



THE WHITE STUFF
Ridgeline
skiing at
Summit
Rocks, Treble
Cone.

POLE POSITION

The New Zealand ski season is set to open next month; here are three ways to plan your time on the slopes. BY RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

RESORT SKIING

An active volcano in the heart of the North Island, **Mount Ruapehu** (mtruapehu.com) is home to the country's largest combined ski fields, Whakapapa and Turoa. With big

mountain chutes and easy-rolling natural half-pipes formed by lava flows, Ruapehu delivers the goods for all styles of skier and snowboarder. One lift ticket gets you access to more than a thousand hectares of skiable terrain, and a new high-speed chairlift means more time on the snow. Stay in the quirky village of Ohakune—the so-called “carrot capital” of New Zealand—where the Powderhorn

Chateau (*Mountain Rd.*; 64-6/385-8888; powderhorn.co.nz; doubles from US\$141) offers lodge-style accommodation and plenty of mulled wine.

Freeskiing buffs from around the globe visit the South Island mountain of **Treble Cone** (treblecone.co.nz) to test their mettle on the steep, powder-clad Motatapu Chutes, home to the New Zealand Big Mountain Freeskiing championships. Mere mortals stick to the 550 hectares dedicated to well-groomed corduroy and advanced off-piste runs. An excellent ski school and breathtaking view of Lake Wanaka and the Aspiring Ranges put TC (as the locals call it) in a class of its own. Stay in the town of Wanaka at **Edgewater Resort** (64-3/443-8311; edgewater.co.nz; doubles from US\$189) for plush lakeside accommodation and easy access to the ski fields.

Mount Hutt (mthutt.com) is an hour from Christchurch International Airport, making it the country's most accessible ski resort. Don't be surprised to spot Herman Maier or Mario Matt on the slopes; this is the mountain of choice for the Austrian ski team's southern-hemisphere training. But, this is also a family-friendly place with a good mix of skiing for all levels, including 365 hectares of inbound terrain and the heart-pumping Rakaia Saddle Chutes for those who like it steep. Après-ski action is found in the small town of Methven; rub shoulders with the Austrians who favor the bar at the Forest Lodge, and sleep over at **Ski Time** (*Race Course Ave.*; 64-3/302-8398; skitime.co.nz; doubles from US\$137) for gourmet dinners and big beds.

CLUB FIELDS

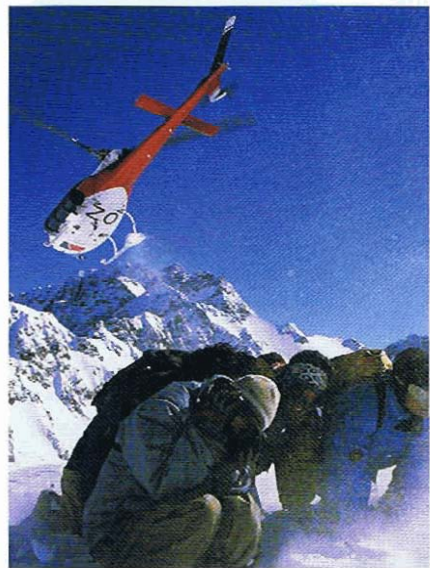
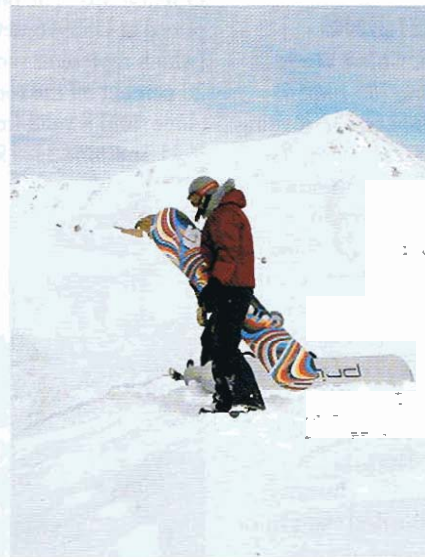
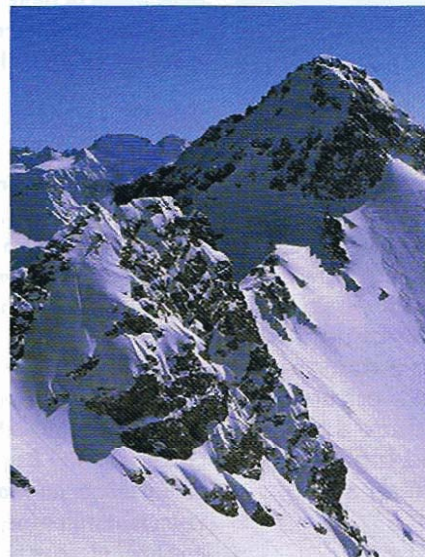
American freeskiing celebrities Seth Morrison and Glenn Plake regularly return to **Craigieburn Valley** (craigieburn.co.nz). For one, this club field, a smaller, less-commercial alternative to ski resorts, offers impressive bowls of untracked snow; then there are the awe-inspiring ridgelines, the finger chutes, and the hospitality of

club members, who spend their lunchtimes barbecuing on the deck of **Koroheke Lodge** (64-3/318-8711; doubles from US\$83). Craigieburn is not for beginners. If you like your snow groomed, then you'd better go elsewhere. It is, however, for those who seek adventure, don't mind pitching in with the chores, and are happy to bunk down in the club. Be prepared to tackle the "nutcracker rope tows," a cable pulley system run by a stationary tractor in a shed. It will be worth the struggle when you reach the peak and survey the terrain and the serious lack of people. No lift queues here, ever. No wonder Silverton Mountain, Colorado, claims Kiwi club fields as its inspiration. It's heaven for off-piste powder hounds and only 90 minutes from Christchurch.

Porters (skiporters.co.nz; day pass US\$60) is a club field with a difference. You will find snow groomers here, so those who like their snow on-piste should be happy. There is also a swanky new million-dollar café and day lodge, which opened last season. Porters's claim to fame is Big Mama—said to be the longest, steepest single ski slope in the Southern Hemisphere. Less than 90 kilometers from Christchurch, Porters is a club field with class for those who want boasting rights without having to rough it. **Alpine Lodge** (64-3/318-4002; doubles from US\$65) provides bunk-style on-mountain accommodation. Go now before the resort

becomes too commercial. Word is of terrain expansion, as bigwigs from Whistler-Blackcomb were spotted surveying Porters from a chopper last year.

You'll find **Temple Basin** (temple-basin.co.nz; day pass US\$47) off Highway 73 in Arthur's Pass not far from Christchurch. Promoted as "inbound backcountry," expect to share the basic lodgings with die-hard powder fiends who have traveled from North America on a whisper of snowy white stashes. Some are put off by the 45-minute walk from the car park to the lodges, but the view is breathtaking and a pulley system will take your bags. Chores are divvied up to weeklong guests to keep the costs down, so expect to roll up your sleeves. What you will get is 320 hectares across four basins of southern powder for all levels of skier



READY FOR TAKEOFF Above and top: Methven Heli takes skiers into the Arrowsmiths Mountain range. Right: A snowboarder at Heli Park in the Southern Alps.

and boarder—and there are no groomers in sight.

HELI-SKIING

Southern Lakes Heli Ski (southern-lakesheli.co.nz; US\$1,100 per person for private charter with an average of 10–15 runs) knows how to put on a party. Their private charter services mean you, a guide, and four of your nearest and dearest get to choose your terrain and have it all to yourself. You could opt for one of their standard heli skis at half the price, but why mix it up with the public? Standard heli-ski days take in three, four, or five runs, but when you have exclusive use, you can get in as many as 15 runs in a day. It is your choice whether you stop for the gourmet lunch or snack on a bit of sushi on the slopes. You don't have to be an extreme skier to make the most of the seven mountain ranges in which they operate. Terrain is chosen to suit your ability, so your ego will be properly taken care of.

Kevin Boekholt is a heli-ski guide with the world's best, Canadian Mountain Holidays. Come the southern season, he packs his bags for his own heli-ski company in downtown Methven, **Methven Heli** (heliskiing.co.nz; US\$670 for five guided runs, gourmet lunch, and transfers) with the pick of the terrain in the Arrowsmiths Mountain range. International guests mix it up with seasoned locals who return each year for a mix of steep terrain, rolling glaciers, rocky chutes, and postcard vistas.

Mount Potts Lodge (mtpotts.co.nz; five heli-ski runs for US\$635) in the Southern Alps is the quintessential Kiwi ski experience. Set on a working backcountry farm complete with sheep and cattle, the lodge is meters from the helipad where the chopper takes guests each morning to the Two Thumb and Cloudy Peak ranges to score some fresh turns. This former cat-skiing operation has also reinvented itself for the 2008 season with the opening of **Heli Park** (US\$157 for access pass and first run; US\$59 per lift thereafter), an Australasian first that takes a maximum of 14 skiers and boarders up to their own 380-hectare mountain. ©