

The Guide Snow driving

Making tracks

Make sure your trip to the ski fields is a safe, enjoyable one, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.

IT'S WINTER school holidays and you could be driving the grommets to the snow. The big names of Thredbo Alpine Resort and Perisher Blue and their boutique cousins, Selwyn Snowfields and Charlotte Pass, are a 500-kilometre drive from Sydney. Sounds easy? It is, if you're prepared.

The car

Ideally you'd like to take a four-wheel-drive for road conditions that may be icy, but not everyone has an SUV.

Make sure you have your car serviced, or at least your tyres checked for sufficient tread and your brakes for fluid, before you go. It's important the battery is at full power, as once they hit freezing point batteries work at just over half their former capacity.

Add some antifreeze to the radiator to stop it cracking. You may also want to put some methylated spirits into the water container for the windscreen. This will ensure the water won't freeze should you need to use it.

Don't think just because you have a four-wheel-drive that your tyres will be

safe, either. On my recent trip to Thredbo I assumed my standard four-wheel-drive traction would be enough, I was wrong. Thankfully for me, and others around me, my wheels just spun on the snow while trying to park.

Remember to switch the car over to four-wheel drive once you're in the village or beforehand when the roads are icy.

If you do hit ice on the road change down your gears and drive slower to ensure the traction breaks through the thin ice and the tyres remain in contact with the road. Drop gears to slow down, rather than braking.

You will need to carry two sets of snow chains in your car during winter in the Kosciuszko National Park or risk a \$200 fine.

Snow chains can be hired at most petrol stations in Cooma, a little over an hour's drive from the snowfields.

Rhythm Snow Sports is open 24 hours on Sharp Street on the left hand side as you drive in to Cooma and you can pre-order your snow chains on their website (www.rhythm.net.au). They cost \$30 for three days to \$45 for seven days.



Tyres

Tyre pressure is important when using snow chains, they should be 25kPa higher than normal. There will be snow-chain fitting bays on the side of the road with attendants that can help you if snow chains are required.

Always fit snow chains on the driving wheels – front wheels for front-wheel cars, rear wheels for rear-wheel drive and front wheels in four-wheel-drives. When driving with

snow chains on, stick to 40kmh or less or risk damaging your car.

The drive

After all the preparation, it's time to enjoy the drive. Grab some portable DVD players or even your laptop with sets of headphones and some movies for the kids in the back.

A good selection of driving music is a must for those up the front. We sang our way through Meatloaf's greatest

hits, Pink's latest hits and got down and dirty with Amy Winehouse before we'd even hit Canberra, but we didn't have kids to attend to.

The drive will take you anything from 5½ hours to seven hours depending on the traffic, so long as you stick to the speed limits which are clearly marked along the way.

How many stops you make depends on how many drivers you have, but it's recommended you break every two hours to reduce driver fatigue.



ON THE ROAD: (from far left) A four-wheel-drive is ideal for the slippery conditions; snow chains are a must for all vehicles and can be hired in most Cooma petrol stations; Lake Jindabyne. Pictures: GREG NEWINGTON, NEIL NEWITT

The route

When leaving from Sydney make your way onto the M5 from Mascot and take the freeway to Canberra.

You can stop at the mammoth American-style rest stops with all the usual fast-food suspects or take the five-minute detour into Goulburn at the two-hour mark. Most folk head to the neon lights of Paragon cafe for its retro velvet booths and gateaux selection. We chose the Greengrocer Cafe on Clifford Street in Goulburn. It's a mix of fruit shop, delicatessen and cycle shop all in one.

If you're looking for cheap ski clothes you'll find them from Goulburn down to the Snowy Mountains, so make sure you add an hour's extra drive time if you're in the mood for burning plastic. Bypass Canberra, taking the signs to Cooma. It should take about two hours from Goulburn to Cooma.

Pit stop

Pick up your snow chains in Cooma and if you want a decent coffee then stop at the Lott Cafe on Sharp Street at the end of town. It's got a bakery, so it's worth stocking up.

Next stop is Jindabyne, but you can drive right through.

We pre-ordered our rental skis through Larry Adler's premium service. It's all done over the phone and all you have to do is go in with your ski boot. Your skis are ready with the appropriate settings and are adjusted to your boot length and, voila, two minutes later you're out of the store and back in the car.

We did, however, wish we had taken the time to spend up at the supermarket as ski towns are notorious for both higher prices and limited produce.

Park fees

From Jindabyne it's 30 to 45 minutes to your ski field of choice. Take some cash for the National Park entry fee. It's \$27 a day during winter or \$190 for a year.

Arrival

Thredbo had experienced some magical snow and we drove in to twinkling town lights and moonlit white stuff on the mountain.

Thankfully we had a private underground car spot at Ski In Ski Out (www.skiinskiout.com.au) but if you have to park in the public car park or outside on the road make sure you park your car in gear and leave the handbrake off. Handbrakes have been known to snap when left on. Now your car has got there in one piece, let's hope you manage to get down the ski hill the same. Happy schussing.



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