

Snow wars:

New Zealand versus Australia



KIWI cool ... New Zealand's Mt Hutt.



NATURAL high ... Australia's Thredbo.

As we head into the ski season, the battle between Aussie and Kiwi slopes hots up, writes **Rachael Oakes Ash**

ASK a Kiwi about skiing in Australia and they'll laugh from the belly. One look at the big mountain peaks of New Zealand's Southern Alps and Australians know why. But while 50,000 Aussies cross the Tasman to schuss the slopes each winter, few New Zealanders come our way. Those Kiwis haven't done their figures.

Australia has the longest ski run in Australasia, a 5.9km run at Thredbo in New South Wales. It also has the largest commercial ski area in Australasia, Perisher Blue's 1245 hectares across seven peaks.

When it comes to vertical, however, the Kiwis have us beaten: Turoa's 722 metres of vertical at Mt Ruapehu on the North Island beats our best — Thredbo's 672 metres. In fact both Mt Hutt (683 metres) and Treble Cone (700 metres) on the South Island still beat Australia on vertical.

The average hectares of ski-able terrain per ski area is a different story. Take New Zealand's top seven commercial fields (Treble Cone, Remarkables, Coronet, Hutt, Whakapapa, Turoa and Cardrona) and average their ski-able hectares against Australia's top five (Thredbo, Perisher, Hotham, Falls and Mt Buller) and Australia leads with 540 ski-able hectares versus 397. Translated? That makes the average Australian ski area 26 per cent larger than the Kiwi ski area.

The battle continues with snow. In the Australasian ski industry it's best not to mention the "war" but we all remember the tragic lack of snow in Australia last season while New Zealand thrived under metres of the stuff in the best season in 20 years.

We also remember the year before when New Zealand experienced a serious snow drought, some fields closed early while Australia was thigh-deep.

You can spout figures back and forth across the Tasman but the ski experience speaks to individuals and each field within each territory has its own strengths. Those who prefer a more European style of skiing choose Australian ski fields for their mountain villages. All major ski fields offer ski-in, ski-out access from accommodation (and bars) to ski runs.

Falls Creek, by far the prettiest ski village in Australia and New Zealand, is pedestrian-only. Guests park in the long-term carpark and are transported by snow cat to their accommodation. Across the range, Mt Hotham village sits on the top of the mountain, meaning first run down is to get to the first chairlift.

Many a visitor to Queenstown and Wanaka in New Zealand's South Island have been surprised to realise getting to their ski area of choice can take anything from 25 minutes to an hour's drive on roads that are generally not sealed and not for the faint-hearted.

The payback is guests in Queenstown and Wanaka have a choice of four or more ski fields each morning.

For dedicated party people, Queenstown is the clear winner with 120 licensed establishments in a square kilometre, with many open until dawn.

Add a plethora of dining options from fine dining to

casual and themed, and other ski towns need not apply. If you like to ski through the trees, then Australian snow gums are part of the quintessential Down Under ski experience; if you don't then head to New Zealand where snow is above the tree line, the runs wide and open with breathtaking lake and plateau views.

Gourmet foodies may well prefer to dine on mountain in Australia where award-winning dining exists both on the ski runs and in the ski-in, ski-out villages. Thredbo has more than seven on-mountain restaurants possible to ski into and that doesn't include the premium dining options in the village.

New Zealand has yet to raise its bar with on mountain catering, it's simply best to pack your own lunch, as choice and quality are limited. Treble Cone does deserve applause for its catering with daily specials, fresh produce and even gluten-free options.

Most yearly skiers are intermediates who like to stick to the groomed, for these skiers the skiing is not dissimilar in both countries. Thredbo and Hotham lovers will argue the pitch of Funnel Web and Mary's Slide is steeper than Whakapapa Pinnacles, Remarkables Finger Chutes and Treble Cone's Motatapu Chutes but they're not groomed and if you can ski one of them you can ski them all.

New Zealand does tend to have more challenging off-piste terrain accessed by traverse or hike from the commercial ski boundaries. Think of Coronet Peak's back bowls, Remarkables homeward bound, Mt Hutt's "other side" and Turoa's glacier.

Mt McKay and Mt Hotham both offer cat skiing for an alpine backcountry experience, however New Zealand offers up some exciting terrain for the seriously experienced or those who simply have disposable cash. Two words — heli-skiing.

The Southern Alps of New Zealand extend for more than 550km and are accessible by chopper. You don't have to be an extreme skier to heli-ski, there is appropriate terrain suited to every level.

Then there's the glacial skiing, cat skiing and the quirky and cheap club fields of New Zealand where guests are given chores and everyone pitches in when the last rope tow closes for the day. They're intimate and remote and there's never a lift queue, just hectares of big mountain terrain.

The bottom line comes with lift pass costs. A day lift pass in Australia ranges from \$90 at Hotham and Falls, to \$95 at Perisher. In New Zealand it starts at \$71 (\$NZ80) at Mt Ruapehu to \$88 (\$NZ99) at Treble Cone. You do the maths.

Australia's response? We have created Andrea Binning, a world champion extreme free skier who is a Hotham devotee. Mt Buller is favoured by Winter Olympic medallists Jacqui Cooper and Alisa Camplin and snowboard champion Torah Bright is a Perisher Blue regular. Did we mention the first non-European to win an FIS World Cup was an Australian? Malcolm Milne in 1969.

Enough said.