

travel

with Stephen McCarty



A walk on the mild side

Guided treks in the Snowy Mountains are promoted as an easy alternative to arduous foot-slogging. With the help of strapping young guides, Rachael Oakes-Ash finds two nights on Mount Kosciusko challenging and exhilarating.

Nolen Oadya of Kosciusko Alpine Guided Walks understands me. He knows my idea of roughing it is drinking domestic champagne. So he has seduced me into taking a two-night trek in Australia's Snowy Mountains with promises of Bedouin tents, gourmet food and strapping young men carrying my pack ... and like all good seductions, the bait is not what it seems.

A former World Cup freestyle skier, photojournalist and ski coach, Oadya has lived in the Snowy Mountains town of Jindabyne, New South Wales, for 20 years. He was the perfect choice for a leader when entrepreneur Bruce Marshall decided to promote treks in the wilderness. I am told, however, that Oadya is just the front man and our guide, Doug Chatten, is the real brawn.

Pictures: Rachael Oakes-Ash

The first night is spent at Novotel Lake Crackenback in Kosciusko National Park, which keeps my alter ego, Mary Millionaire, satiated with its lakeside location, in-room open fires, golf course and indoor swimming pool.

We meet Chatten early the next day. From a distance, he looks young; up close, he is strapping in a mountain-man sort of way. As a professional guide Chatten has trekked most of Europe and North America. He specialises in outdoor education and follows the leave-no-trace trekking principles espoused by adventure organisations around the world, which means we have to wash using a canister, the contents to be stored and brought back after the trek. I can hear Mary screaming.

Chatten rifles through our packs, discarding any

unnecessary items and lightening the sherpa's load. We have our own superhuman, Stuey, who will be transporting our packs into the backwoods. I wish sherpa Stu was transporting me as we cross the Snowy River barefoot, Ecco trek boots hung by their laces around our necks. The walk has begun.

We are taking the "easy" trek option, following a wooden walkway (to help keep walkers to the path and protect the undergrowth) that winds round the ranges. My four fellow trekkers are all female (groups are limited to six to keep it personal), one a marathon runner, and I make a mental note not to follow her lest I end up in Boston or New York.

It is said that walking is meditative. As we climb hills I

The pristine fresh waters of Blue Lake.



Clockwise from above: Novotel Lake Crackenback resort, where trekkers lap up luxury before heading to the wilds; a barefoot crossing of the Snowy River; despite the sunshine, walkers often encounter snow.



am aware of every breath and every step, and as the climb grows longer I hit a rhythm that, once reached, allows me to take in the scenery of snow-speckled summer hills and sparse terrain. The Snowy Mountains are primarily known as a winter skiing destination, but when the snow clears, the beauty of the alpine landscape is revealed. Alpine marsh marigolds in shades of purple and yellow, and snow buttercups of white dot the scrub.

Kosciusko is the largest national park in New South Wales; it is also home to the country's highest glacial lakes and highest mountain, Mount Kosciusko, which stands at 2,228 metres. On day one we explore Blue Lake, a natural crater of fresh water. The granite cliffs surrounding the lake feature waterfalls of ice, which give way in the heat. It's an impressive sight, even more so when lying back as we "decramp" our muscles and enjoy a picnic lunch. Next stop, base camp, for home-cooked food and river-chilled wine. We just have to walk another two hours to get there.

Sherpa Stu does a good job of setting up camp in a sheltered outcrop. Two canvas tepees represent the kitchen and the bathroom (with canister), thankfully placed at opposite ends of the camp. One-man cocoon tents are

scattered around the mother Bedouin tent, where we meet for meals.

I have never before been camping. If I had, I might have settled into slumber more easily. As it is, curled up and zipped into my down sleeping bag on a mattress, I toss and turn throughout the night, convinced there are bogeymen in the wilds around me. My tent has no double-locking system, no bars on the windows, no smoke alarm. The only thing that saves me is the smell of pancakes at sunrise. Over breakfast, Chatten tells us tales of Laurie Seaman, who perished in a blizzard on the way to the summit of Mount Kosciusko in 1928. His mate, Evan Hayes, was lost in the snow behind him and found dead lying on his skis when the weather broke. Seaman died waiting for Hayes. Seaman's Memorial Hut marks the spot along the trail to the top of the country.

After 6km of morning trekking I am happy to set eyes on the hut, but there is a mountain to conquer and three more kilometres to go. It's cold in the wind despite the cloudless sky, but we all take a moment to mark the occasion as we set foot on the mountain.

Because much of the trek from Kosciusko to Thredbo is on wooden decking, anyone of reasonable fitness can

climb the mountain. Our first sight of other humans is along this latter part of the route – and we are soon inundated with tourists doing the half-day return saunter from Thredbo. I am disappointed to see them, the solitude of outdoor life having crept up on me, but it's all downhill from here and I can hear the cappuccinos of Crackenback a-calling. It's amazing how much energy you have left when the end is in sight ... and for the first time I overtake the marathon runner.

Getting there: Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com) flies direct from Hong Kong to Sydney. Transfers from Sydney to Kosciusko can be organised through Novotel Lake Crackenback resort, which charges A\$549 [\$3,300] a person for two nights in a luxury lakeside apartment with hot breakfast, plus a two-day, one-night guided walk. See www.novotellakecrackenback.com.au for more information, or call 61 2 6451 3000. The Leave No Trace organisation practises outdoor ethics from the backyard to the back country. See www.lnt.org.