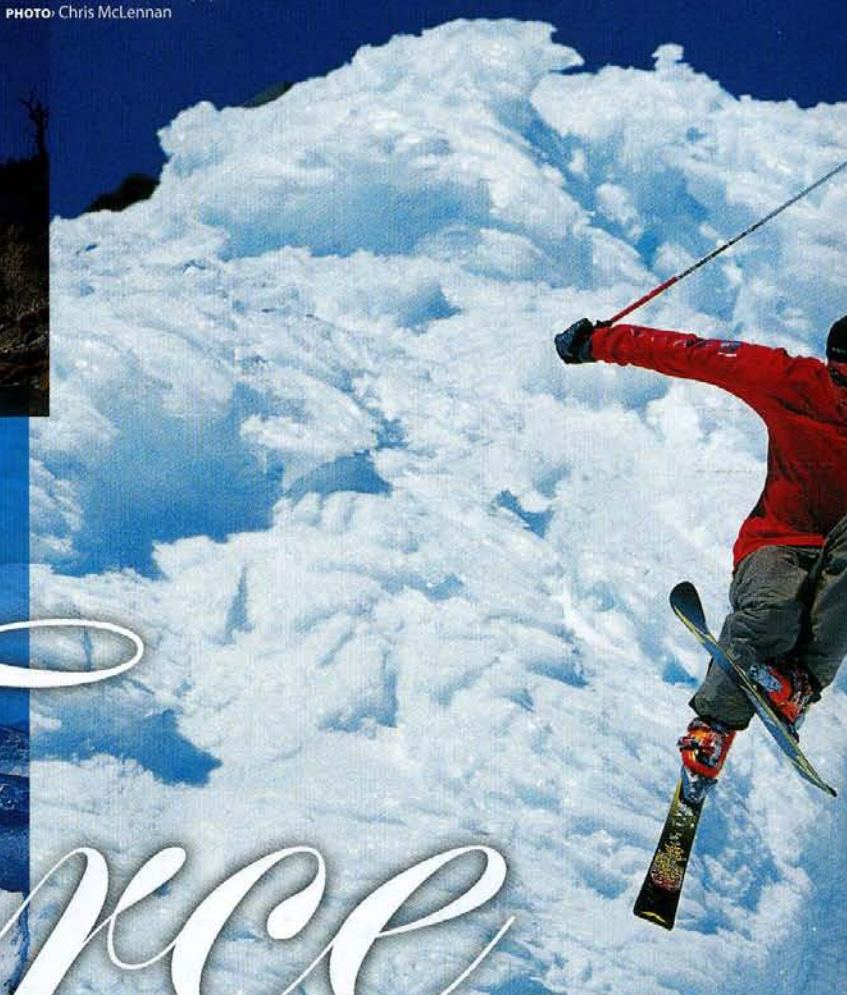
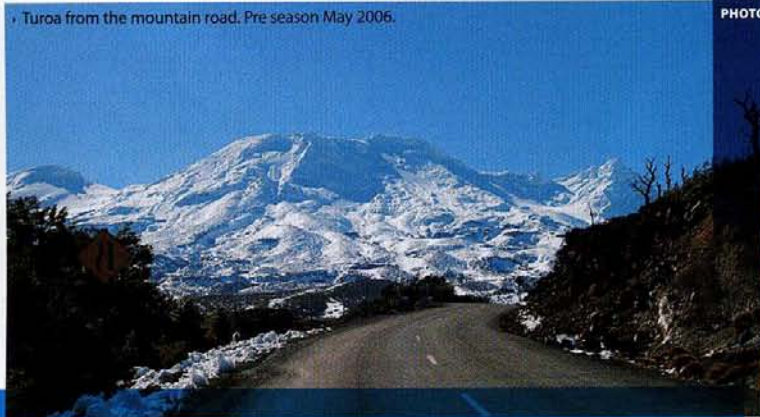


• Turoa from the mountain road. Pre season May 2006.

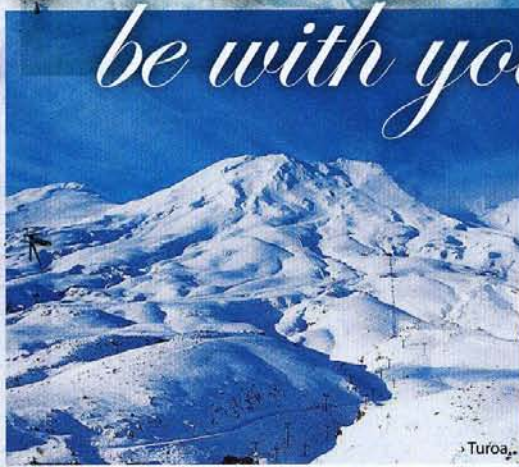
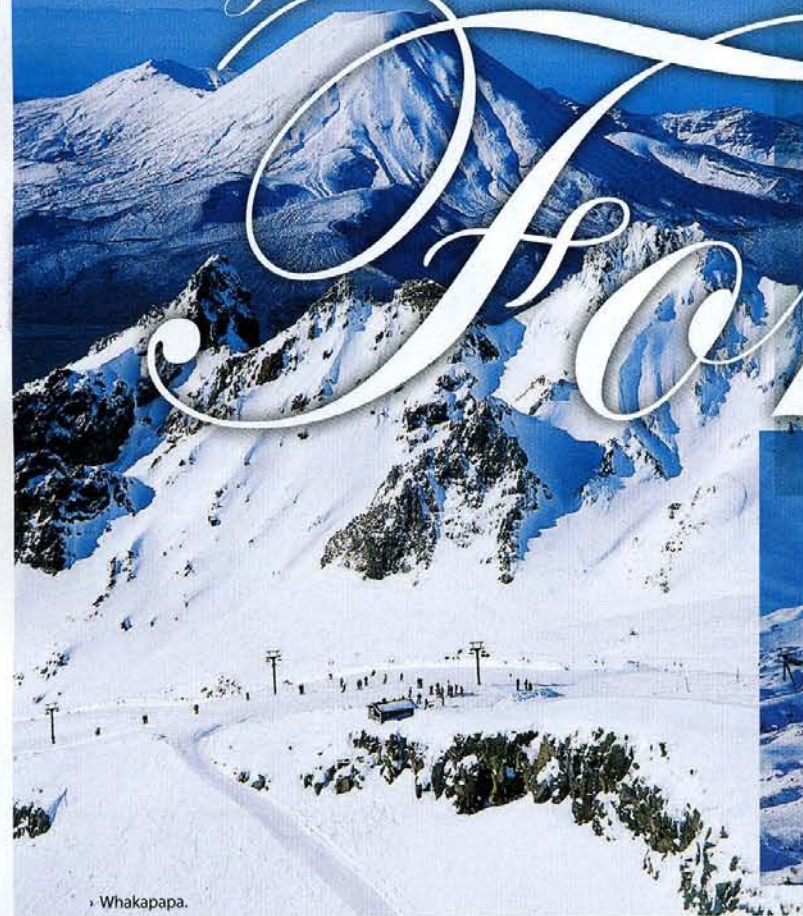
• Cam Roberston at Whakapapa.
PHOTO: Chris McLennan



may the

Force

be with you



• Whakapapa.

• Turoa.

Giant carrots, eruptions and strange nicknames could make you draw some disconcerting conclusions about Mt Ruapehu. But it's a mountain that commands respect – and lures you back as Rachael Oakes-Ash discovered.

Mt Ruapehu has Mana, that's Maori speak for power and psychic force. It's also an active volcano meaning you don't want to mess with the mana here, you might get burnt. The most recent eruptions were in 1995/96 but they're a hardy bunch in these parts – after the '95 eruption the skiing only stopped for half a day.

Access roads were closed as recently as March 18 this year when a lahar, or mudslide, from the crater

lake made its way to the sea via the Whangaehu river. This time no one got hurt, unlike the last lahar in 1953 when 151 people died when the mud washed away a rail bridge.

But that doesn't stop thousands of Kiwis from schussing down Ruapehu's slopes come winter time when the mountain boasts the most snow and the deepest base in the country (an average two to three metres).

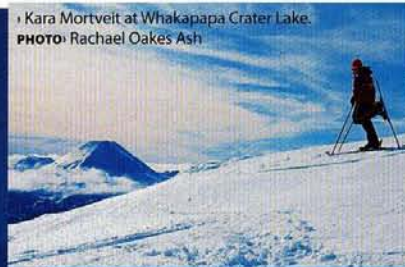
It may not have the neon lights of

Queenstown or the international airport of Christchurch but it does have over one thousand hectares of seriously awesome terrain across two ski areas and when the conditions are on I know where I'd rather be. This mountain is hot, pun intended.

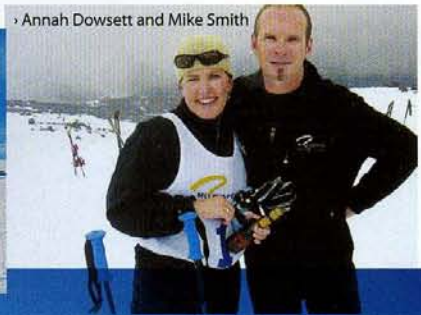
Snowsports lovers from Auckland and Wellington have been skiing this mountain since 1929 when the first rope tow was installed and with phase one of a \$40million mountain development set to open this

season, they'll be doing it for 75 years more. A six-seater high-speed chairlift, 1.4kms in length, ensures it's one super speedy trip all the way to the top at Turoa ski area.

The money for the project was raised by selling life passes for NZ\$3875 to NZ\$4995. It's that kind of mountain; those that ride its slopes are as loyal as bloodhounds and proud to call it their own. They don't mind handing over the mullah, no one profits as the lift



› Kara Mortveit at Whakapapa Crater Lake.
PHOTO: Rachael Oakes Ash



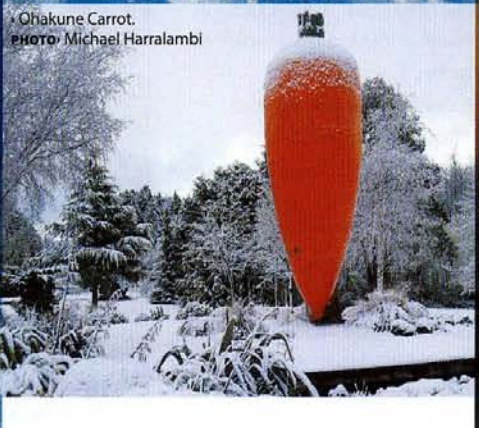
› Annah Dowsett and Mike Smith



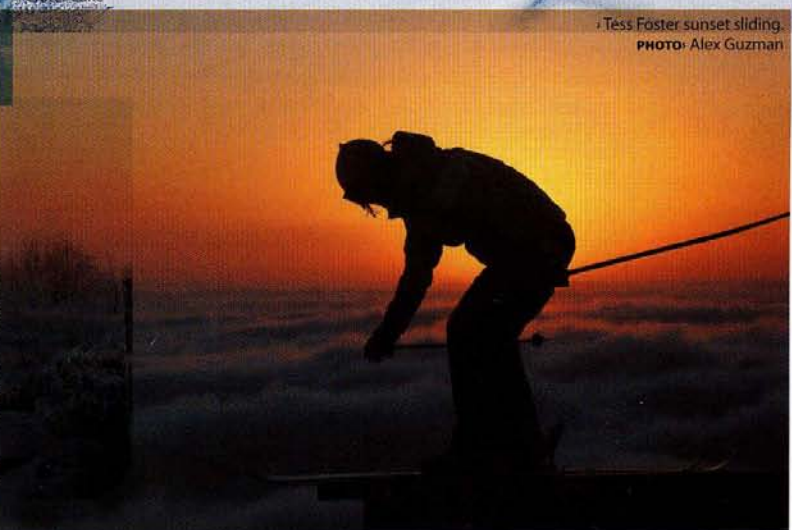
› Crater Lake



› Logan Bennett in Turoa Terrain Park.
PHOTO: Olivier Renassia



› Ohakune Carrot.
PHOTO: Michael Harralambi



› Tess Foster sunset sliding.
PHOTO: Alex Guzman

company's, Ruapehu Alpine Lifts' constitution requires all profits to be invested back into the mountain.

The mountain may have mana but it also has its demons. The nature of the geography, a giant mountain literally standing alone in a plain, means it's exposed to the elements. You can be skiing a blue bird day one moment and be in a white out the next as the weather settles in. Sometimes it lasts an hour but other times it's been known to close the mountain for days.

Ruapehu is divided into Whakapapa and Turoa, and most have their preferred area to ski.

Whakapapa, the 'wh' is pronounced with an 'f', is the butt of usual jokes from those that hear its name for the first time.

It's hard to believe much has changed when skiing on the Whakapapa side where retro is fashionable by accident. Ski club stalwarts don the same one pieces in pastel colours they've been sporting since the 80s, many negotiating the powder with impressive agility on toothpick skis.

It's all about The Pinnacles at Whakapapa, rocky chutes set on a steep pitch. Head out to the Black Magic Lift accessed backcountry and

experience natural half pipes as the snow falls into the lava setting. The purists ski Whakapapa, no doubt because they grew up as members of the various ski clubs that line the access road at the base of the lifts.

Turoa is more of a contradiction. There's plenty for the skier who likes his/her runs open and wide so they can go at mach speed but also lots of off-piste and backcountry here, even a glacier, to keep boarders and freeskiers more than happy. Add Australasia's longest vertical, 722metres, and you won't be complaining.

The ski town at Turoa, Ohakune, is

known as the 'carrot capital' of New Zealand and a giant carrot welcomes visitors on the road in. Well, it's not really giant, it's more medium sized, not quite big enough to warrant a door and a souvenir shop inside and not quite small enough to fit into a casserole.

Home to 1236 residents, everyone has a nickname in Ohakune, even those that don't want one. You may be christened Jeremy, Andrew or Craig but you're more likely to be introduced as Paddy, Monster or Dribble. It's best not to ask, better to offer them a drink and watch them drink ten.



Turoa
PHOTO: Glyn Hubbard

Thank god folk round these parts are friendly, when the mountain closes you need as many friends as you can get to pass the time. Everyone has a story of how they came to settle in Ohakune. Most are locals that tried to leave but found the mana drew them back.

Annah Dowsett, nickname Moo, customer service manager for Turoa ski field, grew up in Ohakune, the daughter of publicans who ran the original Ohakune Hotel. She left for a short time, to work in the ski fields of Japan and Canada but she too returned, drawn by the power of the mountain. Like most in Ohakune, she takes life with a smile.

"I started working at Turoa at 17 as a snow hostess, we wore pink one piece suits and smiled, we were known as the Twinkies because we were soft and squishy on the outside and the joke was there's not much going on in the middle" laughs Moo who now works in mountain management and manages a staff of 18.

Then there's Paul Steiglbauer, nickname Little Hands, whose father was maintenance manager at the Whakapapa Chateau for 22-years. He couldn't wait to get out off the National Park, the even smaller village on the Whakapapa side. But he too returned and opened the Projection Room in 2000, a funky bar joint with turntable and fusion dining more suited to metro than rural town.

"Everybody comes back, you can't help it. There's something about it" says Little Hands as he serves up Polish honey vodka with his trademark grin.

The town's retail outlets are filled with similar stories. Aucklander, Charles George, nickname Chubb, is the proprietor of the Snow Centre store and grew up skiing weekends at Tongariro Ski Club where he learnt to ski race. When it came to opening his own ski and snowboard store in New Zealand, Ohakune was a no brainer, it's easier to sell what you love where you love.

Did we mention James Foubister, aka Uncle or Monster depending on who you talk to in town? He grew up in these parts and he too tried to leave, doing seasons in Utah, Crested Butte and European ski areas.

"I would get drunken phone calls in the middle of the night saying wicked day today on Ruapehu. I thought I was missing out, I'm a Kiwi

“ Ohakune's 'giant carrot' is more medium sized, not quite big enough to warrant a door and a souvenir shop inside and not quite small enough to fit into a casserole. ”

boy at heart and anywhere else just wasn't the same."

Like the others, he returned and now works as a retail manager at the Junction Ski and Board shop year round. Uncle and Moo were both on the mountain when the last eruption

happened. Moo tells the story of going to the pub and pulling the table and chairs outside to watch the lava meltdown after dark.

The drama was exciting, especially as no one got hurt, but the eruption hit the ski season hard as many staff left overnight and the skiers stopped coming, for a short time. In true Ohakune fashion they took it in their stride.

Uncle donned a gas mask and swept the ash from the street, sending all the other townfolk inside on Thames Street as the train slowly came through town. He thought it was hilarious, lord knows what the passengers thought as they looked out on the town beneath the volcano, one mad man in a gas mask with a broom.

That's the backbone of Mt Ruapehu. It's not just the awesome skiing and the fact you'll be the only Aussie in town. It's the people like Moo, Chubb, Little Hands and their

FAST FACTS



PHOTO: Glyn Hubbard

WHERE:

Mt Ruapehu, North Island, New Zealand
www.mtruapehu.com

GETTING HERE:

Air New Zealand flies direct from Sydney and Melbourne to Wellington and from Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide to Auckland. Mt Ruapehu is a four hour drive from both these cities or under two hours from Palmerston North or Taupo airports.
www.airnewzealand.com.au

WHERE TO STAY:

Miro Ridge is a stumble from the bars of Thames Street. It's a clean and friendly ski lodge style accommodation at a budget price. www.miroridge.co.nz

WHERE TO EAT:

Utopia Café for breakfast and coffee to take up the mountain: 47 Clyde Street, Ohakune. The Projection Room for Asian fusion style tapas before 10pm and a DJ and honey vodka till late: Thames Street, Ohakune. The Powderkeg for steak, shooters and some stick: Thames Street, Ohakune. www.powderhorn.co.nz

WHEN TO GO:

Fallout Festival August 18 – September 8
www.falloutfestival.co.nz

WHERE TO GET GEAR:

The Snow Centre at the Powderhorn
www.snowcentre.co.nz
The Junction Ski & Board
28 Thames Street