle skiing and the Devil’s playground takes care of the black-run advanced skiers and boarders.

New in 2006 – buy a five-day ski pass from Monday to Friday and ski the Sunday afternoon after 1pm for free. Stay in nearby Jindabyne and catch the Ski Tube to Perisher or stay on snow at a range of accommodation options from budget to lodge to hotel and peruse the bars by moonlight.

**VICTORIA
Mt Buller**

Only three hours drive from Melbourne, Mt Buller is the weekend ski field for most of the city’s snow sports enthusiasts so best go mid week to avoid the city crowds. It’s not as big as Mt Hotham or Falls Creek and has only 180 hectares of resort ski terrain but it’s close proximity to the big smoke means more

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IMAGES: **1** Taking to the powder at Mt Hotham. **2** Hoqua chairlift at Mt Buller (photo by Tony Harrington). **3** Making the most of great conditions at Mt Buller (photo Tony Harrington). **4** Mt Buller mid-season (photo by Mark Ashkanasy). **5** Tricky manoeuvres at Mt Hotham. **6** Kids having a ball at Falls Creek. **7** Fireside entertainment for all ages at Falls Creek.

ski day opportunities for those willing to put in the drive time.

Mt Buller is home to the World Cup Aerials each September and provides an excellent race-training schedule throughout the season to groom future Olympians. Beginners, however, may want to start on Bourke Street, Australia's most popular green ski run before hitting the black runs of Federation and Sun Valley.

La Trobe university has a campus on site with excellent gym facilities and the Mt Buller Village Cinema screening latest release movies nightly. Après action starts at the appropriately titled Après Bar at the Mt Buller Chalet before moving on to the Hotel Pension Grimus Austrian restaurant

for true thigh slapping hospitality. Do not go past the Salzburger Nockerl hazelnut and chocolate soufflé.

Falls Creek

Falls Creek is Victoria's largest ski field (450 hectares) with added heli access for day trips to nearby Mt Hotham and a ski pass that covers both mountains. The prettiest snow village Down Under is pure ski-in, ski-out when the snow's falling which means no schlepping of ski equipment at the end of a long day.

This is ego-skiing country, wide open groomed runs that make everyone feel like a ski guru while Kat Skiing gives black diamond advanced skiers access to

neighbouring Mt McKay and the powder bowls of Rocky Knolls and Dam Site.

Littlies are well catered for at Falls with the daredevil wooded Fox Trail purpose built for mini ski hounds. The first resort to build a superpipe for free riders and skiers, Falls Creek maintains purpose-built advanced terrain parks in Castle Park and a beginner park at Drover's Dream.

The village's 28 bars are open for après come sundown; for a vodka cocktail at Astra, a cold climate wine at chic Huski Lodge's The Produce Store or a cleansing ale and live music at The Man Hotel. Chow down for gourmet dining at Mulch before a movie at the laid back couch cinema, Glo.



Mt Hotham

Hotham ski village is perched on top of the mountain, meaning the first run of the morning is the one down to the chairlift. This is snow gum territory with gullies and chutes and valleys to challenge the hardy with secret powder stashes in the back country for the truly daring. Learn to ski at Hotham and you can ski anywhere.

Drop the kids at Snowzone in the morning for kids ski school and a purpose built day care centre and head to Heavenly Valley for first tracks.

Parents can rest easy as the MILO Helmet program means all kids at Snowzone get complimentary helmets.

The village is divided into the main village and Jack Frost and Davenport Village with a free shuttle service between each. Those

seeking winter solace head to the alpine village of Dinner Plain, 10 kilometres into the valley. Home to a new six-million-dollar day spa and gymnasium with Japanese onsen this season, Dinner Plain is easily accessed by a regular bus service day and night.

Ski the Orchard and Keogh's at Hotham for a quintessential Australian alpine experience, snow laden gum trees provide gladed runs and the truly daring tackle Mary's Slide, one of the steepest pitches in the country. The Heli ski link to Falls Creek means access to both fields on the same day.

For tired princesses Hotham has Australia's premium altitude spa, The White Spa adjacent to fine dining experience, The White Room, for true winter chic. Those with energy to burn end up at the General Store for serious après. ■

TRAVELtips

TRAVEL TIPS: The Australian Ski season opens on the Queens birthday weekend in June and usually finishes in October depending on the amount of snow around. Best times to go for value are July and September as August is peak time with peak prices. Last minute bookings can always be made due to cancellations that occasionally occur. So don't let timing deter you from an impromptu weekend on the slopes.

WHERE TO STAY: In Thredbo try www.skiinskiout.com.au for the mountains only true on snow accommodation in one to five bedroom self contained accommodation. Call Cath or Alison on (02) 6457 7030. Perisher Valley Hotel has prime location in Perisher Blue for bookings phone (02) 6459 4455 or visit www.perisherblue.com.au for last minute package deals. Mt Hotham has a range of accommodation from the intimate luxury of Zirkys to the self contained Sambucca and Schnapps apartments. Call 1800 468 426 for suitable accommodation bookings. Falls Creek is lodge heaven from budget to the upmarket OokHuski Lodge. Contact Falls Creek reservations 1800 45 35 25. Slope side lodging is available at Mt Buller Chalet next to Bourke St in Mt Buller visit www.mtbullerchalet.com.au

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION: Visit Tourism NSW www.tourismnsw.gov.au; Ski Victoria www.skivic.com.au; Thredbo: www.thredbo.com.au; Perisher: www.perisherblue.com.au; Falls Creek: www.falls creek.com.au; Hotham: www.hotham.com.au; Mt Buller: www.mtbuller.com.au

