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Stay among the snowdrifts

CHARLOTTE PASS

Jim O'Rourke

Ski in and ski out. It's the only way to travel, writes Jim O'Rourke.

IN the old days, Australia's alpine skiing pioneers were forced to slog their way through the wintry wilderness of the NSW side of the Snowy Mountain range for more than 20 kilometres to reach the virgin slopes around Charlotte Pass, Australia's highest ski field.

The plucky trekkers trudged south from the Hotel Kosciuszko, built at Diggers Creek in 1909, to take advantage of the reliable snowfalls above the 1760-metre snowline at the pass.

After years of lobbying by the traditional ski clubs, whose captains could appreciate that the natural shape of the landscape around the pass would provide a range of challenging ski runs, the state government built the Kosciuszko Chalet at the bottom of the bowl-shaped valley.

A 38-bed dormitory-style building went up in 1930. It became the focal point of skiing in the area, eventually attracting a range of private ski lodges.

To get to Charlotte Pass today, skiers simply jump into a heated "snow bus" to make the eight-kilometre over-snow journey along the Kosciuszko Road from Perisher Valley.

The village is snowbound in the winter months, a definite plus for skiers who want to keep away from the hustle and bustle of the giant neighbouring resorts at Thredbo and Perisher Blue.

Those wanting the relative isolation of Charlotte Pass have to drive to the Ski Tube rail station at Bullock Flat, on the road between Jindabyne and Thredbo, and leave the car in the overnight car park. They catch the train to Perisher before making the last leg of the journey to the pass on a 14-seater, converted snow cat.

The privately built and managed lodges are still clustered around the Chalet, but more of them are opening their doors to paying guests.

We stayed at Tar Gan Gil, a beautiful two-level lodge built from cypress pine in 1979. The lodge is nestled on a gentle slope just 20 metres from the chairlift terminal, the main route to Kangaroo Ridge at the top of the slopes.

Back down in the valley, managers and lodge shareholders David and Noala Mockeridge, who've been at Charlotte Pass for 24 years, are keen to encourage visitors to sample the ski fields.

There are 24 beds in Tar Gan Gil, spread across three family rooms, and four twin bedrooms. Most have views.

We had a twin room with a comfortable Queen-sized bed with en suite and, importantly, a strong heater which kept the overnight temperatures of minus 11 degrees well away.

All linen and towels are provided; all you need is your ski gear. In the all inclusive price, David and Noala provide three beautifully prepared meals a day.

You can have a hot breakfast to get your energy levels up for a day on the piste then a warming lunch of soup or pasta. For dinner, the three-course meals range from gourmet chicken and beef dishes to good old-fashioned steak followed by sumptuous desserts.

There is even a barbecue on the wooden deck where David weaves his magic during Friday lunch.

To encourage the club-like atmosphere, all guests sit around one large table at meal times. As they do in the private lodges, guests are politely asked to help out when David and Noala are serving meals by taking the plates from the kitchen servery to the tables and help clear the plates away at the end.

Don't worry, they won't ask you to do the washing up.

Tar Gan Gil has a comfortable lounge area on the first floor with panoramic views over the village and mountain.

It also has a small sauna and a laundry room for those with a bit of washing to catch up on. There is a television in the lounge, but it is only used for playing video tapes and that's only between 1pm and 5pm.

"People come to Tar Gan Gil to get away from the normal routine," David said. "So we discourage sitting down in front of the telly. It gives people a chance to talk, or if they want to, read a book or play a game of Scrabble."

Charlotte Pass is perfectly suited for families with small children. Due to the lease arrangements with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the village is only allowed to accommodate just over 600 people, making the queues on the chairlift, the five T-bars, pomas and rope-tows virtually non-existent.

And don't be put off by talk from the flashy skiers at Thredbo and Perisher that Charlotte Pass is for the less skilled and more careful skier. Some of the runs, chutes and gullies especially on the slopes of Mt Guthrie and underneath the chairlift, are as challenging as any Black runs you'll find in the other resorts.

Remember, Charlotte Pass has a more reliable snow cover and that cover lasts and stays in better condition longer than its showier neighbours.