

great white safari

When you develop an insatiable thirst for virgin powder, it's an affliction that can lead you down a slippery slope to some seriously cool corners of the world – some of which are just next door... **STORY** Rachael Oakes-Ash **IMAGES** Camilla Stoddart + Black Diamond Safaris



“ There is something about getting away from the masses, the meditative beat of one foot in front of the other as one hikes upwards in order to ski downwards, the belief that it’s just you and the mountain... ”



E For some in this life, a quiet jog around the block is akin to running the New York Marathon. Leisure skiing is similar. Those who take to the blue groomed slopes of commercial ski resorts may think they are risking life and limb with every turn, but others know different.

Those who have ventured further out into the cold know that it’s the untouched snow that brings the most joy. The snow one has to hike to, the snow found out the back, out of bounds, away from the masses on their week-long ski holiday, the snow known simply as ‘powder’. Once discovered, the quest for virgin powder can turn the shyest most unassuming type into a drug whore, and like most drugs, if not dealt with appropriately, the result can be death.

I first became addicted to powder in Japan on my first backcountry day, hiking the Japan Alps on the main island of Honshu. Led by a madcap Canadian with long dreadlocks and a bent glint in his eye, we hiked two and a half hours up a ridgeline behind the town of Hakuba to find our own stash of the good stuff.

I was a backcountry virgin. The idea of hiking a ridgeline with skis strapped to my back was not one I salivated at, especially when I’d come unprepared. I was unfit to start with, had brought little in the way of energy food, and had just handed my life over to a guide I assumed knew more than I did about avalanche safety simply because he was a guide. All mistakes I have since rectified.

The snow was good. In fact it was better than good, it was premium A-grade with not a track in sight. But after a full eight-hour day I was completely and utterly beat, and lucky to come home uninjured when my adrenal exhaustion had taken its toll on my leg muscles. I finished the day upside down in a snow hole, unable to brake. Later I found out that the paths we’d



taken had killed others in more substantial snow seasons.

The following southern winter, I enrolled in an avalanche course. The two-day course, held on Queenstown’s Remarkables ski field, instilled the fear of God into me, with talk of aspects, slough, slab avalanches and crushing snow that sets like concrete with you underneath it. Time to invest in an avalanche transceiver.

A LOVE OF THE backcountry bonds people. There is something about getting away from the masses, the meditative beat of one foot in front of the other as one hikes upwards in order to ski downwards, the belief that it’s just you and the mountain that sets people apart and brings them together.

Simon and Heather Dent know this better than anyone. Their boutique ski company, Black Diamond Safaris, guides international guests through the rugged lift-accessed backcountry terrain of Craigieburn, Mt Olympus and Broken River club fields in New

Zealand’s South Island, offering ski tips, lunch on the barbie and 4WD transportation into these little known snow regions.

I’m a powderhound on the sniff for white magic, and Heather Dent is my dealer. Heather is a hardened American-cum-Kiwi who likes her mountains steep and her powder thigh deep. A former champion surfer, she spends her northern winters as a ski patroller in North America and her southern ones in the Canterbury region hunting for secret stashes in the Craigieburn Ranges.



Snow Safaris

SNOW HUNTER multi-day guided ski and snowboard safaris are run through Black Diamond Safaris (blackdiamondsafaris.co.nz). Adventure trips can be adjusted to suit your time schedules from two days to seven plus. A five-day four-night safari starts from NZ\$2320 per person for three people, including transfers, guiding, breakfast, lunch, dinner, transport and avalanche equipment.

Air New Zealand (airnewzealand.com.au; 13 24 76) fly daily direct from Sydney to Christchurch. The Burn is just over an hour from Christchurch International Airport. Avalanche awareness courses are available from around \$75. See mountainsafety.org.nz for more information and locations.

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The Snow Hunter Safari is a three-night, two-day affair, and I am joined on the tour by six burly Aussie tradies who promise Heather to be on their best behaviour. A promise shattered by the time the second bottle of wine is opened.

By the end of the first night we've created a Jenga-based drinking game called 'XtremeTumbling Tower' with a highly complex set of rules that, if broken, result in nudie runs around The Burn lodge where we are staying.

We're not here to party though, not to start with anyway, we're here to ski. But the season has been lean so we're going to have to hunt to find the good stuff. Avalanche danger is high with a series of weak layers that are causing some serious problems. The crystals aren't bonding and the snow is threatening to slide.

As Heather navigates the precarious road in to Craigieburn ski field on day one, my jaw hits the floor. I count not one, not two, but signs of nine avalanches on this steepfaced terrain. Not small avalanches either. The debris is big enough to wipe out a small village.

I HAVE A FEAR OF AVALANCHES, a phobia of giant proportions not helped by my avalanche course. I even ski with an AvaLung, a snorkel-like contraption designed to allow you to breathe air straight from the snowpack. Heather ensures we all have transceivers before we venture to the Craigieburn base lodge. The club fields of New Zealand are a unique experience that have inspired Colorado's famous Silverton ski field, known for its lift-accessed backcountry terrain. There are over 12 Kiwi club fields, each owned by a conglomerate of members who pay an annual fee and offer their services for working bees in return for super-cheap lift passes and accommodation in bunk-style lodges complete with a chores board for cleaning and cooking.

Craigieburn is the most 'big mountain' of them all and it's loved by US extreme-ski legends Glenn Plake and Seth Morrison with good reason. Its 400-plus official hectares of skiable terrain include narrow, steep, pitched chutes and wide-open bowls without a groomer in sight. If you're prepared to hike then a whole new world of seriously impressive skiing opens up. But first we must negotiate the famed 'nutcracker rope

tow', a cable-and-pulley rope tow system hooked up to a tractor's engine that sits stationary in a mid mountain shed, its wheels replaced with bricks. With nutcracker-style tools attached to a leather belt worn around our waist and heavy-duty gloves we grip the moving cable, throw the cracker over the side and hang on for dear life while the cable drags us up the hill. Of course, this is all done in full view of the entire mountain. The beauty of these fields is the lack of people; few folk willingly exchange the luxury of a high-powered quad chair with a circus contraption from circa 1934.

The 40 odd folk on the mountain lodge deck at lunchtime are constantly entertained by us virgins negotiating the towropes, dropping off like flies till we get it right. The boys and I follow Heather across Hamilton Face, traversing its wide-



Gear on assignment

The Backcountry Access Tracker DTS was a great value avalanche transceiver. A good first timer's beacon, it has an easy-to operate digital transmitter that shows real time display (RRP \$390 / backcountryaccess.com). Alternatively try the Ortovox D3 Digital (RRP \$600), more readily available through NZ-based marvelox.com.

A Black Diamond AvaLungII (RRP \$259.95) is a device that allows you to breathe fresh air directly from the snowpack and diverts exhausted, carbon dioxide-rich air away from your fresh-air intake zone. A lifesaver. There are also versions integrated into packs perfect for back country days. Sea To Summit brings in the Revelation 35 & 45L (RRP \$669.95), Bandit (RRP \$459.95), Covert 32 (RRP \$569.95) and Alias packs. seatosummit.com.au / blackdiamondequipment.com

open bowl to access some chutes that appear to be untracked. When I stop halfway across to admire the view Heather almost has a heart attack, barking at me to keep going. When I look up I see why. There is only one pillow of snow yet to 'go' on this mountain and I have decided to stop right underneath it.


Life-threatening situation averted we arrive, one skier at a time, at the top of a pristine chute, about three metres wide and a good 40° plus pitch. Two turns in and I know I've brought the right skis. The K2s float on the snow when needed and flex when not.

WE COULD HIKE 15 minutes over the ridge to Broken River club field for lunch but instead we hang with Symon Dent and his mate Chicken, whose real name is permanently withheld (though I am assured his beard and pseudonym have nothing to do with being on the run). A barbie of freshly killed wild venison is served up on the Craigieburn deck amongst the 'locals' who have called this ski field home for over three generations.

On day two we hope to sniff out some more of the same at Mt Olympus but it's closed due to avalanche danger. Heather assures us Craigieburn's finger chutes will serve up what we need, so we return to the scene and hike 10 minutes from the top of the rope tow to taste the famed 110 chute, named after it's 110cm width at it's narrowest point.

We attempt to traverse further out into the open bowl but ski patrol advises us against it so we stare wide eyed at the ridges of snow just begging for us to lose our lives on them. It doesn't seem fair, knowing that within half an hour's hike we could take on lines of powder untouched by others this season. But safety is paramount.

That's the trouble with addiction, if you don't monitor it you can get yourself in serious trouble. Knowing the limits means you can return in one piece to take the booty when the conditions are right.

I haven't returned to Craigieburn to claim that booty just yet but I have gone on to savour the delights of Utah, Canada and Switzerland's backcountry so I am officially beyond help. 

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