

The ski season is here at last. Rachael Oakes-Ash helps you choose a resort

SKIING is a subjective sport. Even the snow tribe is divided between boarders and skiers, fans of on-piste groomed corduroy and seekers of off-piste terrain.

But powder lovers, free-heelers and cross-country skiers alike all agree: winter is their favourite season.

Given the choice of more than 14 Australian and New Zealand ski fields, the only question in 2006 is: which one?

Australian fields open this weekend. Snow-making is well under way after an early pre-season dump, and more is forecast.

Across the Tasman, Mt Dobson, a private club field near Christchurch in the South Island, has been open since May 29. The larger fields open on different weekends this month.

Each resort offers something different.

In Australia, Mt Hotham is the only field with its own airport. The village is on the snow ridge, which means the first run of the morning is down to the chairlift to access some of the most challenging terrain.

Last year the White Spa opened, which is one of only three pure ski-in, ski-out alpine spas in Australia.

Stand by for the future at Hotham's Dinner Plains Village, where \$6 million has been pumped into developing a plush hotel-spa complex complete with Japanese onsen (public bath house).

A helicopter service links Hotham and Falls Creek (www.falls creek.com.au) for daily skiing, and lift passes cover both mountains.

Falls Creek is car-free and by far Australia's most scenic snow village. Runs are wide, open and groomed, and 28 bars allow awesome apres activity for those without offspring.

Kids and kidults will love the new Snow Bungy trampoline.

For a true alpine experience, go to Falls Creek.

Both Hotham and Falls offer a five-day women's program for chicks on sticks.

Mt Buller has spent \$1 million on new snowmaking equipment for this season.

Wireless broadband has been introduced across the resort in case you want to check emails mid-run.

Freeriders are well catered for, with three new parks.



In New South Wales, choose between the steeps of Thredbo, the rolling, groomed runs of that family fave, Perisher Blue, or the intimate beginners' field at Selwyn.

Thredbo remains the skier's mountain, having the longest run in Australia and New Zealand: the thigh-burning, 5.9km Super Trail and more than 675m of vertical.

Perisher cements its reputation for perfectly groomed slopes this season with a third 350 Sherpa Winch Cat groomer worth \$400,000.

Snowboarders will rejoice at the 95m superpipe with 5m walls, a freeriders' park, rail park and fun park for learners.

Across the Tasman, skiing is above the treeline, so don't expect the runs through the snowgum glades that you get in Australia.

Traditionally, the fields of New Zealand are not ski-in, ski-out. The only commercial ski field you can stay on is Cardrona.

In the South Island, stay at Queenstown, Wanaka, or Methven for Mt Hutt.

In the North Island, stay at Ohakune for Turoa and Whakapapa.

No matter what the forecast, New Zealand ensures snow this year with major upgrades of snowmaking systems at all South Island fields.

Coronet Peak, 30 minutes from



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Queenstown, has added 35 per cent to its snowmaking terrain.

Across the valley, The Remarkables has extended snowmaking from the original beginners' slopes to include intermediate and advanced terrain.

Previously "all-natural" Cardrona, midway between Queenstown and Wanaka, will have snowmaking for the first time.

At Wanaka, Treble Cone is in on the act with 50 per cent more snowmaking and new, super-wide, groomed trails.

It's a fair trek to Mt Ruapehu, an active volcano in the central North Island, but it's well worth it, com-

binning the country's largest ski fields of Whakapapa and Turoa.

Ruapehu gets the most snow and has the longest season, though its exposed position in the middle of a plain means extreme weather can set in very quickly.

Most ski tour operators have accommodation, transport, lift passes, lift rentals and lessons on offer for Australian and New Zealand resorts, including the smaller club fields of New Zealand and Snow Park boarders' mountain near Wanaka.

For a package to suit you, try:
Ski Max, www.skimax.com.au
Value Tours, www.valuetours.com.au
Ski Express, www.skiexpress.com.au