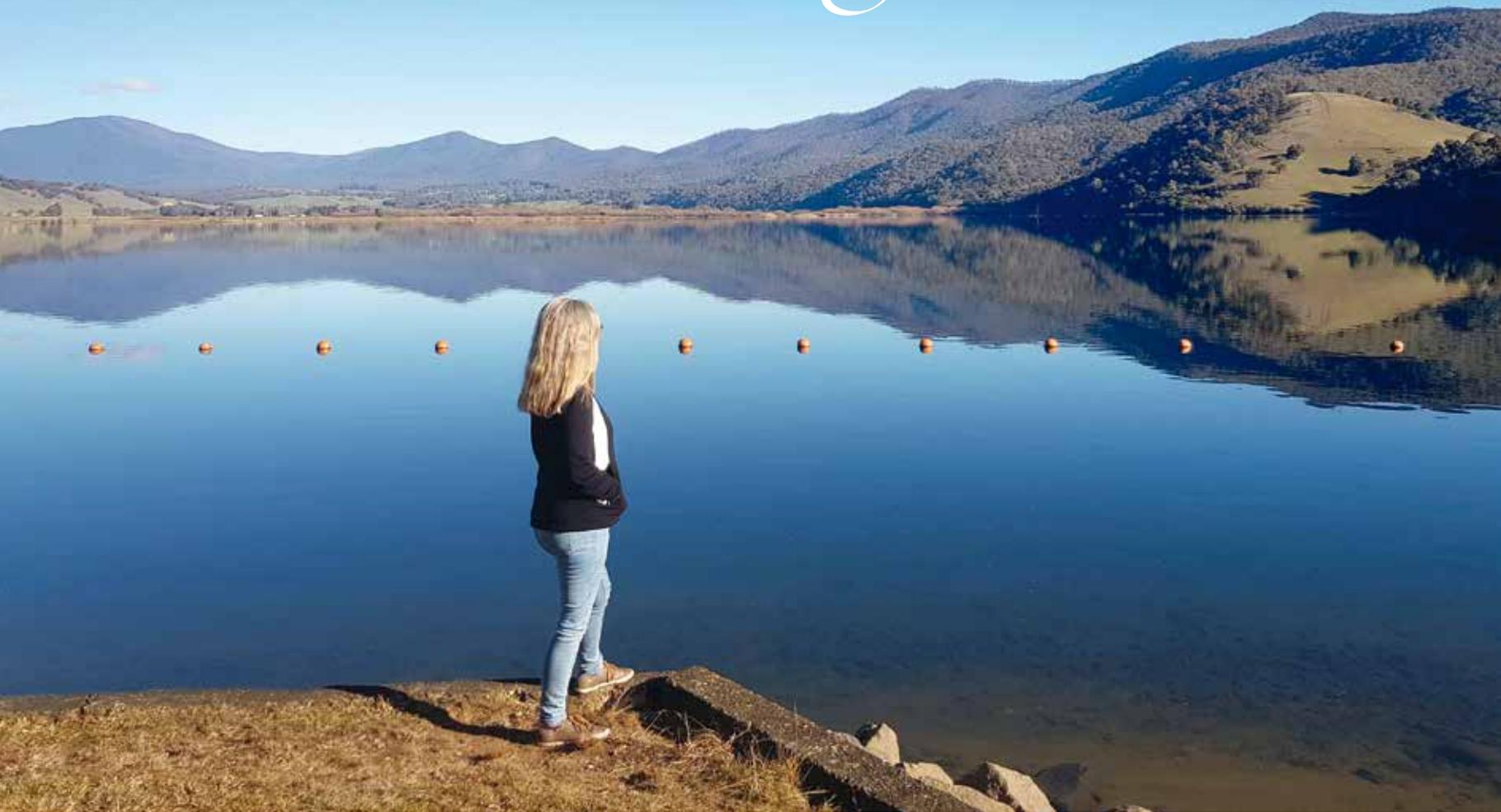


take the high road



PHOTOGRAPHS **HUW KINGSTON**

Instead of spending 2020 overseas, intrepid traveller and Bundanoon resident **HUW KINGSTON** has spent a year in the Snowy Mountains. He maps out a scenic road trip, a 350km loop from Cooma best enjoyed over a few days – or even longer.

THE WOMBAT SHUFFLES across the top of my skis without a care for his world or my skis. As he does, a pair of crimson rosellas flash across the marbled, ice-rimed trunk of a snowgum, announcing their presence with a squark in unison. Where else in the world?

If the Highlands has long and happily been my home, the Snowy Mountains hold a good part of my heart. Perhaps, if a few metres of snow dropped on Bundanoon each winter rather than a dusting every couple, things might be different. If I could link turns off Gibbergunyah, then Highlands heaven would be closer.

But for that pleasure you must seek higher ground. Yes, the mighty Himalaya has gripped me for many years, the frigid mountains of Central Asia and elsewhere too. But there is something special about the Snowy Mountains, our own giants. Some might laugh a little, looking at those rolling summits from the east, from Jindabyne or even Charlotte Pass. But those who have viewed, or better still skied, the hidden western

faces, will understand the Snowies are more than deserving of the mountains moniker.

I write this as a blizzard drops powder in a pandemic over Perisher and across mounts Townsend, Twynam, Carruthers and the big one, Kosciuszko. But dare we, in this most peculiar of years, look beyond the week and the winter? This place is as gorgeous in other seasons as it is under a white blanket. And, with travel dreams restricted to close to home, why not venture south and loop the largest national park in NSW?

Kosciuszko National Park, a place with the clearest of skies, is the source of Australia's longest rivers and home to endless adventures and enduring legends. It's a spectacular trip but be prepared for plenty of gear changes on some of Australia's highest and windiest roads.

Beyond Canberra, the hills close in then pull away from the road as you head into the Monaro region. Often close but hidden from view is the Murrumbidgee, Australia's second longest river.

At Cooma take a break, an escape even. The Corrective



CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN PHOTOGRAPH MILLPOND CONDITIONS ON KHANCOBAN PONDAGE, PART OF THE SNOWY MOUNTAINS HYDRO SCHEME; SWING BRIDGE ACROSS THE SNOWY RIVER IN WINTER; RIME ICE ON A FIRE DAMAGED SNOWGUM; THE CREW AT JINDABYNE BREWING; ON THE BIKE TRAIL TO HATCHERY BAY, JINDABYNE.

Services NSW Museum, attached to Cooma Gaol, tells the story of prison life from the First Fleet to today. The lockdowns of 2020 are hopefully the closest any of us will ever come to this reality.

Cooma is also home to another place with plenty of experience in tunnelling. Snowy Hydro has its headquarters in town and the Discovery Centre is a must visit given our drive passes many of the dams, lakes, and hydroelectric power stations of the immense Snowy Scheme.

Climbing from Berridale we spot plenty of wiry merino sheep, well camouflaged among endless granite boulders, as the bulk of the Main Range unfolds in the distance. This section of Kosciuszko NP holds the 10 highest mountains in Australia and, even in the height and heat of summer, you may well spot remnant patches of snow clinging to their flanks.

Lake Jindabyne is next into view. Flooded by damming the Snowy River, the old village now lies beneath the lake, the newer town hugging its southern shore. Despite the spring snowmelt, Lake Jindabyne offers surprisingly warm summer swimming.

Mountain fever afflicts many. Crisp air and clarity of sky ensures that even the most sedentary will be urged to pull on walking shoes, pedal down a trail, paddle a canoe, throw in a line. To listen, to smell, to explore. To follow in the footsteps of

the Ngarigo and Walgal people who, for thousands of summers, climbed up into the high country to feast on the juicy bogong moths.

Ski town in winter, adventure and relaxation hub in summer, Jindabyne has plenty going on. An old machinery shed once used for building ski lifts is now used for brewing beer. Jindabyne Brewing has fast become a favourite haunt for locals and visitors alike.

The Alpine Way climbs up to Thredbo village. Paralleling much of the drive, the multi-use Thredbo Valley Track snakes 35 kilometres along the crystal clear, boulder strewn Thredbo River with various access points en route.

Thredbo village is well worth a wander. Winter is all snowsports but for the rest of the year bikes, hikes and numerous festivals take over. The Kosciuszko Chairlift takes you from the village to almost 2000 metres. Many of your fellow travellers will go no further than take in the views. Others will drop over the edge on mountain bikes down to the village far below. Some will begin the 13 kilometre return walk to the summit of Mount Kosciuszko, at 2228 metres, Australia's highest point.

The drive through to Khancoban should be done in good light and good weather. Once over 1580 metre Dead Horse Gap, the road loses three quarters of that altitude in twists and turns to Tom Groggin and the infant Murray River. A mere

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THE MAIN RANGE IN KOSCIUSZKO NATIONAL PARK IN SUMMER; THE BIG TROUT, ADAMINABY.

10 metres across on the south bank is Victoria. Could you ever have imagined a time when it would be illegal to step across that river and that border? Drop a fallen leaf into the narrow channel and imagine it journeying nearly 2500 kilometres to the sea.

At Geehi Flats stop to view the western faces of the Main Range. Unlike their relatively gentle rise from the Monaro, the mountains here shoot up steeply, impressively for nearly 2000 metres.

Khancoban, a little town created during the Snowy Scheme construction, is, at 300 metres, the lowest point of this rollercoaster road trip, and like many towns here, comes with its own lake. What goes down must surely go up and, just north of Khancoban, our grand loop of the Snowies turns on to the KNP5 Road. Closed in winter months, this road rises to the highest point on our journey, topping Dead Horse Gap by mere metres.

So much of this grand country was heavily impacted by the devastating 2020 bushfires. Green shoots are showing through, but it will be a long, slow recovery in such fragile country.

Our road finally meets the Snowy Mountains Highway at Kiandra. During a short-lived gold rush, thousands came to this cold, windswept place. For entertainment, Norwegian miners fashioned skis from local mountain ash and hit the slopes. In

1861, on the hottest continent on earth, the world's first official ski club was formed.

Little remains of the town that once stood at Kiandra, 150 years of mountain weather eroding away such human endeavours. Sadly, those buildings that did survive were razed by more recent natural forces; the memories of Kiandra now interred in the ashes.

Around here there is every chance you will spot some brumbies. No one can deny the majesty of these introduced animals, some 25,000 in total in the park, but equally no one can deny the damage they do to the fragile landscape. It is, perhaps, the most debated issue in the Snowies.

No road trip in Australia is complete without something big and Adaminaby serves up The Big Trout. This is fisherman's country. The original Adaminaby was drowned under the vast waters of Lake Eucumbene and the town moved 10 kilometres to its present location.

Your loop will finish back in Cooma but, who knows, your heart might tempt you back toward the mountains. For my wife and me, 2020 was planned to be a year living in Europe but, as for millions, plans were upended by a virus. By then though, our Highlands home was rented to friends who lost their house in that terrible January. So here we are, a year in our little Snowies shack. They do say it's best to follow your heart. **HL**

