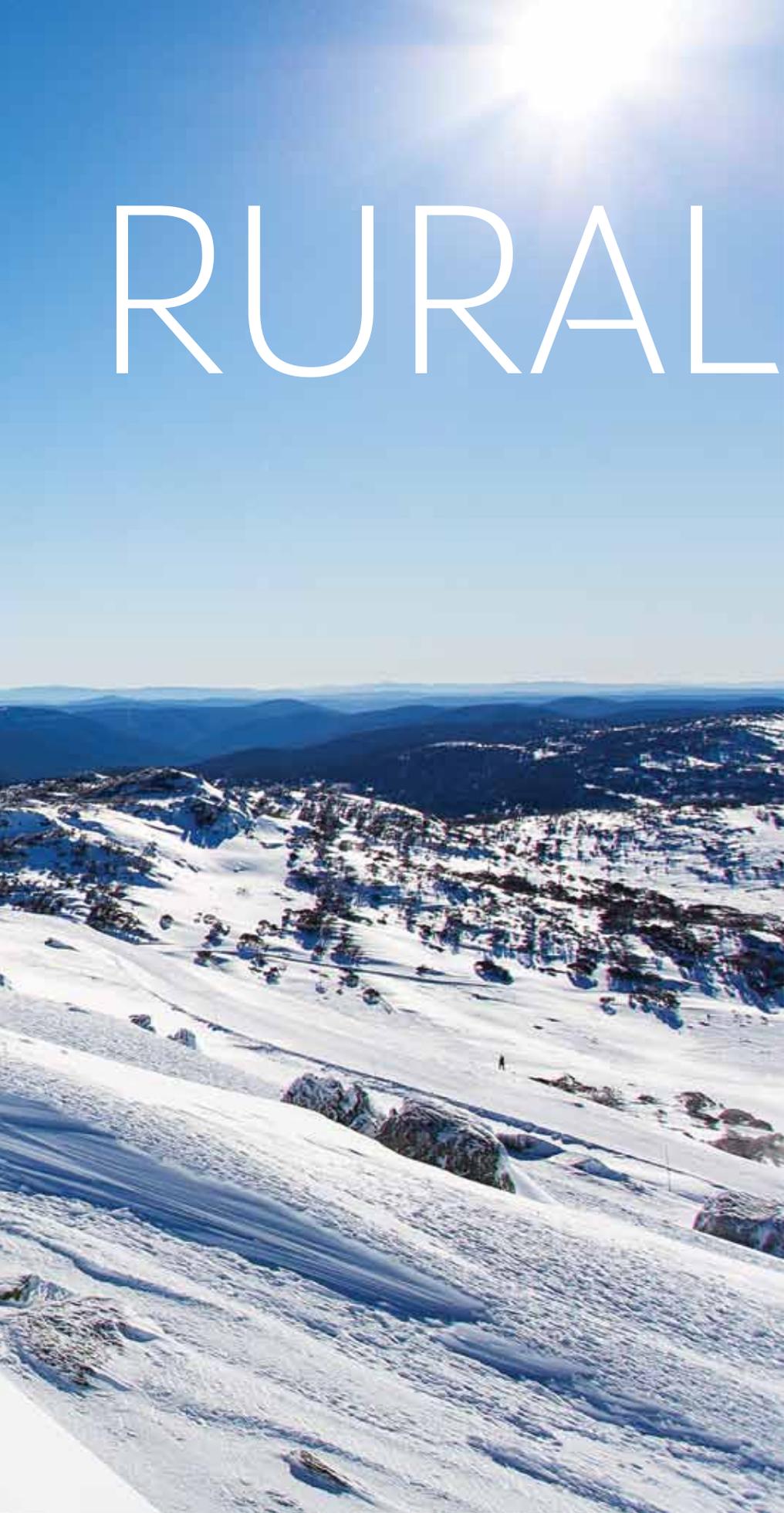




RURAL

PEAKS



AUSTRALIA MAY NOT BE THE FIRST PLACE THAT SPRINGS TO MIND FOR A WINTER GETAWAY, BUT WITH SEVEN MOUNTAIN PEAKS AND 47 LIFTS, PERISHER, TUCKED WITHIN THE PICTURESQUE KOSCIUSZKO NATIONAL PARK IN RURAL NEW SOUTH WALES, IS THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE'S BIGGEST ALPINE RESORT

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

“Where’s the snow?” asks my friend Nick

plaintively as we drive towards Perisher resort in the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales. We’re hitting the slopes, but there’s no snow to be seen. This is no European alpine village. The sun is filtering through the clouds, illuminating the wheat-coloured Australian farmland. “I’m sure it’s colder out there than it looks,” I reply, peering through the car windscreen in search of some of the cold white stuff. “Yes it is,” agrees Nick rubbing his hands together. He knows – he rode his motorbike on a ten-hour odyssey through winding mountain passages to join me on the snowfields.

It’s not until we pull into the car park of the Skitube Alpine Railway – the train that whisks snow sports enthusiasts to the base of the mountains – that we spot a few pocket-sized piles of mushy snow. The chill bites into our faces and fingers as we don winter jackets and gloves before heading into Bullock terminal to collect our passes.

We join the melee flowing through the turnstiles, dodging errant skis hoisted on

shoulders and plonk down on the plastic train seats. The Skitube runs above ground for 2.6 kilometres then enters a tunnel for 6.3 kilometres. The 12.5 percent gradient has us bracing our legs to avoid sliding off the seats and crushing the teens opposite.

“Welcome to Perisher,” says marketing coordinator Laurie Hodge at the Perisher Valley station. “Are you ready for it? There’s a bit of a blizzard out there,” she adds, as we gaze at her in disbelief. We step outside into a swirling fog of white. The wind is shooting tiny fluffy flakes through the air in every direction. I’m exceedingly tempted to abandon adulthood and throw myself on the ground to make a snow angel.

Suited, booted, and layered in thermals, gripping snowboards, we head to the Snowsports School meeting point. “Have you done this before?” asks John, one of the weathered snowboard instructors. He sends Nick to join the first-timers and points me up the hill. “Can you get on and off a chairlift and do linked turns down there?” he questions,

pointing to the main slope. It’s been a long time since I’ve been on a mountain. “I’m not sure,” I stammer. “Try intermediate,” he suggests. “I’d rather not,” I reply. John concedes, directing me to the green beginner’s flag to meet today’s lesson guru, Kyle.

Kyle is the perfect stereotype of an Australian snowboard instructor. His scraggly sun-bleached locks poke out from under his fleece hat and he sports a surfer’s tan. “Let’s go,” he says, leading us up the almost-flat slope. “It’s not worth queuing for the magic carpet,” he decides, indicating a lift laden with youngsters. “We’ll board down and walk up.”

Kyle directs us to take a run so he and John can assess our abilities. Bodies barrel in every direction. “Who was that doing linked turns?” asks John. I raise my hand shyly. “I told you to join the intermediates,” he admonishes. I promise to challenge myself tomorrow. For now I’m happy to review the basics.

Over the next two hours, Kyle trains us in different techniques. At the bottom we battle against the wind and snow to trot back up – an exhausting feat. “Sometimes, I like to do a gentle sliding pirouette like a ballerina,” Kyle says. As I form a troubling mental image of macho Kyle’s ballet moves, in a stroke of beautiful timing a young girl wearing a puffy purple jacket, lime-green ski pants and a tutu glides past. “I push my foot forward and ⇒

It takes little cajoling to steer Nick onto the eight-person chairlift up the main slope and we slip, slide, glide and crash our way down, laughing in the face of the blizzard



PREVIOUS PAGE: A skier heads down the slope towards Perisher Valley.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: A snowboarding lesson in progress; the Skitube Alpine Railway makes its way to the slopes in around ten minutes; a group of cross country skiers making the most of the sunny day; lightweight snowshoeing poles make the sport easier; looking down Front Valley at Perisher; a young skier.



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The starscape spreads out over Moonbah Huts; the lakeside chalets at Novotel Lake Crackenback Resort & Spa; a sunny day on Perisher; cosy comfort inside Moonbah Huts.



Our quaint stone hut stands on the edge of an open grassy field. My mouth drops open at the blanket of stars sparkling in the midnight-black sky

swivel like this," he demonstrates, urging us on to smoother turns. A moment later we watch an instructor chase after a runaway boarder whizzing across the slope out of control.

Nick and I reconvene over coffee and soul-warming pizza at Aldo's Café and Pizzeria, a popular slope-side joint. Despite his newbie status, it takes little cajoling to steer him onto the eight-person chairlift up the main slope and we slip, slide, glide and crash our way down, laughing in the face of the blizzard.

Nick clambers onto his motorbike in the nearby sleepy town of Jindabyne and I follow as he navigates to our accommodation, Moonbah Huts. Dusk is cloaking the town and we're looking forward to warming our toes. We travel in convoy to the outskirts and down a meandering country road. Then the tarmac disappears. Nick pulls over and checks the map. "We've gone past it," he notes, turning back into the darkness, devoid of street signs, lights and cars. Nick pulls over for a second time. "We've passed it again," he says bemusedly, clambering into the car to consult the notes.

A van creeps up beside us. "Do you guys need some help?" asks the driver in a strongly-nasal Australian twang. "Head back to the main road and turn right at the first dirt road after the white house. There are signs," he directs with a wave. The first dirt



road is a driveway and the second a narrow track. At the third we find a sign and bump 6.8 kilometres down a dusty potholed road, free-ranging cows gazing blankly at us as we pass. When we find the driveway, owner Brett Smith steps out of the shadows. "Glad you found us," he says, eyes twinkling.

Our quaint stone hut stands on the edge of an open grassy field. "Look up," says Nick. My mouth drops open at the blanket of stars sparkling in the midnight-black sky. Inside the cosy hut a log fire crackles in the fireplace and the table is laden with locally-produced goodies. The beds are draped in warm, grizzly bear-like throws and two chairs lounge in front of the fire. A bunch of deep scarlet and olive-green wildflowers brightens the room. The dresser is loaded with antique tins and the bathroom walls are papered with newspaper pages from the 1930s. There is no television or internet, just peace and warmth; equivalent to a comforting hug.

Back on the slopes, instructor Nathan coaches me through a series of turns. I've joined the intermediate group and Nathan is giving us pointers on keeping weight on our front foot. "Pretend you are putting on a seatbelt as you turn," he instructs, stretching one arm across his body. "Your shoulders have to turn and you can't change your centre of balance." We follow him down the slope gesticulating like disco divas.

Nathan is replaced by Sam on day three. "How are we on tow lifts?" he asks. The others nod. I tremble. I've never been on a tow lift with a snowboard. "You'll be fine," says Sam, reassuringly. I swallow my fear and follow his instructions, gripping the T-bar as if my life depended on it. At the top Sam leads us across the mountain to a smooth set of runs

called Happy Valley. The sun is sparkling in the cerulean-blue sky and the snow is powder-soft, as we confidently carve downhill snake-paths, mastering our new techniques.

By late afternoon every muscle hurts. Nick and I ride the quad lift with two young boys on our final run. "Let's go to the top," Nick blurts recklessly. I chew my lip nervously. "Where are you going?" I ask the boys. "The top," they reply confidently. "Will we die if we go up there?" Nick asks. The boys pause. "You won't die," they conclude. "But you might fall over a lot." Nick and I share knowing glances – we've mastered the art of falling.

The vistas from the top are spectacular, the deep blue sky kissing pure white snow, Perisher Valley stretches out before us. "How are we getting down there?" I wail. "Follow me," Nick says fearlessly, dropping over the edge. For the next twenty minutes we face-plant frequently. I slide down a particularly steep section on my back, not on purpose. But we laugh loudly throughout.



Abandoning the slope, we sate our ravenous snowboarding hunger at Cuisine on Lake Crackenback, part of the Novotel Lake Crackenback Resort & Spa. The modern glass structure juts over the lake, which is slowly icing over as the evening cools. We peruse the menu prepared by award-winning executive chef, Greg Pieper. The contemporary Australian dishes are tinged with European flavours, the descriptions making our mouths water. We share Queensland scallops so tender they melt in a burst of flavour, and a delicately flavoured fluffy Blue Swimmer Crab omelette. The highlight is the enormous Wagyu sirloin, towering over a small puddle of jus and eschallot jam. We barely have the energy to split a chocolate delice with coconut sorbet and eucalyptus caramel for

dessert, but somehow we manage, toasting our excesses and Nick's morning departure.

I'm excited to spend my last snow

day with Acacia Rose from K7 Adventures. Acacia's enthusiasm for all things back country is infectious. She educates me on cross-country skiing, skiers of all ages gliding elegantly past, as she straps me into a pair of lightweight metal snowshoes that look like elaborate upside-down animal traps. A group of teens slide effortlessly around a track in formation as Acacia hands me a pair of poles.

I am surprised at how easy it is to walk across the banks of soft, powdery snow as we hike into the woods. Cool overnight temperatures and today's sunshine have left giant snow crystals clinging to every branch, twig and stem. The untouched snow sparkles iridescently in the sunlight, the only blemish a fox trail that we follow.

Occasionally we break through the snow banks, sinking knee-deep into powder, sending wet flakes flying. Acacia points out water courses so I don't wind up in an icy-cold stream. At a secluded lookout we lay our jackets on the snow as picnic rugs, admiring the ranges sloping down into the valley.

At an untouched clearing Acacia points out the bald dome of Mt Kosciuszko. At 2,228 metres, this is Australia's highest mountain, but not by much. Measurements of the peak that was originally named Kosciuszko proved it to be slightly lower than neighbouring Mount Townsend. Accordingly, the New South Wales Lands Department swapped the names, maintaining Kosciuszko as the highest peak.

Physically exhausted from the unfamiliar

combination of snowboarding and winter hiking, I stumble into the Spa and Wellness Centre at Lake Crackenback for an après ski massage. Nicola leads me into the warm treatment room where her strong fingers dig into my muscles, releasing the tension. Working her way up my spine she finds a bundle of knots. "Do you mind if I get into your shoulders?" she whispers. "Go for it," I groan as she manipulates the knots into submission.

The recovery process complete, I bid farewell to Nicola and her magic hands. I see the white-capped mountains in the mirror as I drive away and picture the gentle breeze swirling snowflakes over my tracks, hiding my transgressions. As my footprints disappear, so must I. At least until next season. 🍷

EXPERIENCE AUSTRALIA

FOR SLEEPING: NOVOTEL LAKE CRACKENBACK RESORT & SPA

Located on the border of the Kosciuszko National Park, minutes from the Skitube, Lake Crackenback Resort & Spa is enfolded by the spectacular Snowy Mountains. Covering 150 acres, the accommodation ranges from apartments to studios and four-bedroom chalets, many perched by the lake. Every freestanding property is different, lending the resort the air of an exclusive neighbourhood.

WWW.LAKECRACKENBACK.COM.AU

FOR EATING: MCEVOYS

McEvoy's Licensed Restaurant at Rydges Horizons Snowy Mountains in Jindabyne offers a superb menu featuring Australian fusion cuisine. For a regional speciality, try the Moreton Bay Bugs, served with a crunchy Japanese-style vegetable fritter. The salted caramel crème brûlée is dessert perfection, and Squires Bar next door features vibrant musicians such as local blues-rockers Marshall & the Fro.

WWW.RYDGES.COM

FOR INFORMATION: VISIT NSW

For a comprehensive rundown of the best New South Wales has to offer, look no further than Destination NSW. Covering every corner of the state, the website is packed with insider information on what to do, where to do it and where to stay. From the Snowy Mountains to the Outback, no stone is left unturned.

WWW.VISITNSW.COM

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