

Caught in **Charlotte's** web

Immersed in the history and hospitality of Australia's highest alpine village, *Kellie Bisset* finds out just how good Charlotte Pass really is.

BOYD McNiven, of the Sydney Ski Club, could have picked a more accessible location to endure a burst appendix than the snowbound NSW ski resort of Charlotte Pass.

It was the 1950s but, fortunately for Boyd, the tradition of doctors flocking to the snow for their winter break was thriving.

The appendectomy was performed in the Kosciuszko Chalet ping-pong room under lights borrowed from the generator shed. There were 17 doctors present – all of them skiers.

According to the documented history of Charlotte Pass, *Skiing off the Roof*, “the ether [was] dripping down on to the patient’s gauze mask from a bottle clearly marked Gilbey’s Gin”.

These days, the treatment of medical emergencies at Charlotte Pass isn’t quite so ad hoc.

But, despite the ready availability of oversnow transport back to Perisher Valley, there remains a wonderful sense of isolation in Australia’s highest alpine village.

Tucked away among the snow gums of Kosciuszko National Park, this remote Bavarian-like ski hamlet, accessible from nearby behemoth resort Perisher Valley, is home to a dozen ski lodges and the historic Kosciuszko Chalet.

A week at Charlotte Pass, or ‘Charlotte’s’ as the regulars call it, is a truly great escape.

No crowds, no queues, no noise – and, in our accommodation, no TV – means that guests at Charlotte’s can drink in the beauty of their national park environment and really savour what they go there to do: ski.

On discovering no network coverage in the village, we were delighted at the prospect of a mobile-free week, only to be disappointed later by knowledgeable regulars who advised us that we could get a signal – if the weather was good – from the top of the resort chairlift.

But, standing atop



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Bruce Fremann

White gold (above): It may not be the Rockies, but regulars keep returning to Charlotte Pass because of the quantity and quality of the resort’s snow.

Join the club (left and below): Tar Gan Gil is one of a dozen club lodges at Charlotte Pass, and is open to non club members.

Kangaroo Ridge, surveying Mt Kosciuszko and the breathtaking backcountry of the Snowy Mountains, it seemed the last place anyone would want to talk on a mobile phone.

Too stunning, too pristine, and too close to nature to be interrupted by modern technology. The phones stayed safely packed away back in our room.

A limit on the number of guests at the resort (607 maximum) means visitors have plenty of the white stuff to themselves.

Time spent on the slopes is boosted by the smooth flow of skiers and boarders onto the lifts.

We spent no longer



Bruce Fremann

than a minute at any one time in a queue – and this during days of perfect sunshine and faultless blue sky.

Charlotte’s has five lifts: the triple chair, Pulpit T-bar, Guthrie poma, a beginners’ poma and a portable rope tow.

Most of the terrain (80%) is intermediate, with 10% catering for beginners and 10% for advanced skiers and boarders.

The difficulty level suited us perfectly. While

some more advanced skiers might prefer the challenges of nearby resorts Thredbo and Perisher, regulars we met during our stay said they kept returning to Charlotte’s because there was plenty of beautiful powder to be had, as well as an unbeatable atmosphere, thanks to its cluster of small lodges and lack of vehicular access.

There is also unrestricted access to the main range, so, if cross-country skiing is your thing, this resort is a great launching point.

The other major attraction of the village is that it welcomes children with open arms. And it is safe for them – a plus listed by numerous guests we met.

The chalet has child-minding facilities and scheduled activities for kids, so there’s no dilemma about which parent gets to do some afternoon ski runs.

SNOWBOUND HISTORY

There is no escaping the sense of history at Charlotte Pass, and this is an integral part of the village’s appeal.

It is regarded as the birthplace of modern skiing in Australia, with the state government of the time building the first Kosciuszko Chalet in 1930 at an altitude of 1760 m.

Rudimentary skiing had begun on the Kian-dra goldfields (85 km north-west of Cooma) in the 1860s, and moved over the snowy ranges to Diggers Creek, where the Kosciuszko Hotel was built in 1909 beside the road leading to the present-day Smiggin Holes ski resort.

The slopes around the hotel were not so challenging for those who had mastered the sport, but the hotel was used as a base by cross-country skiers wanting to explore the region.

Eventually, calls grew louder for a chalet located in an area with more reliable snowfall, and the government finally bowed to pressure from the ski lobby to construct the then 38-bed chalet at Charlotte Pass.

Needless to say, getting to a

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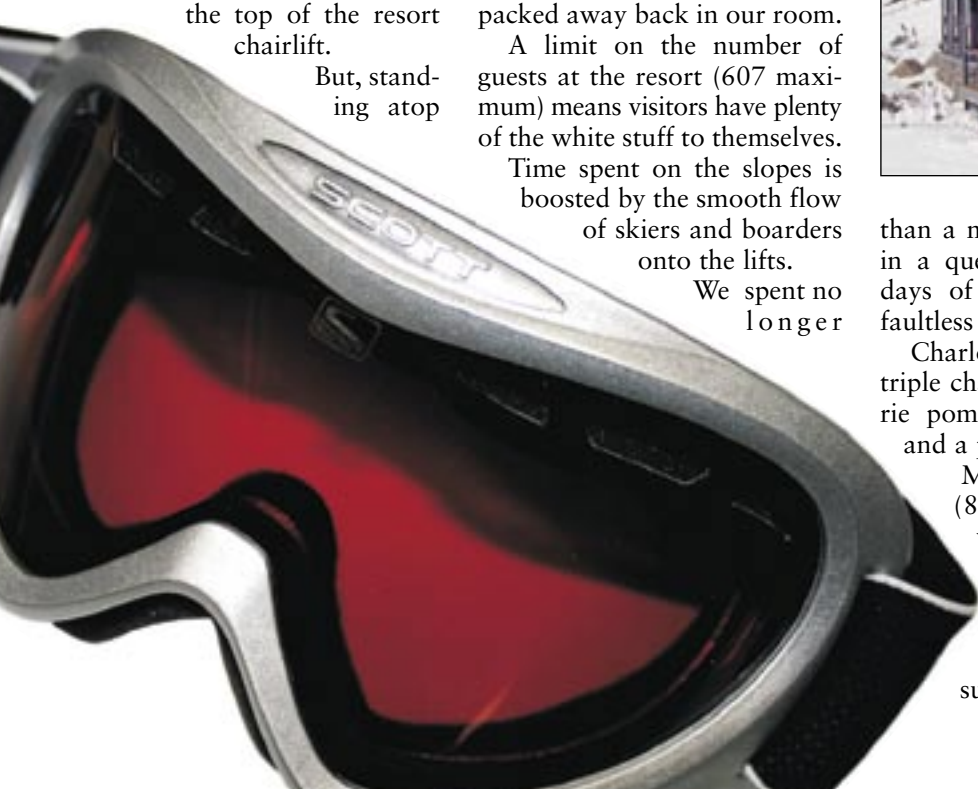
snowbound chalet was a challenge in 1930.

Evocative black-and-white photographs of early snow transport adorn the walls of the current Kosciuszko Chalet, which was built in 1938 after the original building was lost in a fire.

The chalet dominates the village, its architecture a reminder of the history. Inside, though, there are plenty of concessions to modernity: two bars, pool tables and regular live music.

Sitting by the roaring fire in the chalet’s main lounge is a great way to relax after a day on the slopes, particularly if you indulge in the hot chocolate with marshmallows.

Village guests can use most of the chalet’s facilities (including child-minding) and, as such, the hotel is the hub of the small





ski community. Further up the hill, within easy skiing distance of the chairlift and beginners' poma, is Tar Gan Gil, one of the ski-in, ski-out club lodges at the resort.

Tar Gan Gil, as with some other lodges in the village, also takes non-member guests. It's difficult to say what we enjoyed most about our stay there: the comfortable accommodation, the gourmet food or the marvellous hospitality.

The lodge has a welcoming feel, with the upstairs lounge a great place to enjoy a pre-dinner drink or an afternoon read. The lounge has uninterrupted views of the slopes and offers video facilities for the kids – though viewing is limited to between 1 pm and 5 pm.

David and Noala Mockridge have managed the 24-bed lodge since 1982 and it's difficult to imagine a more hos-

pitable atmosphere.

By the end of the week, we really felt part of the Tar Gan Gil family, a mixed bag of lodge members and newcomers who'd stayed elsewhere at Charlotte's but preferred Tar Gan Gil's cosy charm. Built in 1979 by business equipment company Olivetti for its employees, Tar Gan Gil takes its name from an Aboriginal word meaning 'high white mountains'.

The food was so good that skiing all day was almost a compulsory weight-maintenance measure

A highlight of any week here is the outdoor barbecue, when David, brandishing his tongs, cooks kranskis – or regular sausages for the less adventurous.

Sitting on the deck in perfect sunshine surveying the few lunchtime skiers who chose to ignore their stomachs and enjoy the slopes, the barbecue was a fitting last lunch at the lodge.

The standard and quantity of food at Tar Gan Gil – including

Bavarian style (above): Kosciuszko Chalet dominates the alpine village of Charlotte Pass.

Backcountry bliss (right): The resort may lack the reputation of neighbouring Thredbo and Perisher Blue, but it nevertheless provides top-class skiing.

a three-course meal every night and the option of a cooked breakfast each morning (included in the rates) – was so high that skiing all day was almost a compulsory weight-maintenance measure.

Tar Gan Gil also takes summer bookings, giving hikers an opportunity to explore the area from a local base. One of the most popular walks is to Blue Lake, about 22 km return. The walk takes about five hours.

The alpine wildflowers are another summer drawcard. They bloom from mid-January until late February.

It seems, though, that winter is the time when the local folklore and an intangible sense of mystery is most pervasive in the village.

Staff and regulars are happy to relate tales from the past, with some stories more fanciful than others.

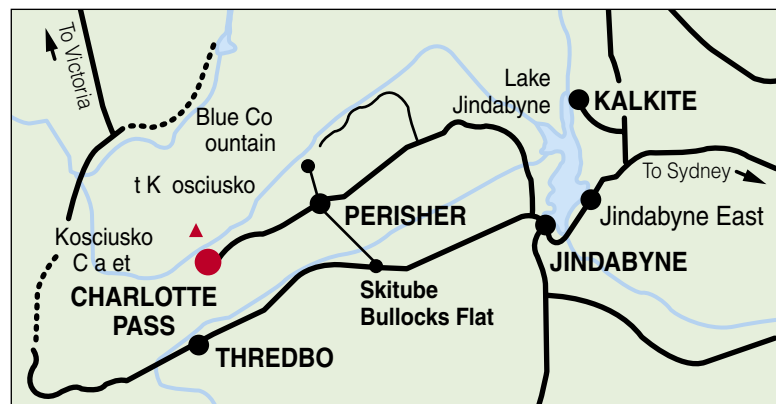
We particularly liked the tale of the ghost horse, and were assured it was true by one member of the ski patrol, who said there had been several "reliable" sightings of the animal.

As the story goes, in 1963, a staff member of the chalet decided to travel the 10 km from Charlotte's down to the Man from Snowy River Hotel at Perisher on his afternoon off.

After a few hours spent socialising with acquaintances at the hotel, it was well after dark by the time he realised he

Ski stats

Highest lifted point: 1954 m
Vertical drop: 189 m
Season: June long weekend to October long weekend
Average snowfall: 2 m+
Skiable area: 50 ha
Groomed area: 50 ha
Terrain: 10% beginner, 80% intermediate, 10% advanced
Longest run: Kosciuszko Road
Hottest temperature: 25°C
Coldest temperature: -23°C (the coldest in Australia)



Charlotte Pass fact file

Getting there: In winter, take the Skitube from Bullocks Flat (where there are short- and long-stay car parks) to Perisher Valley and hop on a snowcat for the 30-minute oversnow ride to Charlotte Pass. (There is a car park at Perisher, but overnight parking is not allowed.)

In summer, you can drive directly to Charlotte Pass and park overnight. **Costs:** Accommodation at Tar Gan

Gil includes all meals and linen; discounts available in shoulder and low seasons. A seven-night stay costs \$627 to \$962 per room, depending on room type. A five-night stay costs \$572 to \$907. Children's rates are discounted.

Weekly lift passes cost \$504/adults, \$305/children (under 14); day passes cost \$85/adult, \$58/children.

Skis, snowboards, boots, poles and children's helmets can be hired at the village (packages available), but ski clothes are not available.

For more information:

- Tar Gan Gil ski lodge, call 02 9594 5666 or visit www.targangil.com
- Kosciuszko Chalet, call 1800 026 369 or visit www.charlottepass.com.au

had missed the last snowcat of the day and decided to set off for the chalet on foot.

Despite the hour, the night was crystal clear and he was confident he could safely make the journey.

But, halfway home, he felt the air around him become completely still and knew he was about to be caught in a ferocious blizzard.

He pressed on but, suffering exhaustion, was ready to lie down in the snow and leave himself to the mercy of the elements.

Before he could

collapse, he heard a noise up ahead that sounded like whinnying. He followed the sounds and came upon a magnificent stallion, and, according to *Skiing off the Roof*, "saw quite distinctly in the weakening light of the torch that his hide was flaming red".

The stallion led him to the grounds of the chalet and, with a toss of its mane, disappeared into the night, having saved his life.

Stories such as these, told around hot coffee with an outside temperature of -15°C, confirmed this was certainly the best place to be 'stranded' in July. **MO**

