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EPIC SNOW ADVENTURES of the WORLD

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Experience the world's most thrilling winter adventures



MOM-AND-POP MOUNTAINS

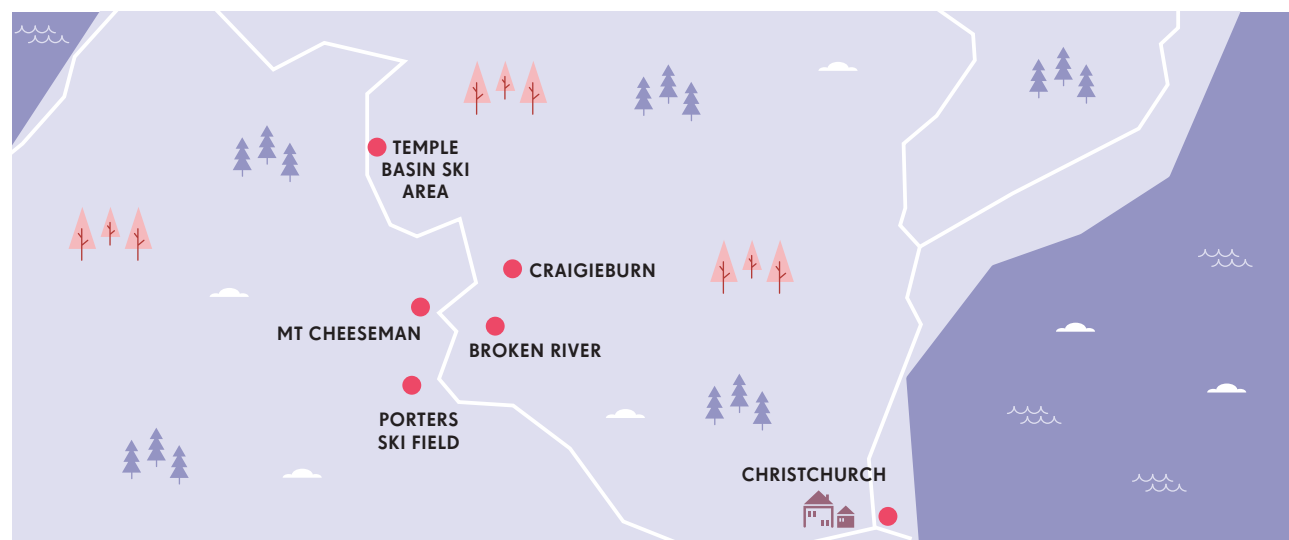
For a skiing or riding experience that's more quirky and quiet than at the famous resorts, it doesn't get much better than New Zealand's tiny, family-owned 'club' ski fields.

Rope tows are an endangered species. But they are cheap, fast and simple. A rope moves in a continual loop, powered as often as not by some ancient tractor engine or similar. The idea is to grab the moving rope with one hand until you are moving with the rope. Then you flick what is known as a 'nutcracker' under the rope, clamp it down by holding on – and up you go. The strain is taken by the nutcracker being attached to you by a belt or climbing harness. It all feels a little overly complicated and outdated, but such is the charm of New Zealand's 'club' ski fields.

The major New Zealand resorts are well known for a Southern Hemisphere winter blast. But scattered across the Southern Alps

are a dozen or more small areas whose charms and challenges are spread through whisper, not billboard blast. They offer a very different, very varied experience, laced with infectious Kiwi charm. Most are owned and run by volunteer clubs and, while the members might get cheaper prices, all are open to skiers and boarders, and still offer superb value.

The Selwyn Six – Porters, Temple Basin, Broken River, Craigieburn Valley, Mt Cheeseman and Mt Olympus – hide in the mountains west of Christchurch, the second largest city in NZ. They are close enough for a day out; you could take in two or three in a weekend; or a week's road trip will see you cracking the full half dozen, which is



exactly what I had in mind (there is also an option, for those with the skill and fitness, to ski tour between four of them).

Porters leads you gently into the delights and is a grand place to start. With rare easy road access, a quad chairlift and a line of three T-bars stepping up the mountain, a vast area opens up for all levels of skiers, whether they're cruising the cat track taking in the views, or plunging down seemingly bottomless Big Mama. Jason, an old biking mate, led me into Crystal Valley, a near 3000ft (900m) 'slackcountry' descent of mountain face and gully that delivered us to within a spit of Porters Lodge, the only accommodation nearby.

The following day, I went on to Temple Basin, which is hidden, even by club field standards, and is the closest ski area to the main divide of the Southern Alps. I clambered up a snowy, at times icy, trail into the clouds. After 90 minutes and 1600ft (500m) of altitude gain, I found the ski area sitting in the mist. Fortunately, a goods lift carries your luggage to the heavens. Nothing is easy about Temple Basin, neither access nor skiing. It is protected by an amphitheatre of mountains and pays its respects to the sentinel of Mt Rolleston opposite. Rope tows here probe into bowls unseen from the lodges and hiking between them is the deal. A band, The Eastern, entertained us on the divide and the party went on until long after the sun had set in the western sky and, for some, almost until it rose again in the east. The next morning, the lifts were unsurprisingly quiet and the snow was firm. Laurence and I found powder stashes down Bills and Cassidy, and laughed at the madness and beauty of it all.

Next, we were on to Broken River, another 'walk-in' ski area. The ski field has a rather funky tramway that, when it works, transports skiers and gear. If not, it's a 20-minute trudge up the access road. Getting to the rope tows from the three accommodation lodges here involves a hike up a long line of wooden steps to the Access Tow. Thus, mastery of the rope is a prerequisite just to reach the day lodge and main ski area.

The day lodge is central to the vibe at Broken River and, as with most of these areas, it's totally accepted that some people will bring their own food and drink. If you want to fire up the barbecue on the deck, go for it. After lunch, steep runs were had off Nervous Knob, long drops into Allan's Basin and much fun off Main Tow. Then, with fresh snow and improving visibility, it was run after run down the ridge to the base of Access Tow, hollering at our good fortune.

Just along the Craigieburn Range from Broken River is Craigieburn Valley itself. After driving up another winding, icy access road, our plan was to stay overnight, ski some runs in the morning and then tour along the range to Mt Olympus. In the bar that night, club president Phil told us how, decades earlier, some members had lovingly built their own T-bar lift, eschewing the commercially available versions. Piece by piece it was transported to Craigieburn, then installed. Dramatically, after less than a season, the towers buckled. So now Craigieburn defiantly remains a grooming-free and rope-tow-only area.

With more snow overnight and ropes to unfreeze, Craigieburn opened late that morning. We traversed beneath Hamilton Peak



WHITE KNUCKLE

Driving to many of the ski fields in New Zealand is part of the adventure – and that applies to many of the main resorts too. On narrow and tight dirt roads, steep corners abound and crash barriers don't. Skiers and boarders who wouldn't blink before a double black may close their eyes as their car teeters on the edge of some icy switchback. 4WD hire cars will give you some confidence, but snow chains are often required. Shuttle buses may be preferable for your own sanity and security.

"The ski field has a funky tramway that, when it works, transports skiers and gear"



© SAM WORSF / Selwyn NZ & © MATT CHERUBINO / Selwyn NZ



Clockwise from top: off-piste in the Selwyn region; stoked at Cheeseman; après at Mt Olympus. Previous page: Broken River rope tow



and boot-packed up onto Hamilton Saddle. A sublime run in deep powder took us back into Allan's Basin and on to Broken River in time for pizza. Soon we were on our way again, taking the main tow up and then booting up a peak overlooking Yukon Bowl. We were tempted, but were late and Mt Cheeseman was calling. A narrow ridge, which would be challenging in bad weather or ice, led us to the climb of Mt Wall and across to Mt Cockayne.

Mt Cheeseman, with two T-bars, is a family favourite. There were no rope tows to deal with, so the only nutcracker required was for the walnut bowl on our dinner table. Alas, we didn't get to ski Cheeseman at its best, as more thick, icy fog wrapped the mountain the following morning. The weather also thwarted our plan to continue touring across the range to Mt Olympus. After a few blind runs, we left early in the afternoon to drive to Mt Olympus instead.

The road to Olympus wound through rocky hills and past a sign that instructed: 'Snow chains and courage should be carried at all times'. Upwards we went on the narrow road, where occasional crumbling edges, snow and fading light added further interest. The Top Hut, the accommodation lodge, was perched halfway up the slopes, necessitating a journey on two rope tows with all our gear. The next morning, in clearing skies, the two upper rope tows gave up some beautiful skiing before we hiked up Little Alaska for a soft snow return to lunch. We gobbled down more runs before boot-packing up to the Sphinx for one final off-piste celebration. Partway down the access road, we saw another sign, perhaps less useful than the first. 'Back to Reality', it proclaimed. **HK**



DIRECTIONS

Best time to go // The season generally runs from July to late September. August and September are usually reliable but check the snow reports and prepare to move around.

Gear required // You'll get everything from sublime powder to savage ice, so be prepared. If you plan any backcountry excursions then take suitable skis/boards and safety gear.

Nearest town // Christchurch is 1-2 hours from the Selwyn Six. Springfield is the last town you'll pass before you hit the mountains; Darfield the closest with a ski shop.

Getting there // Christchurch has an international airport with direct flights from Australia and elsewhere, plus regular connections to Auckland, NZ's largest international airport.

Where to stay // All six of the fields have limited accommodation, usually a mix of catered and self-catered.

Things to know // The Southern Alps are big mountains with variable weather and the inherent dangers all such ranges possess. In winter, avalanche awareness is essential.

MORE LIKE THIS KIWI CLUB FIELDS

ROUNDHILL

Twenty-five miles (40km) from the town of Tekapo, Roundhill's two T-bars and a platter (overhead tow) access some wide-open runs, ensuring it's a real family favourite. Many park up to the snow, with their tailgates open, setting up barbecues, tables and chairs for the day. But, as the Roundhill website puts it: 'For the more adventurous, head up the world's longest and steepest rope tow and see what Australasia's biggest vertical drop (2569ft/783m) is all about.' The Heritage rope tow goes on and on. It's nearly 5000ft (1500m) long, averages 30 degrees and tops out at 6998ft (2133m), opening up some steep, challenging runs, contrasting with the mellowness of much of the ski field. The most spectacular picture-book views – over aquamarine Lake Tekapo to Aoraki/Mt Cook, New Zealand's highest mountain – demand a drink at the tiny Von Brown cafe.

Nearest town // Tekapo

ŌHAU

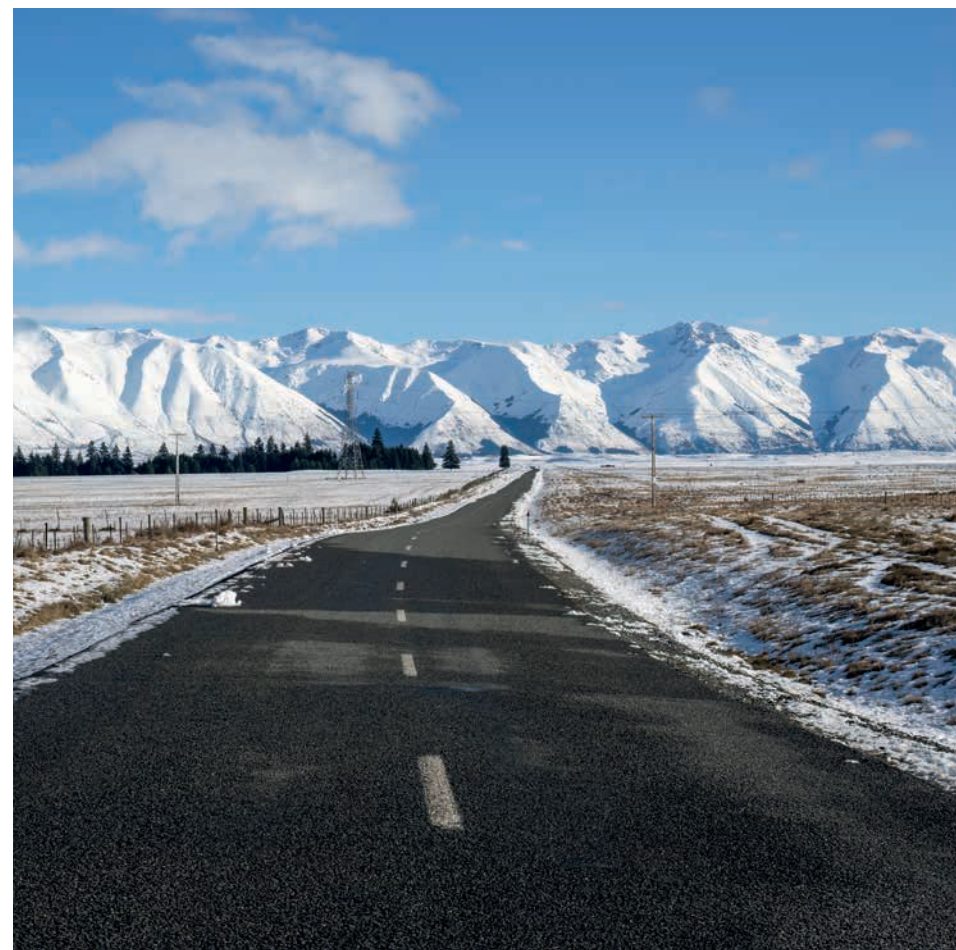
Privately owned rather than club run, but with a similar vibe, Ōhau never fails to provide a fine stay and a full stomach, summer or winter (at the Lake Ōhau Lodge, order the pumpkin and orange soup followed by salmon on potato bake with caramelised onions, and plum cake with raspberry sauce for desert). Such indulgence demands a decent workout. And with a handy 10in (25cm) of fresh stuff dropping on Ōhau the day before, I timed my visit well. Access is focused around a double chairlift heading up the guts of the bowl. There's plenty to keep you busy inbounds, but for those well equipped with skins, safety gear and a knowledge of sidecountry excursions. Just watch out for the famous Ōhau rocks that can ruin both run and base. The vistas from the ridge on a blue-sky day are mindblowing. Hemi's run, named after a local Māori ski tourist, drops into a series of bowls and narrow valleys, finishing on the access road just below Ōhau.

Nearest town // Omarama

FOX PEAK

Fox Peak, on the Two Thumb Range, is Kiwi club skiing in the raw. When we visited, a tiny wooden 'Ski field' arrow, with lichen growing on it, showed the way and our car was soon bumping up a farm track, dodging heavily pregnant ewes. In fading light we arrived at Fox Lodge, a proper old mountain hut, perched below the ski area. The Southern Alps were cooking up a storm but weather is localised in these parts and when one ski area gets a dump, another nearby may get nothing. Fox had been unlucky this time and the snow was thinning, but I could see the potential of the three fast-moving rope tows. A tiny hut serves as both ticket office and snack bar in a ski area staffed entirely by club volunteers – and it is usually only open on weekends. A hike up to 7650ft (2350m) Fox Peak offers excellent long off-piste runs into North and South Basin, with 3200ft (1000m) of vertical to the base station. We were among perhaps only 40 people there on a peak season Sunday.

Nearest town // Fairlie



Clockwise from top: epic runs, epic views atop Ōhau; the T-bar at Roundhill; Lake Ōhau road and the peaks of Ōhau

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AN ALPINE ODYSSEY IN OZ

Australia's Main Range is one of the finest stretches for multi-day backcountry touring in the Southern Hemisphere – but it offers much more than just a ski tour.

I strapped skis and a carbon violin case to my already bulging pack. It was late on a Sunday afternoon, mid-September, misty and drizzling, in Guthega's car park at the road's end. Winter had played its own tune that season with snowstorms few and far between. The season of 2020, like the year of 2020, was less than average. A ridiculously warm September had played havoc with the snow and a virus had done the same with humanity. Pete, Richard, Mal and I were eager to escape.

Hiking on grass and wet snow, we moved up towards the Main Range, Australia's highest ground. Crossing the swing bridge over the Snowy River, the violin case's strap caught on a stanchion. Fortunately, I caught it before it dropped into the swollen river. More fortunately, I was not carrying Richard's priceless Guarneri concert piece. Once across, we put on our skis and continued, almost until dark, to camp below Mt Twynam, the bronze medallist among Australia's tallest mountains.

The bad weather blew itself out overnight and blue sky greeted beanie-clad heads emerging from tiny tents. Strong coffee brewed as a stream of enthusiastic skiers passed our camp en route to the tops. Fully caffeinated and with porridge lining our stomachs, Pete, Richard, Mal and I skied first to Twynam's summit before taking a steep, still-icy gully down to Blue Lake, mainland Australia's largest glacial lake. We picked our way around the rim of the lake's thinning ice, which, in the thaw of spring, can appear as true blue as its name suggests. Although avalanches are uncommon in Australia, a large slide had recently brought car-sized snow blocks cascading to the lake's edge.

Sticking skins back onto skis, we climbed back onto the defining ridge of the Main Range. From here, waters flow west into the greens

of the state of Victoria and on down the Murray River, starting its 1550-mile (2500km) journey to the sea; or east towards the browns of the Monaro plains in New South Wales to continue down the Snowy River. Australia's highest land, on the world's flattest continent, is a very special place. A wombat might shuffle nonchalantly across the snow and, while he does, a pair of colourful parrots flash across the marbled, ice-rimmed trunk of a snowgum, surely the most beautiful trees in the world to ski among.

For decades I've loved that colour contrast, the rain shadow effect so often blocking moisture from reaching further into the Monaro. But, in this winter of 2020, I felt a different contrast. Each time





FROM THE ASHES

In the far northern reaches of what is now Kosciuszko National Park sit a few ruined heritage buildings. This is the town of Kiandra, torched and blackened in Australia's fiery Black Summer of 2019-20. The fires also destroyed the nearby Selwyn Snow Resort. Kiandra, a frozen but bustling gold-rush town in the mid 1800s, held ski races as early as 1861 when the Kiandra Snow Shoe Club was formed, believed to be the world's oldest ski club. Selwyn Snow Resort, meanwhile, has been rebuilt.



"Two years later, I embarked on my Alpine Odyssey, a second winter traverse of the Main Range"

© Monica Bertolazzi / Gettyimages; juancaanchehera / Shutterstock

I stood on those high peaks, I felt both lucky and guilty to be in one of my favourite places while, 6500ft (2000m) below, Victoria sat out the winter in a grim lockdown. For a while, its capital, Melbourne, would claim the dubious title of the most locked-down city in the world. It was a poignant trip in more ways than one.

I'd started guiding Pete in the backcountry over 20 years ago. He had become a great friend and a great supporter of my various expeditions and fundraisers. His enthusiasm was impressive and endless. Regardless of time or temperature, he'd be out to dance in the full moon shadows on Mt Townsend's slopes, or to ski to Mt Tate's summit for sunset.

The first time I took Pete out on the Main Range was a couple of seasons after I'd skied nearly the full 400-mile (650km) length of this Alpine country in 1997. It was an auspicious start as we lay in our sleeping bags for 48 hours while a blizzard raged, eventually bailing when the wind dropped a touch. Once, only once, I heard him complain. Indeed, I even sensed panic in his voice when he realised I might have skimmed a little on the quantity of cheap red wine I'd carried for our ski camp. Quality is of no consequence when you have a foam mat as your garden seat, the peaks of the Sentinel and Watsons Crags as backyard rockeries and the billowing cumulus below your feet as an unkempt lawn.

Navigating carefully on a compass bearing during that trip, we scabbled our way across the Ramshead Range to the top chairlift station at Thredbo resort, the southern gateway to the Main Range. Then, descending towards the village, I slipped and slid 30ft down the hill, skittling Pete below me. The guide taking out the client is never a good look.

Pete was a passionate snowboarder. I'd actively discouraged him from wasting his time, and mine, on a splitboard. But in more recent years, due to much improved technology, I couldn't resist. For sure, I'd laugh as he hiked or hopped along or found himself too low on a long traverse. But seeing him ride, hearing him holler on the steep stuff off Carruthers Peak, made me laugh too, in a more respectful way.

On our 2020 trip, Pete, Richard, Mal and I continued along the range towards the Western Faces – an array of ridges, gullies and creeks that drops off the top of the Main Range and offers the most challenging and extensive backcountry descents in Australia. We dropped runs on glorious, sun-softened snow, then, from the summit of Mt Anderson, Richard swapped ski poles for violin bow. As a serenade to skiing, in surely one of the finest venues he had ever played, he took off, linking turn after tune after turn. Here was one of the world's most famous violinists playing Vivaldi's 'Winter' to the wind.

Two years later, in 2022, I embarked on what I called my Alpine Odyssey, a second winter traverse of the mountainous land a quarter of a century after my first. A journey crossing the country of nine traditional owners (Aboriginal groups), through three states and territories. In 1997, I didn't see or speak to another soul for the first 18 days of that winter traverse. The first person I met told me about

the death of Princess Diana. Twenty-five years on, the day after I finished my latest journey, the world was tuned into the burial of her mother-in-law, Queen Elizabeth II. Soon after, my own mother-in-law, Eira, whose name means snow in Welsh, passed away.

This time I was repeating the route, with the added twist of diverting to ski at each of the 11 snow resorts dotted across the Alps. When I arrived at Thredbo at the beginning of September 2022, I was 40 days and nights into my journey. I had planned to meet Pete there, to ski the resort and then head off to summit 7310ft (2228m) Mt Kosciuszko, Australia's highest mountain. But Pete was not well and did not show up.

It's a hot summer day as I write this, just a couple of months since I completed my 50-day Alpine Odyssey. Through the window I can see distant snowdrifts still clinging to the southern and eastern gullies of the Main Range. Earlier this same day I penned a eulogy for Pete, who was taken not by the C word that has held sway over our world these past few years, but by that other rotten one. 'Carpe Diem [seize the day],' people often say after such losses. It actually translates more fully as make the most of the present and give little thought to the future. Perhaps we lovers of snow should better say, 'Carpe Ski'em'. **HK**

Clockwise from top: the tor at Mt Kosciuszko; mingling with the masses at Thredbo. Previous page: Thredbo ski resort



DIRECTIONS

Best time to go // The most reliable time for snow is late July into September. Backcountry touring on the Main Range runs well into October; and there are gully runs into November.

Gear required // Cross-country skis and telemark set-ups once dominated. But lighter AT gear and the rise of the splitboard has drawn new groups of skiers and boarders here.

Nearest town // Access points include the resorts of Thredbo, Guthega and tiny Charlotte Pass. All feed 20 miles (30km) or so down to the snowline hub town of Jindabyne.

Getting there // Jindabyne is roughly a two-hour drive from Australia's capital, Canberra, and five hours from Sydney.

Where to stay // All the resorts have accommodation, but this can be hard to find in peak season. Jindabyne is a good base. Up on the Main Range, tents are the only option.

Things to know // Day forays onto the Main Range are possible, but allow three days for a full traverse; much longer to enjoy its many delights.

Opposite from top: the popular slopes of Mt Buller; Jagungal Wilderness is wild indeed

MORE LIKE THIS OZ'S BIGGEST BACKCOUNTRY

FALLS CREEK & MT BOGONG, VICTORIA

Falls Creek – or Falls as it is often shortened to (the perfect name for this sport) – is a resort in the Victorian Alps, one of Australia's Big Five, along with Hotham and Mt Buller, also in Victoria, and Thredbo and Perisher in New South Wales. With loads of beginner and intermediate terrain and a great village, Falls is also the pre-eminent XC (cross-country) ski resort in Australia. Some 30 miles (50km) of groomed trails head onto the Bogong High Plains and, at the end of August every year, the long-distance Kangaroo Hoppet attracts about 1000 skiers as part of the global Worldloppet series. Beyond the trails, the High Plains offer easy touring terrain and an array of atmospheric old huts. An overnight trip will see you at Hotham, with perhaps the most consistently challenging resort skiing in Oz. In the other direction is Victoria's highest peak, Mt Bogong, at 6515ft (1986m). The delights of this bold mountain, standing separate and aloof from its surroundings, are hard won from the High Plains (allow a couple of days), but there are endless gullies and faces to explore on its summit plateau.

Nearest city // Melbourne

MT BULLER & MT STIRLING, VICTORIA

A tale of two mountains that are not really twins, more distant cousins living next door. Rowdy Mt Buller is the closest large Alpine resort to Melbourne and, when the snow conditions hit it well, offers as varied and fun skiing and boarding as anywhere else in Australia. And with its stack of fast, modern lifts, Buller moves people if not mountains. Six miles (9km) away is Mt Stirling, out for a quiet life. Eschewing lodges and lifts, Stirling is all about ski-touring, generally easy touring for the most part, on marked trails. That's not to say that challenges can't be had at Stirling. Head to the Stanley Bowl for some steeper backcountry runs or take a trip out towards the Monument and Craig's Hut. Countless thousands of Victorian XC skiers and tourers have cut their teeth here. A smattering of basic huts allows for simple, self-catered accommodation. For a real contrast, spend a day at Stirling then tour across to Buller – perhaps even ask them to keep the noise down.

Nearest city // Melbourne

JAGUNGAL WILDERNESS, NEW SOUTH WALES

As a light does to a moth, solitary Mt Jagungal (the Big Bogong) – the most northerly of Australia's 2000m peaks – calls you in. And most people head straight for the summit. But the terrain surrounding this popular peak is vast and can take days to explore. North of the Main Range, on through the massive expanse of Kosciuszko National Park, you'll find stands of gnarled snowgum trees, occasional groves of straight mountain ash, granite monoliths, creeks, tarns and hidden old huts. It's never too challenging, except when the blizzards blow and disorientation takes hold in this up/down country. If you come to the Jagungal Wilderness looking for steep stuff, you might be disappointed. But if you come for some winter wilderness wandering, you'll rejoice.

Nearest city // Canberra



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IN DEEP IN INDIA

Skiing in Gulmarg may not look or feel like anything you are used to at home – but that's the whole point.

It was the winter of 1987. The snow kept falling, and the macarons and chai kept coming, as I huddled, shawl around shoulders, next to a tiny wood heater in a small, cheap hotel that was sinking ever deeper below a white blanket. I'd been in Gulmarg, India almost a week, but had hardly skied at the country's premier resort, so thick and heavy was the snow. During that winter of 1987, I had been on my first ski mountaineering trip to the Indian Himalaya. Then, with my companions having headed home, I'd taken rickety buses and rattling trains west to Kashmir to experience Gulmarg, with its short, old chairlift and a couple of struggling pomas.

But what a difference 30 years makes. 'Your robe, Mr Kingston,' smiled the attendant in 2019 as I emerged from the pool, which had a wall of clear glass looking out onto snow-capped peaks. I returned to my warm room in the luxurious Khyber Resort & Spa, promising myself a massage in the day spa later in the week.

Although it was my first visit back to Gulmarg itself, over the intervening decades I'd fallen totally for the Himalaya in winter. Indeed, I'd fallen time and again under heavy packs on numerous backcountry ski tours through those epic mountains. It was a love affair that reached its peak with a 360-mile (580km) ski traverse from Kashmir, through Kishtwar, Zanskar, Lahaul and finally into Kulu.

But back to Gulmarg, back to 2019. Before that soothing swim I'd skied down through fresh powder from the top of a modern gondola which, at nearly 13,000ft (4000m) above sea level, is the highest lifted point in the world. My thighs had packed in, my lungs still suffered from the altitude. Only days earlier I'd been below sea level, scuba diving in Kerala, more than 2000 miles (3200km) away at the opposite end of India.

Gulmarg, home to the Indian Institute of Skiing and Mountaineering, sits at 8700ft (2650m). Across it are scattered numerous hotels and lodges of all standards, and a clutch of poma lifts offering what the Indians call their bunny or beginner slopes. A network of narrow roads links it together; when snow covered, the roads make for interesting driving. Gulmarg is the only ski area in the world where you can see one of the world's 26,000ft (8000m) peaks: Nanga Parbat, the ninth highest mountain in the world.

In the late 1980s, a militant separatist movement emerged in Kashmir and, in response, the Indian government stationed thousands of troops there. Although this presence is still



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noticeable, the impact on tourists is negligible and isn't felt at all in Gulmarg. Blocking the view to the west, 5000ft (1500m) above Gulmarg, is the Apharwat ridgeline. The top station of the gondola sits here, at 13,000ft (4000m) and the ridge itself runs for miles. This easy access from the gondola means that Apharwat now attracts experienced off-piste skiers from around the world to make the most of its dozens of lines.

On a fine day, the Kongdori station area is bustling. A long row of cheap restaurants, *dhabas*, are set up for winter, offering biryanis and *bhel puris*. Sled wallahs cry out for business, offering tows on their chunky wooden sleds. Skidoos zoom by with their cargo of pleasure-seeking Indians screaming in unison. Snowball fights are everywhere. You see, most people who come to Gulmarg don't come to ski. As the Indian economy has boomed, so has domestic tourism. Millions are looking for ways to spend their new wealth and thousands come to Gulmarg just for the snow experience.

This leaves the skiers and boarders among us with slopes that are often near deserted. I'd teamed up with Aadil, an apprentice motor mechanic from Tangmarg, whose engine was decades younger than mine. In turn we skied with Ashama and Jayan, outdoor enthusiasts spending a month honing their ski skills. Grooming is minimal – a line from the top of the chair back to Kongdori and one down through the trees back to Gulmarg. Signage, too, is scarce.

We met again later that evening at the Gulmarg Avalanche Centre's weekly talk, packed into a small room at Hotel Pine Palace Resort. It's one of the few places in Gulmarg where you can buy an après ski beer (Kashmir is predominantly Muslim).

Snow was bucketing down and there wasn't a breath of wind as I bought my last full-day ski pass. For head-scratching reasons, the ticket office at Gulmarg was in a little hut. You could hardly see the ticket wallah through the tiny window and, at times, had to tightly grip the window security bars to stop yourself slipping down the icy steps. It was all so typically Indian and beautiful when the gondola bottom station, 100 metres away, was a spacious building with loads of room for a large ticket office.

After too much fun, we lunched at the Kong Posh restaurant below the gondola mid-station. It must be the only ski restaurant anywhere in the world built with neither windows nor terrace to take in the mountain views. But on this cloudy, snowy day, it mattered little.

'I'm 52, but I've had a hard life,' said our ski guide, Wali, as if to explain his grizzled appearance. There was one more ski to enjoy, the eponymously named Wali's World, a backcountry run down to the village of Drang and then to Tangmarg. When Wali introduced himself, I recalled the shop sign I'd seen in Kashmir decades ago, proudly proclaiming the store was run by 'Useless Wali'. His namesake, however, would turn out to be more than useful as we plunged into a cloud sea from the top of the gondola and descended a series of ridges and bowls for some 6000ft (1800m) into the Drang Valley. Once in the valley, we came across a couple

THE HUMAN SKI LIFT

Years ago, in India's Solang ski area, there was a single 300ft/90m-long poma lift that rarely worked. No problem. Indian women in saris, men in turbans, all in fur jackets, would rent skis and boots, usually many sizes too big, and then hire a couple of porters. These wiry porters would, with some difficulty, push their charges uphill, turn him or her around at the top and let go. Repeat and repeat again. But that did not deter eager locals from skiing.

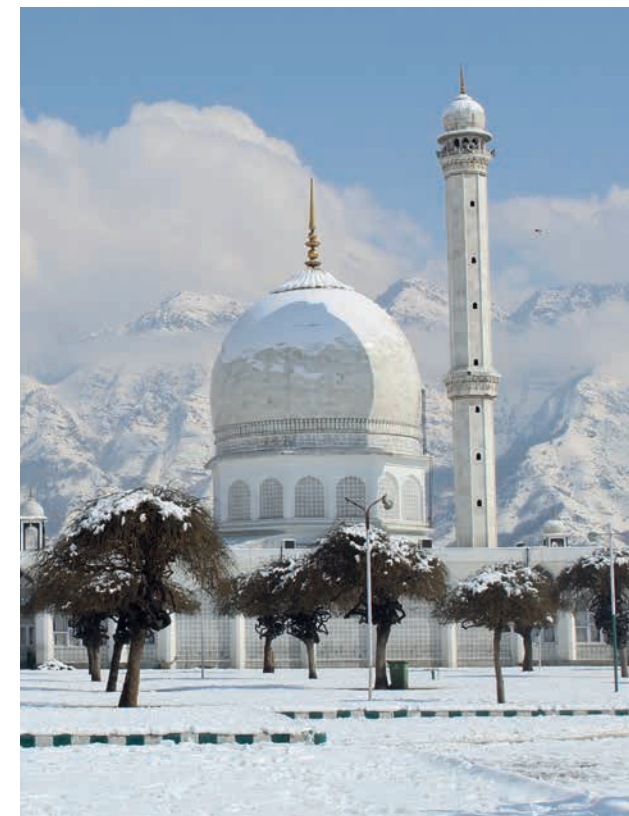


Clockwise from top: sledding for everyone at Gulmarg ski resort; firing up a snowmobile; Hazratbal Shrine. Previous page: the Gulmarg gondola, one of the world's highest operating cable cars



"Most people who come to Gulmarg don't come to ski. This often leaves us skiers and boarders with near-deserted slopes"

of soldiers hiking to a military camp, a reminder of just how close we were to the actual Line of Control between India and Pakistan. After a chai at Drang village, we skied through snow-covered apple orchards to a waiting vehicle at Tangmarg. Two hours later, I was enjoying lunch on the India Palace houseboat, floating on Nagin Lake in Srinagar, the main city of Kashmir. I'd stayed on the same houseboat ahead of that Kashmir-to-Kulu ski traverse back in 1991. In 2019, the same barber, Bashir, gave me a shave and head massage as the sun went down across the lake and the muezzin called the faithful to prayer. What little difference 30 years makes. **HK**



DIRECTIONS

Best time to go // January to March. Gulmarg isn't high by Himalayan standards, so often has a relatively short season.

Gear required // If you're staying inbounds, regular alpine or boarding gear will be fine. Venturing further afield, with a guide, will require a full touring set up – ski or splitboard. Reasonable kit can be hired at Kashmir Alpine Ski Shop.

Nearest town // Tangmarg is the jumping-off point. Srinagar, Kashmir's capital, is 30 miles (50km) away.

Getting there // Fly into a major Indian city such as Mumbai or Delhi then take an internal flight to Srinagar. Taxis will take you from there to Tangmarg, where 4WD taxis jostle for business to get you up to Gulmarg.

Where to stay // Five-star hotels like the Khyber will satisfy those with the dollars. Highlands Park and its cottages offer a more authentic experience. Cheaper hotels are plentiful too.

Things to know // Don't get too frustrated if things aren't working 100 percent. Relax and drink another chai.

Opposite: Mt Rishi Pahar (left) and Mt Kalanag in the dramatic Garhwal region of India

MORE LIKE THIS CENTRAL ASIA'S SKI GEMS

MANALI AND SOLANG, INDIA

At the head of the Kullu Valley, in Himachel Pradesh, the mountains of the Pir Panjal range sit just below the main Himalaya. Although there is a gondola-served, ungroomed ski area at Solang, it is the easy access to skiable peaks and touring that has made Manali a popular destination (in relative terms) and it's an experience melded with the endless charms and challenges of India. Skin up the slopes of Patel Su or those around Bhrigu Lake, or head over Rhotang La or Hampta passes into the trans-Himalayan region of Lahaul. Or take a week-long tour up the Jagatsukh valley, over the near 16,000ft (5000m) Goru pass, and drop into the Malana valley, heading out via the unusual ancient and isolated village of Malana. Manali, a major summer hill town, has dozens of hotels and restaurants or, alternatively, base yourself in a room in one of the surrounding villages.

Nearest town // Ludhiana

KALANAG PEAK, INDIA

There are endless ski-mountaineering objectives across the vastness of the Indian Himalaya. The Garhwal region, in particular, is full of options, including an ascent of Kalanag (21,000ft/6390m) from an approach up the Tons Valley to Ruinsara. Requiring full ski-mountaineering gear for glacier travel and full acclimatisation due to the altitude, Kalanag is a relatively straightforward ascent, albeit one with a steep, generally non-skiable kick for the final summit approach. Ensure you check in with the Indian Mountaineering Foundation about status and requirement for peak permits.

Nearest town // Dehradun

FANN MOUNTAINS, TAJIKISTAN

The Stans, that jigsaw of former Soviet Republics amid the vastness of Central Asia, offer a huge canvas on which to paint your snow experiences. Tajikistan is the smallest and most mountainous. In the east of the country rise the Pamirs, comprising giant 23,000ft (7000m) peaks. Further west are the Fann Mountains, reaching a mere 18,000ft (5500m). Just beyond the outskirts of Dushanbe – the capital of Tajikistan – is Safed Dara, the country's sole ski resort. With a gondola and a T-bar, it's a good place to get your post-flight ski legs. This alpine range still offers many unriden slopes. You might be able to persuade Eraj to open his Artuch summer mountain camp early to start your tours. Beware the vodka, though.

Nearest town // Dushanbe



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