

travel

with Stephen McCarty



The powder puff girls

Ski resorts are offering women a chance to improve their turns in the company of their own kind. Rachael Oakes-Ash joins some other 'chicks with sticks' and learns to slide with pride.

As temperatures drop in the Northern Hemisphere and snow begins to fall, thoughts turn to carving up the slopes of Colorado, Canada and Europe. I'm well prepared, because during the north's down time, I headed south for the winter with the other "chicks".

My hips are made for child bearing, which is why I ski funny and probably why you don't see too many pregnant women whizzing down mountains. It's all in the Q angle, which is technical speak for wide load, or so my ski instructor tells me. It's Women's Week at ski resorts Mount Hotham and Falls Creek, in Victoria, Australia, and I'm participating at both. Thankfully, one week precedes the other, because even my wide load won't reach across both mountains.

If you've ever skied with a man, then Women's Week makes sense; unless you are a man. Guys throw themselves down mountains with brute force, spurred on by the competitive drive to be first to reach the bottom. Women think too much about it, worrying how we look as we make our turns, if we unplugged the iron, if our butts look big in these ski pants.

Generally, skiing is a male sport. You have only to visit Hotham's General Store (and pub) after 10pm to realise this. It is the only place in Australia where there is a queue

for the men's toilets and none for the women's. Mental note: spend more time at the General Store.

Women's ski weeks have evolved because most chicks with sticks find themselves hitting an intermediate rut and not advancing. A lifetime of male ski instructors and male partners screaming at us to get down the hill has turned us off. Group ski instruction tends to follow the male philosophy and forgets about the positive ego-stroking we women need to achieve our goals. "That's it daahling, you can do it, looking fabulous, bravo!" works far better than, "Move that butt, hurry up, haven't you got it yet?"

Enter Lisa Kilpatrick and her band of female ski instructors for the L'Oreal Visible Results Women's Week. They promise to take 28 women out of their comfort zone – but in a safe and loving environment – and on to the next level. I lie on my feedback form, talking up my French Alps experience, which consisted of more p****d than piste. As a result, I find myself in the top group of four – with five serious women with helmets. Some of our group have been skiing this mountain since they were tots; now is not the time to tell them this is my second season. I have nothing but a couple of Heidi plaits to frame my 30-plus cranium and wonder if I will be welcomed into the fold. I would never have dreamed of voluntarily acquiring a

helmet head but the desire to fit in sees me rushing into the rental shop for a hard hat in fetching red.

The day starts at 10am with two hours of instruction, then lunch on the mountain followed by two more hours and some video analysis. Video analysis makes me feel like a world champion until I see the playback and notice that Q angle again. It's all good fun and the women in the group are supportive, cheering as they make it down the drop-offs.

When I was growing up, skiing was only for the rich kids, who returned to school each September with tanned faces, white eyes and the glow of the entitled. Yet there are more than just the entitled in this group: there are single working mothers taking a break with women they've never met, best friends from out of state catching up and a new divorcee gaining her balance. All have a common focus: to get down the mountain in style.

There is no style without diamonds and while I talk carats, Kilpatrick is talking double. She talks pitch, gradient and how to bend the knees, and we soon learn double diamonds are far from a girl's best friend. Kilpatrick's absolute belief in me and my fellow skiers motivates me to believe in myself, or at least my legs, as I begin my jump turn over the side. To make it down in one



piece would have been a miracle three days ago, but it is par for the course come lunchtime.

On the second-last day, I'm invited to a one-on-one ski session with world champion extreme free skier Andrea Binning. No problem, I say to myself; I am a legendary woman skier, repeating my week's mantra. I would like to say I beat her down the slope and impressed her with my aerial jumps off exposed rocks, but I blinked and missed her. Still, it's a proud moment; a week ago I would not have braved the run down, which I followed in her tracks.

The nights are spent celebrating my new-found prowess by shaking ski-tuned dance legs on the General Store's tables with my fellow felines, confidence flowing through our veins. The test comes on my last day with an invitation to spend the afternoon skiing with Winter Olympian Marcus Lovett. He's brought two mates along for company, a Val Kilmer lookalike and his mate Howie. I check my lip gloss and the gender ski-off begins. It is important to mention at this point that it's three against one.

Marcus and his men give a rapid-fire lesson in the meaning of off-piste, leading me astray and among trees that shouldn't be there. True to form they race down the



hill, hardly taking a breath to note my graceful technique as I carve up the slope. Then comes the infamous Mary's Slide: a wall of solid snow. All my skills from the week are called upon. I visualise myself skiing perfectly, map out my route in my head, close my eyes and see the movie before making my first turn, just as Kilpatrick advised.

With my chin out and down over the bottom ski, my

downhill foot steering the turn, my upper body is a core of steel and I swear I can hear my fellow females cheering me on as I make it to the bottom. The men? They're way behind me checking out my Q angle, of which I am now mighty proud.

Okay, the Olympian made it down before me, but I never said he won a medal.

Women's Week programmes allow female skiers to improve their skills in a more relaxed atmosphere.

Getting there: Cathay Pacific (www.cathayair.com) flies to Melbourne.

Further details: women's ski weeks are held at Mount Hotham and Falls Creek, in Victoria, Australia, in July and August. Choose Mount Hotham for ski challenges, its own airport and make-up pamper packs, and Falls Creek for wide runs, champagne and legendary ski instructor Jessie Pitt. See www.hotham.com.au or www.fallscreek.com.au.

Women's Week at Whistler Blackcomb, in British Columbia, Canada, is part of the Women on the Edge ski programme, which aims to break the powder ceiling.

See www.whistlerblackcomb.com. Steamboat of Colorado (www.steamboat.com) runs a three-day Women's Clinic once a month from December to March. Vail, also in Colorado, offers a three-day Her Turn women's ski workshop twice a season, with lots of après-ski socialising. See www.vail.com.

For the snow bunny with six weeks to spare, Canada's Fernie Alpine Ski Resort (www.skifernie.com) runs the You Go Girl programme three days a week from January. Jackson Hole, Wyoming, offers ski camps in January and March for powder princesses. See www.jacksonhole.com.