



chicks on sticks

STORY & PHOTOS BY RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

You can tell how a person is between the sheets by the way they tackle the ski slopes. Testosterone Tonys throw themselves down with brute force and a desire to get to the bottom the fastest. We oestrogenites focus on the journey: we know we'll get to the bottom but why rush the good stuff?

Women approach the mountain with reverence; men show no fear. We think too much; men don't think at all. We care about how we look in case anyone's watching; men don't care so long as they're being watched.

Hence the need for women only ski weeks: nurturing safe environments for intermediate female skiers to push themselves to the next level with loads of laughs and encouragement from all female instructors.

Twenty-eight women gather at Mt Hotham once a year to partake in the L'Oreal Visible Results Women's Week. I lie on my feedback form, talking up my French Alps experience which consisted

of more pissed than piste. As a result I find myself in the top group of four with five serious women with helmets.

Some of our group have been skiing this mountain since they were little tackers. Now is not the time to tell them this is only my second season of skiing, full stop. Reverence must be paid by the group to these women lest the mountain mafia track me down and I find myself in concrete ski boots at the bottom of the Snowy. I learn my lesson when I ski too close to one and she hisses in my direction. I am the first to fall and I can hear the collective exhale of breath from the ladies as they all think, "Thank god that wasn't me."

Meanwhile my ski buddies in the groups below applaud each other with every turn, shouting positive affirmations as their fellow piste heads carve it up. They clink hot chocolate flasks and bask in each other's success. I curse my competitive nature and stick close to my leader, ski instructor Lisa Kilpatrick, for comfort.

"Why do you ski?" asks Lisa on our first day. Must be the wet arse, sore quads and

panda suntan, I say. "Why do you ski?" she asks again. Because I am goal focused on the way down and social focused on the way up (you never know who you meet on the chairlift).

Like me, Lisa took to skiing later in life. Unlike me she can ski. She understands the fears women face on the snow and by mid week we trust her with our lives, finding ourselves on black runs and drop offs we never thought possible.

There's no shouting, just a calm safe belief that we can do it and if she thinks so then I don't want to let her down and neither do my fellow females who have bonded over coffee each night while I danced on tables with a Val Kilmer look-alike at Hotham's General Store pub.

Instruction starts daily at 10am. We break two hours later for lunch at Zirky's where our silver haired Austrian Host tells stories of how he cheated Hitler's Youth. Two hours of more tuition follow and then it's video analysis of our 'skiing capabilities.'

As the days progress so does our skiing and it's me exhaling when the mountain mafia fall on their jump turns. I suspect I'll be going to hell but at least I can apologise to her there. Women high five, laugh and squeal as we take ourselves out of our comfort zones and pick up speed. This is truly fun and I applaud my addiction.



FACT FILE

Fit 2 Ski programs at Fitness First www.fitnessfirst.com.au prevent sore muscles. Contact Holly Cogle from Vital Motion www.vitalmotion.com.au for your personal program.

Mt Hotham

L'Oreal Women's Week is held every July for powder and pampering. Private instruction with Lisa Kilpatrick can be arranged this season (03) 5759 4430. Fly direct to Mt Hotham www.hotham.com.au from Sydney and be on the slopes by lunchtime. www.qantaslink.com.au

Falls Creek

I followed up Mt Hotham with the Mim Sodergren Women's Week at Falls Creek www.falls creek.com.au with Virginia Vindin-Price who co-ordinates the program and her outfits daily. Ask for Jessie Pitt as your instructor (03) 5758 1070 – she's hell, which means good in ski speak. Fly to Albury direct www.qantaslink.com.au and hire a car for the 1.5-hour drive www.europcar.com.au
 Stay: Huski Ski Lodge www.huski.com.au for Zeth Romanis' Produce Store and Endota Day Spa bliss.
 Drink: Astra Lodge Vodka Bar www.astralodge.com.au The menu reads like a bitch fest with Polish Mother in Law and Polish Stepmother as two cocktails.

Come Friday morning and I am invited on a one on one ski fest with world champion extreme free skier, Andrea Binning. 'No problem,' I say to myself. 'I am a legendary woman skier,' repeating my week's mantra. I would like to say I beat her down the slope and impressed her with my aerial jumps off exposed rocks but I am afraid I blinked and missed her. She was down the bottom before I could say "super-cali-fragi-ski-lish-ex-be-ali-downhill". Still, I am proud for a week ago I would not have even braved the run I follow her tracks down.

The real test comes when I am invited to ski with Marcus Lovett of the Snow Show. This time it's Rach and the blokes as Val and his mate Hugh join us. At one tree gully Marcus telemarks down with style, Val rides the snow on his board and Hugh tries to follow. The snow is crusty on top and air filled below. Thanks to Lisa's instruction, I know exactly what

to do as I jump turn, lightly pole planting for direction.

Hugh bottoms out and heads off the hill midway. I on the other hand plant, jump and turn but there's no one there to watch my technique, they've all buggered off to the bottom. As I ski down One Tree and then onto the groomed stuff they are tapping their watches in defiance. Technique takes time, I say, as I inform them I am never climbing Everest with any of them lest they leave me behind. It's not till lunchtime that I discover Marcus is a Winter Olympian and I swallow my words.

But I know I conquered that mountain. They may have not seen me, but I did. If they had looked up instead of beating each other down they would have seen my poetry in motion.

Next time I'm enrolling *them* in Mt Hotham's Women's Week. 