

Snowed under

When the temperature drops and the stress of city life gets too much, people in Victoria and NSW head for the hills for a little R&R.

STORY Rachael Oakes-Ash





MT BULLER

BULLER, AS THE MOUNTAIN IS affectionately known, is the training ground for Australia's winter Olympians and has groomed the likes of aerial medallists Alissa Camplin and Jacqui Cooper. But Mt Buller also provides plenty of action for mere mortals, from the moment revellers place their designer-shod heels upon the dancefloor of the opening weekend's Black Cockatoo Ball to the annual acrobatics of the World Aerials each spring.

For Melburnians looking for a weekend winter playground, Buller is only three hours away, so don't be surprised to find yourself skiing the runs with your neighbour's sister's cousin twice removed. Like most small towns, this ski village has its regulars, including the Toorak socialites flicking through the racks of Prada parkers with their Chanel-painted talons at Niks for Skiing, and students from La Trobe University's mountain campus (wearing last season's off-cuts, but not having any less of a good time for that).

Time is a commodity in Mt Buller, as most visitors have only a few days to discover the mountain and its delights, but never let it be said you went to Buller and didn't take in these treats:

- The Grimus family serves up true Austrian fare at Hotel Pension Grimus. Don't leave without trying the Salzberger Nockerl, a sinful soufflé of hazelnut and chocolate. You could always try asking the Austrian slap dancers to beat it off your thighs post-consumption.
- The Après Café and Bar at the Mt Buller Chalet Hotel is the place to swap stories of your off-piste adventures. Talk them up over a mulled wine and watch the beginners stack on the Bourke Street ski run.
- Quiet types will enjoy the on-mountain cinema at the La Trobe campus, but those wanting to dance till dawn should head for the Kooroora Bistro for some schtick, live bands and DJs till dawn.

Oh, and did we mention the snow at Mt Buller? It offers more than 260 hectares of skiable terrain, in fact, and with the village situated halfway up the mountain, skiers will find themselves above the morning clouds. Twenty-five ski lifts carry snow sport junkies above the treeline for intermediate, wide open groomed runs, tight compact chutes for the advanced and easy beginner grades. In short, something for everyone.

LAKE CRACKENBACK

NOLEN OAYDA IS WHAT THEY CALL in the Snowy Mountains an "almost local". That is, he's lived in these parts for 20 years. A former World Cup freestyle skier, photojournalist and ski coach, Nolen is au fait with the ways of the Mt Kosciuszko ski fields.

I've met Nolen's type before. Actually, I've met Nolen before, last summer, when he seduced me into a two-night summer trek in the Snowy Mountains with promises of Bedouin tents, gourmet food and strapping young men to carry my pack. I got the tents and gourmet food but am still waiting on the strapping young men.

I return in winter to claim this unkept promise, dreaming of ski instructors with superbly muscled thighs. My destination is once again the Novotel Lake Crackenback, where Nolen entertains tourists, in Kosciuszko National Park. The largest national park in NSW, it's home to the country's highest glacial lakes and its tallest mountain, Mt Kosciuszko, at 2228 metres.

In summer the resort is surrounded by scrubland, alpine flowers and crater lakes. During winter it's a world of white, but I am not afraid, despite my memory of Nolen's last words before I left for a European ski trip. "Hope you have your affairs in order!" he called as I drove away from the hotel.

For three days he had spooked me with tales of lost skiers in the crasse of France's Mont Blanc. Thankfully, the Vallée Blanche was closed when I was in Chamonix, so I return to the Snowy Mountains keen to try my hand at the black runs of nearby Thredbo and Perisher Blue, connected to the resort by a ski tube. Neither disappoints, and my only dilemma each day is which one to choose: the double black of Perisher's Kamikaze or the long, long run of Thredbo's 5km Super Trail.

Lake Crackenback is a peaceful retreat at the end of a thigh-burning ski day. The bars of Thredbo and lakeside Jindabyne are not far, should I wish to partake in shots of schnapps, but the fire inside my Crackenback lakefront apartment is too tempting as I open a bottle of red.

The doorbell rings and finally, my strapping young man arrives. It's room service. I am content to swap the promise of testosterone for fine fireside cuisine, at least until my private ski lesson with Klaus on the slopes tomorrow. ■



FACT FILE

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Mercure's Mt Buller Chalet offers ski-in, ski-out mountain lodge intimacy, open fires, open bars and a fine dining restaurant with valley views.

MORE INFO

See www.mtbuller.com.au



FACT FILE

WHERE TO STAY

Novotel Lake Crackenback Resort is located on the lakefront, with stunning views of the mountains and apartment-style accommodation.

MORE INFO

Visit www.snowymountains.com.au