

The **Skier's Dozen**

The big commercial skifields of New Zealand are well known by many, but as this grand tour of the country's small skifields shows, it's often the lesser known areas that make for the best experiences.

WORDS AND PICS [HUW KINGSTON](#)



CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN: *Traversing out of Hemis, a backcountry run at Ohau; Mt Dobson Ski School HQ; plenty of fun for the kids, Ohau; picnic time at Roundhill, a long time tradition.*



appropriate safety gear, a set of skins and a knowledge of mountain travel, most also offer a mouth-watering array of sidecountry and backcountry excursions.

A short, steep bootpack behind the top of the chair brings you onto a ridge from where options abound. We headed left, climbing onto Mount Sutton. The vistas from the ridge on a blue-sky day were mindblowing. We skied Hemis which dropped us, in good snow, into a series of bowls and narrow valleys, to finish on the access road just below Ohau.

So many South Island ski areas are perched on shirtfronts or steep bowls where you really do feel you're sliding off the edge of the world. It's a flat-earth's paradise. The brown hills and turquoise lakes running out onto coastal plains give such perspective.

I chuckled at the Department of Conservation posters adorning the Ohau chairlift towers telling of 'Amazing wildlife to discover' with illustrations of an owl, a beetle and a grasshopper. You head across the Tasman for the wild views, not the wildlife.

ENOUGH ROPE

With rainbows spearing the lakes in front of us, we left Ohau and drove back into Mackenzie country for a sortie to Roundhill.

Two T-bars and a platter accessing some mellow, wide open runs ensure Roundhill is a real family favourite. Many park rear to snow, tailgate open with barbecues, picnic tables and chairs set up for the day, with the most spectacular picnic views over Lake Tekapo.

The time had come though. Roundhill presented the pleasure of the first rope tow of the trip. And not just any old rope tow.

'For the more adventurous, head up the world's longest and steepest rope tow and see what Australasia's biggest vertical drop (783m) is all about' says the Roundhill website.

I tried again, but the rope slipped through my gloved hand. I tried again. Finally I was on but realised my nutcracker was merely half clamped. I hung on, my awkward angle pulling the rope off the pulleys as I went. Halfway up, the inevitable inevitability. I came off and skied back to the bottom of the tow.

One thing's for sure, skiing the 14 smaller and lesser known snowfields of New Zealand's Southern Alps offers a different and hugely satisfying experience.

A FAIRLIE FINE LOCATION

We rolled into Fairlie late in August. It's a little town close to fine mountains, near three ski areas. After a good night's sleep in our cottage at Musterers, Laurence, Viv and I headed up to Mt Dobson to find our ski legs.

Dobson occupies a wide, sunny bowl below the summit of the same name. With a long chairlift, a T-bar and a platter there's a huge area to enjoy. Unfortunately we arrived the day after 120km/h winds had scoured much of the off-piste but could see the potential for a load of fun and, indeed, had plenty of it on the groomed runs.

Lunch was one of Dobson's fine coffees washing down a famous pie from the Fairlie Bakehouse. If our aim was to experience a skier's dozen or thereabouts in the coming three weeks then we were very likely to match that with a baker's dozen too.

OHAU I LOVE IT

From Dobson we headed to the Waitaki region and Ohau Lodge, a place that has never failed to give me a fine stay and a full stomach on previous mountain biking visits.

It's a 10km drive from the lodge up to the skifield. This access drive, like so many we'd take, is not for the fainthearted. All are dirt and tight. Steep corners abound, crash barriers don't. An AWD/4WD will give you some confidence but snowchains are often required too.

With a handy 25cm of fresh stuff dropping on Ohau the day before, our visit was well timed. Access is focused around a two-seat chairlift heading up the guts of the bowl with a platter low down catering for beginners.

At Ohau, as with the vast majority of these skifields, there is plenty to keep you busy inbounds. But for those equipped with



The Heritage rope tow goes on and on. It's nearly 1,500 metres long, averages 30 degrees and tops out at 2,133 metres opening up some steep, challenging runs.

Rope tows 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 your metal nutcracker over the rope, clamp it down by holding on and up you go. The strain is taken by the nutcracker being attached to the belt or harness you're wearing.

Some can be easy, some hard, some frustrating. But most of the ski areas we visited from Roundhill on had them, some exclusively so. The Heritage, despite its length, was not too bad and up and up we went. That vertical made us smile and grimace in equal measure, the latter from muscles screaming for relief from turn after turn. It was magic.

TWO THUMBS UP

It was at Fox Peak, on the Two Thumb Range, that my uneasy relationship with the rope tows fell apart. Fox, easily accessed from Fairlie, is Kiwi club skiing in the raw. A tiny wooden 'Skifield' arrow, lichen growing upon it, showed the way and we were soon bumping up a farm track, dodging heavily pregnant ewes. In fading light we arrived at Fox Peak Lodge, a proper old mountain hut, perched below the ski area. Here Laurence cooked up a storm for dinner.

The Southern Alps were cooking up their own storm with a blood red sky showing at dawn. All weather is local in these parts and when one ski area gets a dump, another nearby may get nothing. Much depends on the direction faced or the side of the range sat. Fox had been unlucky recently and the snow was thinning. But I could see the potential off the three fast moving

Skiing the 14 smaller and lesser known snowfields of New Zealand's Southern Alps offers a different and hugely satisfying experience.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pearce unable to keep his skis on the snow at Mt Lyford; Jason and Laurence looking back up, a long way up Crystal Creek from Porters Lodge; red sky in the morn, skiers warn. Dawn at Fox Peak Lodge; sign to Fox River skifield.



Jason, an old biking mate, runs the ski school at Porters and took a few hours off to lead Laurence and I astray. Thus we strayed into Crystal Valley at the end of the day. A 1,000 metre descent of face and gully took us to within a spit of our accommodation. Fully catered Porters Lodge is highly recommended for the closest stay to the ski area.

A WALK TO A SKI

'Where's the ski area?' I asked Laurence in the car park near Arthurs Pass. 'Up there somewhere' he responded, pointing into the clouds. He and Viv then proceeded to pull ice axes, crampons and two small children from the car.

This was on my only previous visit to Temple Basin, the closest ski area to the divide of the Southern Alps. We clambered up a snowy and at times icy trail into those clouds. After an hour and a half and a 500 metres altitude gain, we found the ski area sitting in the mist. Is Temple Basin the only ski resort in the world necessitating such an approach? Fortunately a goods lift carries your luggage to the heavens.

It was good to worship at the temple again, this time with the access track less snowy. Nothing is easy about Temple, neither access nor skiing. It sits protected by an amphitheatre of mountains and pays its respects to the sentinel of Mount Rollaston opposite.

We arrived at the line of four buildings constituting the temple complex at the same time a double bass was being unloaded from the lift. Temple Double Basin?

Rope tows here probe into and allow access to bowls unseen from the lodge. Hiking between bowls is de rigeur; the idea of connectivity has passed Temple Basin by. We arrived in time for an endurance race that seemed to suit everything about the ski area; a mad four hour challenge of riding lifts, hiking to runs then descending to repeat and repeat again.

When night fell it was the turn of the double bass and friends. Christchurch band The Eastern entertained on the divide and the party went long into the night; long after the sun had set to the west and for some almost until it rose again in the eastern sky.

rope tows. A hike up to 2,350 metre Fox Peak, sitting above the ski area, also offers excellent long off-piste runs into North and South Basin to the base station. Here a tiny hut serves as both ticket office and snack bar in a ski area staffed entirely by volunteers and usually only open on weekends.

PEARCE OF THE ACTION

There are three ski areas north of Christchurch: Hammer Springs and Mt Lyford, each a couple of hours away, and Rainbow, further north. We decided on a day trip to Lyford in the Kaikoura Ranges and this time snuck our son Pearce out of school. He was six the last time I'd skied with him and a bloody good skier. Now 14, he is both a vastly taller and better skier than I.

Happy to hear Lyford had received some fresh snow, a beautiful drive from Christchurch took us up onto this standalone mountain. 30 years ago Doug Simpson decided to diversify from fluffy sheep to fluffy snow on the freehold mountain land he owned. Now a mix of T-bar, platter and rope tow give access to some real fun terrain. Pearce obliged for the camera by jumping off trucks, rocks and whatever he could find to play with.

THE SELWYN SIX

West of Christchurch sits a line of six areas. The largest of these and closest to Christchurch is Porters. With easy access, a modern quad chairlift and a line of three T-bars stepping up the mountain, a vast area opens up for all levels of skiers and boarders. I challenge anyone to not have a grand day out here, whether cruising the cat track taking in the views or plunging down seemingly bottomless Big Mama.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Julia, from the Italian Alps, serves up a fine pizza (of course) at Palmer Lodge, Broken River; Mountain Guide Scott Walker showing how to use an avalanche transceiver. Broken River; Laurence ski touring along the Craigieburn Range en-route to Mt Cheeseman; Sophie, the Craigieburn General Manager; Mountain Guide, Scott Walker, analysing the snowpack from a snowpit he had dug. Broken River.

The lifts were unsurprisingly quiet first thing, the snow firm. Laurence and I explored by ski tow, foot and ski. We found powder stashes down Bills and Cassidys and laughed at the madness and beauty of it all.

PROBES, PIZZA AND POWDER

Broken River or BR is unwillingly challenging Temple Basin as a ‘walk-in’ ski area. This excellent skifield had, until 2019, a rather funky tramway that took skiers and gear up. Currently broken, the choice now is a 20 minute trudge up the access road or a shuttle from the club 4WD truck.

After nearly two weeks on the road and slopes and with never more than a couple of nights in one place, it was a pleasure to settle into Broken River’s Lindon Lodge for five nights.

The NZ Southern Alps are big mountains with very variable weather and the inherent dangers all such ranges possess. In winter avalanche awareness is a key component in mitigating risk. It is important for any skier who ventures off-piste or on tour to understand the danger signs and decision processes as to whether to stay or go. Equally important is to know how to use the special equipment used to locate and rescue any victim of a slide.

The NZ Mountain Safety Council have a range of courses, the most basic of which is their Avalanche Awareness Course and there was one running at BR. So I joined the course expertly run by local mountain guide Scott Walker. A few hours of theory that night – avalanche types, warning systems, weather, safe travel and more – was followed by a day on the slopes practicing the use of transceivers and probes to search for a casualty and digging snow pits to analyse snow structure. A final run down the aptly named and rather steep Avalanche Gully completed an excellent day.

Access to the rope tows of BR from the three accommodation lodges involves a hike up a long line of wooden steps to the Access Rope Tow. This is another ski area that suits intermediate to advanced skiers, not least because mastery of the rope is a pre-requisite to reach Palmer Day Lodge and the main ski area.

The day lodge is central to the vibe at BR. As with so many of these ski areas, there is a total acceptance that some people will bring their own food and drink, others will buy it or do a bit of both. If you want to fire up the barbecue on the deck or make a cup of tea in the kitchen then go for it. If you can’t resist an authentic pizza made by an authentic Italian staff member then go for it too. Not here the ‘No Outside Food Allowed’ signs.

Steep runs off Nervous Knob, long drops into Allan’s Basin and fun off Main Tow. Then into the day lodge for a drink or a chat.

Before another fine dinner, I found myself in the little sauna in the beech forest with one guest who expounded on the sweat lodge scene. To the best of my understanding this seemed to be a men’s club, originating in Mexico, involving aspects of shamanism, chanting and passing out in the heat. I’ll stick to singing in the shower.

At the end of the week, with fresh snow and improving visibility, we did run after run down the ridge to the base of Access Tow, hollering at our good fortune.

TURNING AND TOURING

Just along the Craigieburn Range from BR is Craigieburn itself. Viv dropped off Laurence and I, up another winding, icy access road. Our plan was to stay overnight, ski some runs at Craigieburn in the morning and then tour along the Craigieburn range to Mount Olympus.

The Craigieburn Range has been popular among ski tourers for a long time. Beyond and between each of the skifields are an array of bowls and gullies to drop into and climb out of. In recent years the Craigieburn ‘Haute Route’ has been popularised by local guide Anna Keeling in conjunction with tour operator Chill. This links Craigieburn to Mount Olympus via Broken River and Mt Cheeseman over three days.

Of all the smaller ski areas in NZ, Craigieburn is perhaps the best known internationally. Known for its challenging off-piste and side country runs, it has a reputation as a place where freeride skiers and boarders gather in the southern winter.

In the bar that night Phil, the club president, told us how decades earlier some members had lovingly built a T-bar ski lift in a workshop in Christchurch, eschewing the commercially available versions. Piece by piece it was transported to Craigieburn and installed. Then, dramatically, after less than a season, the towers buckled and the T-bar was no more.

That along with a certain amount of pride ensures Craigieburn is defiantly both a grooming free and rope tow only area.



With fresh snow overnight and ropes to unfreeze, Craigieburn opened a little late that morning. The thin cloud lifted revealing the resort and the mountains around it. How much more pleasure could my eyes take?

Late morning we left Craigieburn, traversing beneath Hamilton Peak and bootpacking up onto Hamilton Saddle. A sublime run down in fine powder took us back into Allan's Basin, back to Broken River in time for one of Julia's pizzas. 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 Cheeseman was calling.

A narrow ridge that would be challenging in bad weather or ice led us to the climb up Mount Wall and across to Mount Cockayne to joined the now shaded slopes down to ski area number ten.

Perfectly considerate, our good friend Cherie was there in the lodge, with a fine cheese platter celebrating our Cheeseman arrival.

Cheeseman, with its two T-bars, is another area well regarded for families. Indeed the only nutcracker required there was for the walnut bowl on our table. Another comfortable night, another lodge where everyone pitched in to help the staff.

Sadly we didn't get to ski Cheeseman at its best with an icy fog wrapping the area the following morning. The weather also meant our plan to continue touring across the range to Mt Olympus was aborted. So, after a few blind runs, we left early afternoon to drive around to our final ski area.

PLAYGROUND OF THE GODS

A few years back I sea kayaked beneath a snow-covered Mount Olympus, the party room of Zeus and his fellow Greek gods and the highest mountain in Greece. At the other end of the world is a mountain of the same name, not as high, but with a reputation for partying as wild if not even wilder than its namesake. Olympus also had a reputation for the wildest of access roads.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Snow-chains & courage should be carried at all times. Road sign en-route to Mount Olympus; Pearce and dad, Laurence, on top of the Sphinx ready to descend to Top Hut, Mt Olympus.



SKI NEW ZEALAND

The Fourteen Fields

Visited:

Mt Dobson www.mtdobson.co.nz

Ohau www.ohau.co.nz

Roundhill www.roundhill.co.nz

Fox Peak www.foxpeak.co.nz

Mt Lyford www.mtlyford.co.nz

Porters www.skiporters.co.nz

Temple Basin www.templebasin.co.nz

Broken River www.brokenriver.co.nz

Craigieburn www.craigieburn.co.nz

Cheeseman www.cheeseman.co.nz

Mt Olympus www.mtolympus.co.nz

Not visited:

Hanmer Springs www.hanmersprings.co.nz

Rainbow www.skirainbow.co.nz

Awakino www.skiawakino.com

All areas hire ski/snowboarding gear and those with rope tows also hire nutcrackers, belts and glove protectors. Don't wear your best ski gear for the rope tows.

Ski shops outside Christchurch are found at Fairlie and Darfield.

Useful Resources

General information can be found on the tourism sites ChristchurchNZ (www.christchurchnz.com/), Tourism Waitaki (www.waitakinz.com/) and Mackenzie Region (<https://mackenziencz.com/>)

The comprehensive Chill site (www.chillout.co.nz/) has offers on snow passes covering multiple ski areas and details on the Craigieburn Haute Route tour.

Both weather and forecasting are highly unpredictable in the Southern Alps. MetService is the government service (www.metService.com/mountains-and-parks/ski-fields). The New Zealand Avalanche Advisory (www.avalanche.net.nz/) is vital for anyone venturing off-piste.

Beyond Lake Coleridge the Olympus road wound through rocky hills. A sign told us 'snowchains and courage should be carried at all times.'

On up we went on a narrow road with occasional crumbling edges and enough snow to add further interest. On dusk we parked at the skifield where there was nothing but a little hut and Viv and Pearce to greet us.

Top Hut itself was perched halfway up the slopes, necessitating a journey on two rope tows to reach it. It was a very special place to stay; sleeping some 50 people and very well appointed.

Perhaps it was the Sunday night, but there was no wild party, just conversations with an international tribe on all that we love about the white stuff.

The playground of the gods treated us well that last day of what had been an incredible three weeks skiing. In clearing skies, the two upper rope tows gave up some beautiful skiing before we hiked up Little Alaska for a soft snow return. After lunch we gobbled down more runs before Laurence, Pearce and I bootpacked up to the Sphinx for one final off-piste run.

The end was nigh. Part way down the access road, a sign told us something we didn't want to acknowledge. 'Back to Reality' it proclaimed.