

British Ski on Australian Snow

By Colin Wyatt

SINCE my ski-ing knowledge of Australia is limited to Mount Kosciusko and Mount Buller, I would feel it is rather pretentious to start writing about it at all, had I not been asked to do so.

Two things stand out as the European's first impressions: First and foremost Australian ski-ing, and snow, are far better than one is led to expect by the Australians one has met in Europe. Admittedly, the ski-able area of Australia is very restricted, and there are no outstanding peaks, or glaciers, but within that area, or rather "areas", since, unlike conditions in Europe, snow does not cover the whole of a country, valleys and all, there is enough material to keep the keen ski-runner occupied for several seasons without covering the same ground. This applies especially to tourers. One does not find the long runs of 3,000 to 5,000 feet descent that one is accustomed to in the Alps, but good ski-ing is not made or marred by length of non-stop descent.

The second impression is that ski-ing in Australia, for the person who cannot carry a heavy pack and live in the huts, is more appallingly expensive than anywhere in the world—at any rate in N.S.W. Mount Buller appears to be a shining exception, and I believe the same applies to other resorts in Victoria. The rail and 'bus journey from Sydney to the Chalet at Charlotte's Pass, for example, takes about as long and costs about as much as from England to St. Moritz. But then one can only get "comfortable" accommodation on the snow, in the tourist traffic sense, by paying 30/- a day for sharing iron bunks in a dormitory, in a building obviously designed by an architect who has had no experience whatsoever of the very special problems that arise in winter conditions at over 5,000 ft. In St. Moritz, for example, where all heating fuel, all food, and all drink has to be brought up long distances on privately-owned mountain railways with a scandalously exorbitant freight-rate, one can have for one guinea per day a single bedroom with running hot and cold water and central heating in the Palace Hotel, one of the most "select" (horrible word) hotels in the world, with a superb dance band, ballroom, American bar, and food as good as the best Paris restaurants.

In a cheap hotel, in Europe, one pays only 12/- to (maximum) 15/- for all the above advantages, including double-windows and no draughts, except the band, bar, ballroom and Paris cooking, all of which are unnecessary, if pleasant luxuries.

So, not unnaturally, the newcomer to Australia is rather horrified to be asked to pay 30/- for less than he has been accustomed to get in expensive European resorts for about 12/-. [We understand some reduction in the tariff is being made for 1941.—Ed.]

On the other hand, the Mount Buller Chalet, especially when one realises that the summer road was only completed last year, gives one accommodation that compares very favourably with Europe, both in comfort and price, even if there are no single rooms or room-heating. But then, it is in the tall timber, and not much exposed to winds.

In Betts' Camp I found a place that is every bit as good as the best type of Austrian hut (only with dormitories instead of two-bunk rooms), and with grand "hut" cooking and showers, and the price, though more than in the case of a similar type of European hut, is equal to the cheapest European hotel.

Having now candidly given my favourable and unfavourable impressions, I'd like to elaborate on the favourable ones. The practice slopes behind Betts' Camp were lovely, equal to the best European wood-running, and with heavenly powder-snow. It was always a pleasure finding new ways down through the snow-gums from the top of the hill behind, whose name I could never be certain. Some called it the Perisher, some the Back Perisher, and some the Paralyser, but I thought "the Pleasure-giver" would have been nearer the mark. And then the wonderful 800 ft. open wood-run, in six inches of powder-snow, from over the top behind Betts' down to Pounds' Hut; and, having got there, all those long open slopes of Twynam, a bit wind-blown on top, but otherwise glorious! I spent a most comfortable night at Pounds', and the view from the hut door might have been anywhere in the foot-hills of the Alps, or in Norway.

One day we went from Betts', via Pounds', up to Twynam, along the Main Range to Carruthers' and home, via Charlotte's Pass. We must have had very nearly 3,000 feet of running, with some glorious schusses, and I shall never forget the trip along the crest of the range, with the clouds billowing up from the Murray side. I cursed that time did not allow us to run down some of the gorges, where there must have been a good non-stop 3,000 ft. of the best type of Arlberg running, well worth the sweat of climbing back again, especially as one could then rest one's muscles, on a "business and pleasure" basis, over the long easy gradients back to the Snowy. There were many moments on that trip when I could scarcely believe I was in Australia, and not somewhere on the Arlberg.

Another day we went up to Mount Kosciusko, via Charlotte's Pass, across to Townsend, down to Lake Albina, by the championship course, up on to Lee, and then home again, via Charlotte's. This, too, was a red letter day. The view off Townsend was magnificent, looking down 5,000 ft. to the Geehi Flats, and the long windings of the Murray gleaming into the haze; away to the north the peaks and gorges of the Main Range shone whitely until Jagungal stopped the eye. We had lovely running from Townsend down to Albina, and from Lee we had a schuss in four-inch powder-snow that must have been almost a mile long.

Except for the east side of the Main Range, which is very like the Arlberg, the Kosciusko area was very similar to Norway, especially the Jotunheim, and the snow conditions were very similar too, except for those glorious glades of powder-snow in the snow-gums, which are something particularly Australian.

Mount Buller, though restricted, gives running that is much more what the average European calls "good ski-ing", i.e., plenty of long, steep slopes on which one can travel at really high speeds and must yet be under control. If only Buller had some sort of a ski-lift or funicular, to save the rather steep and hot climbs back after each run, it would become a sort of "Mürren of Australia", and be the perfect training resort for racers. And it has the advantage of its excellent and moderate accommodation. Buller seemed to me to have immense possibilities, especially in view of its proximity to a big city, and for the tourer the trip to Mount Stirling is something quite original. I have never skied before among timber as tall and large as the Woollybutts; it was most impressive. We had wonderful wood-running, both in the snow-gums higher up, and in the tall timber, on quite reasonable steep slopes, on lovely "spring snow".

Altogether I was most impressed with Australian ski country, and shall not be content until I have investigated it much more thoroughly than the little "scratch" I was able to do last winter.

To console me until I next have a chance to get to the snows, I have an album of photographs that would make a lot of Europeans "sit up".