

Snow safari

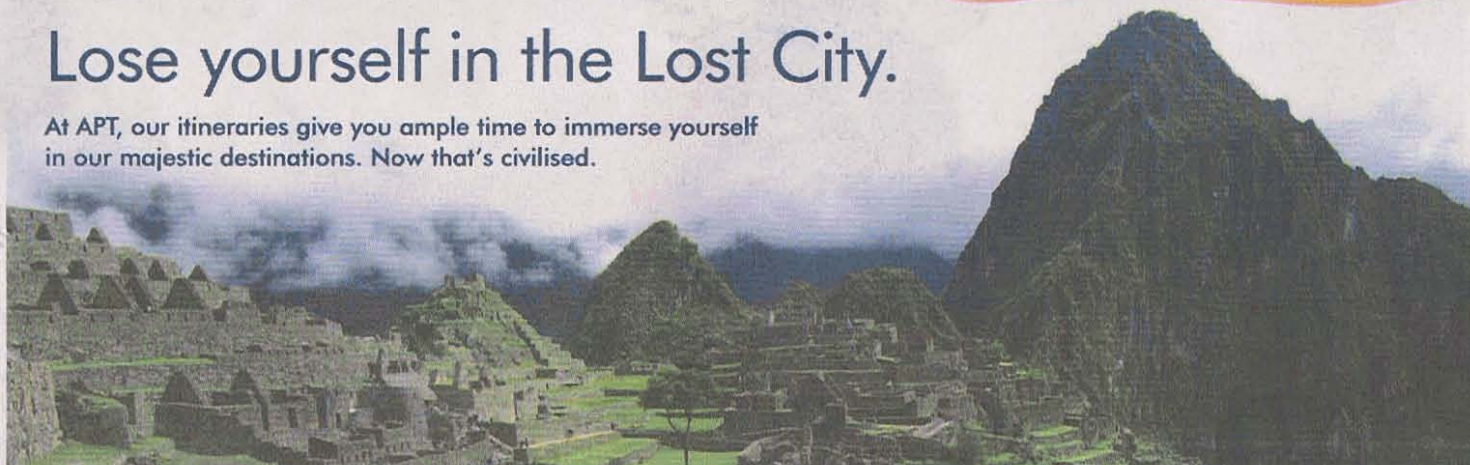
Rachael Oakes-Ash joins the hunt for powder in Arthurs Pass, in the heartland of New Zealand's Craigieburn Ranges.



South America 2008/09

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For many skiers and boarders the quest for powder is akin to the Holy Grail. Not just any powder, either – it must be untracked, untouched virgin snow waiting for a branding. I am hardly religious but I am addicted. I have tasted fresh turns in ungroomed snow and I want more.

Addicts find other addicts, it's only natural, and I'm joined in my quest by six Aussie blokes also in search of secret powder stashes. We're in Arthurs Pass, in the heartland of New Zealand's Craigieburn Ranges and our "dealer" is Heather Dent, a hardened American-turned-Kiwi who likes her mountains steep and her powder thigh deep.

Heather and husband, Symon, own Black Diamond Safaris. This boutique ski company guides international guests through the rugged terrain of Craigieburn, Olympus and Broken River club fields, providing ski tips, lunch on the barbie and four-wheel-drive transport into these little-known snow regions.

The boys and I have chosen a four-night affair with The Burn hosted lodge in Castle Hill as our headquarters. It is run by Tasmanian Bob Edge and Kiwi Phil Stephenson, both keen skiers in winter and anglers in the summer. All the boys are on their best behaviour, slapped over the knuckles by Heather before my arrival. When one of the guests introduces himself as a tradesman with Waste Deep Plumbing and says his name is Tiger I know all bets are off. Boys one, Rachael nil.

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It's the lean season of 2007 following the bumper season of 2006. Winter can be like that, feast or famine, but we make the most of what we've got and know we'll just have to hunt harder to find the good stuff. In fact it's so precarious that Mount Olympus club field has hardly opened this season. It's not so much the lack of snow - there is still enough to be found for a good time - it's the layers that are causing problems.

Avalanche danger is high thanks to weak layers caused early in the season when the snow froze, heated up and froze again. The crystals aren't bonding and the metre or more snow cover on top of the original pack is threatening to slide.

I must confess I have a mammoth fear of avalanches, a phobia of giant proportions. At the same time I am fascinated by them, asking back country enthusiasts to tell me their stories of dodging the white dragon. Yes, I've done avalanche courses, yes I've bought the DVDs, I've even invested in an Avalung (air filtration system) to bide me more time should I go under, yet still I quiver before setting foot off the piste.

Which is why my jaw hits the wagon floor as Heather Dent hauls the boys and me up the winding access road to Craigieburn. I skied here in 2006 when the snow never stopped falling, I've since skied around the world and still I rate Craigieburn in my top five ski experiences. Last time I drove this road we negotiated head-high snow banks, this time we're negotiating rocks and I'm faced by nine rivers of avalanche debris as we park the car beneath the club lodge.

Heather assures me they were set off by Nick, the head ski patroller, who bombs the terrain to ensure the hill is safe for skiers and boarders. This is a backcountry field with lift access but no snowcat groomers so safety is paramount in any season.

The club fields of New Zealand are unique. These private member-owned mountains give a terrific ski experience at half the cost of the commercial ski fields. Guests can stay on the mountain in bunkhouses and basic lodges but they'll find their name on the chores board in exchange for cheap lodging. Hence our bedding down at The Burn where Edge and Stephenson do our chores for us.

Some club fields, such as nearby Porters, have snowmaking and groomers but the



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Head in the clouds ... (above) a lone skier takes on the piste at dusk in New Zealand and (below) enjoying the breathtaking mountainside view.

Photo: Getty Images

true club fields of Cheeseman, Temple Basin, Craigieburn and the like remain natural. Most have nutcracker rope tows – Craigieburn's cable tow is run by a tractor that sits stationary in a mid-mountain shed, its hubs resting on bricks.

Skiers wear a waist belt with a nutcracker contraption joined to the belt by a rope, heavy-duty gloves are worn to grip the moving rope tow cable, the nutcracker is thrown over the side and gripped together by both hands in the hope it will pull you up the hill. That's the theory, anyway, and it takes the boys a while to get the gist even with Dent helping. Rachael one, boys one.

Husband Symon has been skiing these fields since he could stand up and we meet him barbecuing fresh venison on the mid-mountain lodge deck. He's joined by company guide "Chicken", who never reveals his real name or the reason for his nickname.

They know everyone and everyone knows them. Then it's hard not to when there's a mere 40-odd people skiing the mountain each day. It's nice not to share the hill with a thousand folk in designer suits who can only snow plough. It's pure retro dress, big mountain skiers and no lift queues out here.

The hunt is on as Dent guides the boys and me across an open face to some chutes that haven't been tracked. We wear avalanche beacons and practise safe crossing, one skier at a time. The Snow Huntress has sniffed out

her kill and offers up her prey for our taking. We take it with pleasure, making our mark with each turn before heading back up for more of Dent's guidance.

Come sundown we're swapping ski stories over Stephenson's gourmet cuisine at The Burn. The boys devise a complicated drinking game they call Extreme Tumbling Tower involving Jenga and nudie runs through the 50-odd house village, while Dent plots our next day's snow hunting on Broken River's club field terrain. She warns us we'll be earning our turns with a hike to get to the powder but it doesn't slow the boys' drinking.

Tiger and his crew are already talking of returning for another Snow Safari with her this year. That's the beauty of ski tours, they're not always about the amount of snow, more about the people you ski with.

You can't rely on the weather but you can control the quality of your company and if you clash with your guide then chances are you're not going to go home happy. It's impossible to clash with the Dents and their crew, nothing appears to faze them and I want what they're having.

It's been a good day. I win the game of Jenga and remain fully clothed, shouting from the deck to the boys who strip off below.

Rachael two, boys one.

The author was a guest of Ski Tourism Marketing Network, Tourism New Zealand and Air New Zealand.

> TRIP NOTES

■ **Getting there** Air New Zealand flies daily direct from Sydney to Christchurch. The Burn is just over an hour from Christchurch International Airport. See www.airnewzealand.com.au or phone 132 476.

■ **More information** The Snow Hunter multi-day guided ski and snowboard safaris are run by Black Diamond Safaris. Four nights-five days with airport pick-up, daily transport, avalanche transceivers and instruction, lift passes, breakfast, lunch and dinner daily and accommodation at the Burn costs \$NZ2870 (\$2316) a person for two people, \$NZ2320 for three or more people. See www.blackdiamondsafaris.co.nz.

There are no lift queues.

