

Travel

Peak practice

In today's special ski edition we take you from the Australian snowfields to Dubai, one of the world's most unlikely skiing destinations. Here ski writer RACHAEL OAKES-ASH recalls her virgin days on the slopes.

THEY say a man peaks at 17 and a woman in her 30s. When it comes to passion, then I'm on track, finding mine on the baby slopes of Coronet Peak, New Zealand, in my mid 30s. Two years ago I was a snow virgin and my instructor, Brett, was my first.

He was good and I found my calling. Seventeen instructors later and I am well versed in the art of skiing.

My drive to conquer the mountains on sticks came after a humiliating experience at Cardrona ski resort in front of New Zealand's Prime Minister, Helen Clarke. I had talked up my total four days of skiing prowess, convinced I was a world champion and scored an invite to the opening of a new chair lift.

Helen did her speech and we all skied down behind her to the lift where she was going to cut the ribbon, only I didn't make it.

I got stuck on an intermediate blue run and ended up having to ski between the legs of a kiwi mate to make it to the bottom after three spectacular falls, each witnessed by Helen and her press mates as they caught the lift above us. There was laughter, theirs, and tears, mine.

I loathe not being good at something, especially in front of others, so I made a commitment then to return to Cardrona and ski every run before the end of the season.

An intensive week of daily private lessons in the New South Wales resort of Thredbo ensured I did just that.

Having proved myself in the south I went north to the French Alps and met Aldo – a six-foot French-Italian ski instructor complete with green eyes and a killer smile. We could call him a cliché but Aldo sounds better. He skied and I followed, he watched his silhouette to make sure he looked good and I watched him because he looked good.

He ordered panache (the French equivalent of shandy), wine (the French staple) and chartreuse (the local liqueur) at lunch and I paid for the privilege of feeding him. He could still ski perfectly after our liquid lunch while I had to ski off behind a rock to vomit.

There were others after Aldo. I tried and occasionally succeeded in mastering deep powder with Romeo in Japan, learnt moguls from Guernsey at Aspen, avalanche technique from Julien in Sunshine Village, Canada, and natural half pipes with Tim at Treble Cone, New Zealand.

Yes, there were girls – Nerida at Thredbo, Cara at Whakapapa, NZ, Lisa at Mt Hotham, Jessie at Falls Creek and Ollie at Lake Louise, Canada. They taught me about the Q Angle.

Apparently it's in my hips and forces my legs together.

After my first week I bought my first ski jacket, handing over a mortgage payment in exchange for what the shop assistant assured me would protect me from Himalayan-style conditions while still making me look svelte.

After my second week I invested in skis that I schlepped across the Tasman for a week then sold on eBay, preferring to rent demo skis at each destination and save my back.

After my third week I booked in for a detox session to counteract too much apres ski. It's a social sport, you never know who you're going to meet in the gondola on the way up the mountain and who you'll meet again when the sun goes down.

I knew at my age I had lost a lot of ski ground and had a lot of catching up to do. The secret to improvement is time spent on snow and I needed time, which is why I became a ski journalist.



Steep learning curve . . . the view of Mt Blanc seen from Chamonix in the French Alps, top; the writer skiing in Hokkaido, Japan.
Picture: MICHAEL ROMEO.



That and the obvious industry rates that would subsidise my costly passion.

Technique was my obsession, refusing to listen to anyone that didn't have a level 4 instructor accreditation to their name.

Each ski trip I set a goal, conquer the black runs, learn the moguls, ski off piste, trek backcountry, go up in a chopper.

In two years I clocked up 14 weeks on snow in 23 resorts with 121 hours of private instruction and two weeks of intensive group ski programs. I now ski moguls, off piste and double black diamonds and do it for fun.

Do I get scared? Yes, I was terrified the first time I pointed my skis down the hill and that was on the baby slopes.

Two seasons later I drank myself under the table the night before I was to hike Sunshine Village's Delirium Dive and ski it's steeper terrain, but I survived both the hangover and the hike and booked in for back country cat skiing immediately.

Have I been hurt? Yes, while trying to save a snowboarder from almost certain death in extreme terrain territory. He came out with a bruised ego, I came out with six weeks of physiotherapy and a torn MCL in my left knee.

Skiing gets me out of the house. As a single 30-something who lives on her own and works for herself, I was in danger of wearing mental

health grey. There's a bond between those who love the snow, we can talk about it for hours, so long as the lifts aren't running. Walk into any snow town in the world and you'll know someone who knows someone, it's what I call ski degrees of separation.

If I could bottle my commitment and strategy to improving my skiing I would be worth a billion. Instead I am in danger of becoming a ski bum. I can't shake off the beauty of mammoth mountains miles from nowhere, of finding fresh snow for your own tracks, of days when your body does what it should and you feel 20 years younger.

Before I took up skiing I hated winter, now I chase it round the world.

Tips for first-timers

❑ Start a Fit to Ski program at least four weeks before you hit the slopes. The stronger and fitter you are, the less likelihood of injury and the more fun you'll have on the slopes.

Skiing uses muscles not utilised in day-to-day living, so if you haven't stretched and strengthened these muscles before your ski holiday you're likely to end up stiff, sore and incapable of moving by day two.

Fitness First offers ski-specific training



It's all downhill from here . . . a snow skier at the summit of a ski run in the Canadian Rockies, top; snow skiing lessons at Thredbo ski resort, in NSW, left.

programs including a personalised fitness routine. For more information, visit www.fitnessfirst.com.au

❑ Rent your equipment. It's pointless investing in skis and bindings when you're starting out. The learning curve as a beginner is steep and you'll improve quickly, meaning you'll outgrow your skis before they outgrow you. When you hit intermediate level and you're itching to buy, then think about an all-

mountain ski until you determine what style of skiing you prefer – racing and carving, twin tip freestyle or fat powder.

❑ Do take lessons. Ski instructors go through rigorous training to achieve their qualifications. They know what they are talking about. Second-hand instruction from family members and well-meaning friends may only pass on their bad techniques to you.

Rachael Oakes-Ash