

# OUT BACK

WITH CHRIS BOOTH



Australia's resort ski fields harbour a secret they're hiding out back. It's big, it'll blow your mind, and it has adrenaline written all over it. Best thing is it's totally crowd-free. Welcome to the backcountry.

WORDS Rachael Oakes-Ash  
IMAGES Dom Kieler



AUSTRALIAN SKIERS are a backcountry pioneering bunch. The world's first ski club, the Kiandra Ski Club, was founded in Australia's gold fields in 1861 by three Norwegian miners who converted wooden fence posts to skis. Almost 150 years on and the fence posts have been replaced with glass fibre, carbon and titanium technology, and skiers pay top dollar to ride chairlifts through precarious weather to access unpredictable snow conditions.

Yet still the cashed-up downhill ski set mock the granola munching skiers seen from the top of the chairlift hiking their way out of resort bounds to a world where the only cogs turning are those of the mind.

Backcountry skiing—or ski touring—has a bad rap from the adrenalin-fuelled terrain park rats who prefer their skis in the air and old school racers who have never stepped foot off the piste. Ski touring, however, is back in the spotlight as extreme skiers look to bigger mountains and search for untracked snow. If they don't have a helicopter then they'll have to strap velvet skins under the skis, click into alpine binding mode and start skinning uphill, one ski at a time.

Australian freestyle skier, Chris 'Boothy' Booth, is a convert. The 20-year-old big-mountain skier started his career as an alpine racer, then trained in moguls before switching to the terrain park. At 13 years of age, while on holiday in Whistler, he talked his way into a forerunning spot on the Freeskiing Championship Invitational. He fell, but not before his impressive style was spotted by some big gun ski brands and he scored a sponsorship deal.

He then found a way to combine his freestyle antics with his newfound love of free skiing in bigger mountains when, at 19, he took part in the Rip Curl Himalayan Search, dropped in by helicopter to make his moves on untouched snow with natural terrain.

"Backcountry now represents 100 per cent of my efforts," explains Boothy while strapping skins to his fat Black Crows skis. "The way I approach it is by combining my freestyle background with more serious mountain terrain. It's very difficult but it's here that I have found the true enjoyment that I have been looking for in my skiing."

The weather gods have delivered a blue bird day after an overnight snowstorm and we are venturing into the Main Range behind Thredbo

with Phil Hannam from the Thredbo Outdoor Adventure Centre as our guide. He promises to give us a quintessential backcountry Australia experience.

Although I have had the fortune to hike the peaks of the Japanese Alps with skis strapped to my back to access thigh-deep dry powder, the Wasatch Ranges of Utah during a record snow year and to haul myself up the Andes to ski down under the wings of Condors, this is my first day in the backcountry of Australia.

In the world scale of ski touring, the Australian Alps' high snow moisture content, average snowfall and lower elevation can't compete with the famed Haute Route in the European Alps, but there is something unique about snow-laden eucalyptus gums, and the challenge of negotiating variable conditions to find the powder is all part of the process.

“ Backcountry skiing has always sat at the core of snow skiing. It is the equivalent to big wave surfing, free climbing, or deep ocean swimming. ”

Although you may think we don't have the pitch for avalanches, I'm taking a transceiver. Avalanches can happen on a slope as low grade as 28° and the alpine regions of New South Wales and Victoria have far steeper than that. An avalanche took out Kunama Hut on the Main Range in 1956, killing a woman sleeping within, and in 2008 a 22-year-old male skier was killed when an ice cornice collapsed triggering an avalanche that buried him under debris at Blue Lake near Charlotte Pass. Transceivers, shovels and probes are *de rigueur* when venturing off piste and there is no point going if only one of you has them, it takes two for a rescue.

After a chairlift ride up Thredbo, Boothy, Phil and I venture from the top of Karel's T-Bar and head out to Ramshead, Australia's fourth highest mountain at 2166 metres, on a slow incline steep enough to have us stripping off ski jackets.

"I use the terms backcountry and big mountain interchangeably," continues Boothy who is studying law at Sydney University and

is not afraid of a chinwag. I'm happy to let him talk. I want to conserve my oxygen as the incline continues and he is clearly fitter than me.

"Big mountain skiing is characterised more by the act of dropping down a mountain face and skiing it in a way that challenges you, whereas backcountry skiing involves the entire experience – hiking, skinning, route finding and often camping. Backcountry skiing has always sat at the core of snow skiing. It is the equivalent to big wave surfing, free climbing, or deep ocean swimming. It connects with our innate desire to experience nature, and in that sense appeals to our sense of adventure."

We traverse up Ramshead to get some cruisy turns down before making our way to some rocks for Boothy to jump. The granite outcrops that dot the Snowy Mountains above the tree line provide excellent chutes and terrain for

anyone wanting to be challenged. Phil explores some terrain that we decide to give a miss and instead make our way down Golden Gully to some lower tree skiing. The snow on the way down is pristine, boot-deep Aussie powder, though I'm told last week it was crud.

It is hard to believe that thousands of skiers are fighting it out for the piste just over the horizon. We haven't run into anyone all day, apart from a handful of snowboarders attempting a hike at the beginning, on the way to Dead Horse Gap.

Our last climb out is laborious, traversing left then right as we head for the Thredbo Alpine Resort boundary, hoping to make it back onto the piste before the Saturday night flare run takes over. After six energy exerting hours with more uphill skinning than downhill skiing, our exhaustion levels are high and it is hard to get my legs to obey commands.

Backcountry skiers have a saying about 'earning your turns', and somehow I think we've made a term deposit in the bank.

# 6 AUSTRALIA'S BEST BACKCOUNTRY MISSIONS

IMAGES James Morrow / ozbc.net



## RESORTS |

- F** FALLS CREEK
- T** THREDBO
- P** PERISHER
- H** HOTHAM
- B** MT BULLER
- D** THE DU CANE TRAVERSE



## MISSIONS |

- 1** DAY TRIPPER
- 2** FOREFATHERS SNOWSHOES
- 3** LAKE LOOP
- 4** WATSONS CRAG
- 5** VICTORIA'S ROOFTOP
- 6** THE BIG COMMITMENT

## one

- **MISSION:** Day Tripper
- **LOCATION:** Thredbo to Ramshead, return by Golden Gully-NSW
- **DISTANCE/TIME:** 6km/one day
- **OVERNIGHT:** Bed down in Thredbo Alpine Resort for a morning start.
- **WHAT & WHY:** This route is a good introduction to backcountry in Australia and easily accessible from the top of Thredbo Alpine Resort. You will need to purchase a 'single lift' pass for the ride up. Expect a fair bit of traversing uphill through rocky outcrops before open plains to Ramshead. It can get quite exposed up here so take appropriate all-weather gear for wind protection. Some simple traverses will get you to some sweet little chutes and gullies. Once you head down to the tree line towards the creek it is a taxing traverse back up to the Thredbo boundary for a final ski back down the Supertrail to the base of Thredbo village.
- **MAPS / INFO:** Phillip Hannam from Thredbo Outdoor Adventure Centre takes guided ski tours 'out the back' of Thredbo [thredbo.com.au](http://thredbo.com.au). Check with Kosciuszko National Park for weather and backcountry conditions 02-6450 5600.



1

## two

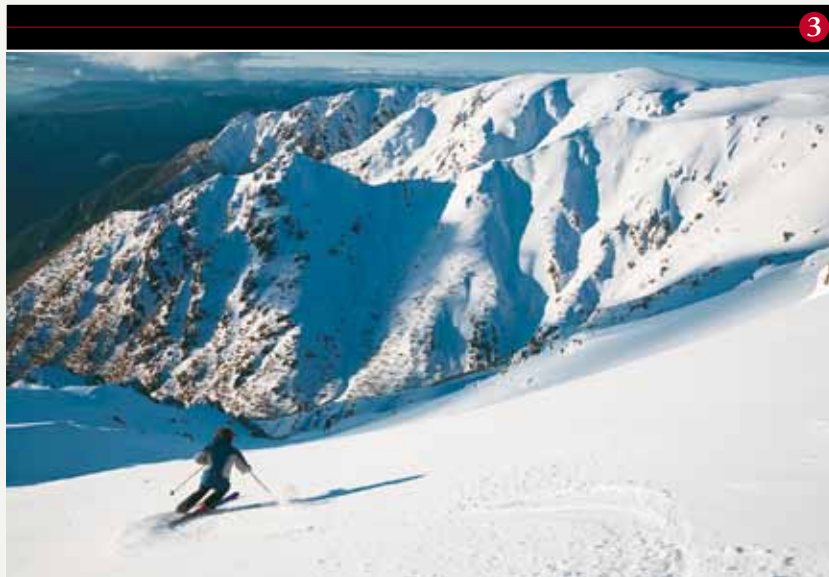
- **MISSION:** Forefathers, Snowshoes
- **LOCATION:** Kiandra to Kosciusko, New South Wales
- **DISTANCE/TIME:** 70kms/five days
- **OVERNIGHT:** Pack a tent for camping or choose from a number of public huts. Broken Dam Hut or Four Mile Hut (also known as Hughs Hut) will be good for the first night. Then map your route around Happys Hut, O'Keefes Hut and Mawsons Hut. You may also want to stay at Seamans Hut above Thredbo.
- **WHAT & WHY:** This route was first skied in 1927 and is Australia's most historic backcountry skiing route. The Kiandra Ski Club lays claim to being the first ski club in the world and was founded in the gold fields in 1861. The first part of the tour is undulating and flat. Don't be fooled by Mt Jangungal, it may be one of the highest peaks in Australia but the steep side is misleading as it is rocky and doesn't hold the snow very well. Once you get onto the Main Range you're into the good stuff with the chutes and open bowls in the Club Lake and Blue Lake region, but be prepared for all kinds of weather and for wet river crossings.
- **MAPS / INFO:** Pre-plan your huts on the trip with [kosciuszkohuts.org.au](http://kosciuszkohuts.org.au). Bruce Easton from Wilderness Sports in Jindabyne has all the equipment you need for hire, including camping gear and maps [wildernesssports.com.au](http://wildernesssports.com.au). Check the weather on the Bureau of Meteorology website before venturing out [bom.gov.au](http://bom.gov.au).

## three

- **MISSION:** Lake Loop
- **LOCATION:** Guthega to Carruthers Peak in the Main Range of New South Wales
- **DISTANCE/TIME:** 16kms return/overnight
- **OVERNIGHT:** It is also possible to start this ski tour from Charlotte Pass for a 3km each way day trip. You will need to take a tent if you do this from Guthega as it will require an overnight unless you leave before dawn.
- **WHAT & WHY:** The first few kilometres of terrain is flat until you cross the Snowy Mountain on the bridge at Illawong Lodge. Then there's a gradual climb towards Mt Twynam of around 600 metres of vertical before some downhill towards the Sentinel Ridge and then up to Carruthers. Carruthers Peak falls 200 vertical metres into Australia's highest alpine lake, Club Lake. The chutes

of Club Lake offer both wide and narrow spaced skiing with a 35° pitch. On the north face of Carruthers you will find wide gullies and double the vertical. Expect to be able to ski snow out here until late in the season as this area is the first to receive snow each winter.

- **MAPS / INFO:** Charlotte Pass offers guided backcountry tours into this region [charlottepass.com.au](http://charlottepass.com.au). Alan Andrews book *Skiing the Western Faces* is a must read for anyone venturing into the Main Range of New South Wales (Tapletop Press). The Kosciusko Visitors Guide gives a detailed breakdown on ski trails, huts and camping sites. [environment.nsw.gov.au/parkinfor](http://environment.nsw.gov.au/parkinfor). James Morrow's website, *Oz BC*, has comprehensive trip reports [ozbc.net](http://ozbc.net).



3



4

four

- **MISSION:** Watsons Crag
- **LOCATION:** Charlotte Pass to Watson's Crag, New South Wales
- **DISTANCE/TIME:** A day trip of 14kms return with an early start
- **OVERNIGHT:** Bed down at the Mt Kosciusko Chalet for an early start [charlottepass.com.au](http://charlottepass.com.au)
- **WHAT & WHY:** From Charlotte Pass follow the summer walking track to the Blue Lake Track, then head up to Tenison Woods Knoll and out along the Twynam West Spur to Watson's Crag. The 'crag' present true expert backcountry terrain for skiers who like it steep and deep. The south facing slopes are filled with 'crag' or large granite outcrops, so the chutes here are narrow and steep and require a good snow coverage before being attempted. These are mainly expert lines and you won't be able to see what you're skiing from above, so you'll need to do a recce of the chutes from the Spurs vantage points to choose your line. The northern faces of Watson's Crag are found to the lookers right of Mt Twynam, with plenty of options for the intermediate to advanced backcountry skier. The gullies here are a mix of rocky at the top opening to wide fall line gullies with good steep pitch but shorter runs.
- **MAPS / INFO:** James Morrow's website, Oz BC, has impressive images of these spectacular peaks and ridgelines [ozbc.net](http://ozbc.net).

five

- **MISSION:** Victoria's Rooftop (Bogong to Hotham)
- **LOCATION:** Mt Bogong, Victoria's highest peak, near the township of Mt Beauty.
- **DISTANCE/TIME:** 64km, three or four days
- **OVERNIGHT:** There are plenty of cattleman huts to either stay in or camp nearby including Cleve Cole Hut on Mt Bogong and Ropers Hut on Duane Spur.
- **WHAT & WHY:** This route is traditionally the ultra marathon route for the Rooftop Run held in January across the Bogong High Plains. In 1964 a trio of cross-country skiing mates set a record 13 hours and 15 minutes for the top of Bogong to Hotham. They called it 'the Silver Straight Jacket' route. One of the trio, Charlie Derrick, attempted the Golden Straight Jacket, which was from the base of Bogong to the peak and then on to Hotham in 1965. Sadly he

didn't make it, perishing half a mile from the finish. Norwegian XC skier and USA Olympian, Audun Endestad, did the route in the early 1980s in a record six hours, but most people take three or four days to ski tour this track. Starting at the Mountain Creek campsite, expect a three-hour climb to the summit of Mt Bogong before dropping into Big River. Another ascent will have you onto the Bogong High Plains then it's a ski tour past Falls Creek and Mt Jim, past Combungra Valley, a climb up towards Mt Lock and into Hotham. Phew!

- **MAPS / INFO:** For information on the Bogong High Plains and Alpine National Park maps visit [parkweb.vic.gov.au](http://parkweb.vic.gov.au). Hotham Alpine Resort [hotham.com.au](http://hotham.com.au). Huts Victoria for Cattleman's Hut details [hutsvictoria.org.au](http://hutsvictoria.org.au).

six

- **MISSION:** The Big Commitment
- **LOCATION:** The Du Cane Traverse, Tasmania's Cradle Mountain National Park
- **DISTANCE/TIME:** 20kms of walking on good tacks, a 2km trek and climb onto the range, and 15kms of ski touring. Factor time for at least three days/three nights
- **OVERNIGHT:** Snow camping is your only option so take cold-weather camping gear
- **WHAT WHY:** The Du Cane Range traverse is one of the hardest backcountry routes in Australia and is for the seriously committed or just plain crazy. The scenery is truly spectacular but conditions are variable, to say the least, with ice a serious challenge. Phone coverage is limited so don't even consider doing this alone. You must be an advanced to expert skier to even consider this route and take cold-weather clothes, camping gear, food and snow shoes for some difficult sections. The route is accessed by a four-and-a-half-hour walk off the Overland Track at the Lake St Clair end. Then it's a two or three-and-a-half hour climb onto the range with steep sections, boulder fields and forests. There is no escape as it is exposed

from Castle Crag onwards. Skiers can click in from Castle Crag and ski the gully systems between here and Mt Massif. There is a big descent to Big Gun pass, which has large cliffs in the vicinity and requires great care, then a steep climb onto the Du Cane range and fantastic ski touring from there on the plateau. Skiers come out at the Labyrinth, a rocky outcrop. In good conditions you can ski a fair bit of the Labyrinth but you will need to walk off the mountain for an hour or two to Pine Valley Hut and then it's a three hour walk to the ferry back to Cynthia Bay, which must be booked ahead.

- **MAPS/INFO:** Notify the Park Service before you go. There is a sign-in book at the park station at Cynthia Bay where you will catch the ferry in [parks.tas.gov.au](http://parks.tas.gov.au). A good map is essential. There is a 1:25 000 map sheet of the Du Cane region available from good gear shops in Hobart. Try Jolly Swagman's Camping World in Elizabeth Street [campingworld.com.au](http://campingworld.com.au). To book the ferry call 03 6289 1137 or email [lakestclair@trump.net.au](mailto:lakestclair@trump.net.au) 