

Ski free at Charlottes Pass! That's right, SKI FREE. How can that be? The answer is to go on cross country skis. It used to be called "Langlauf", which translated is long running derived from the long skis used. I regard it as bushwalking on skis. It is referred to as XC skiing. There are no lift tickets, no lifts, no crowds, no timetable, just the magic scenery of Kosciuszko National Park. If you ski in the trees or on the flat whiteouts are easier to deal with than on the downhill ski slopes. If you can ski downhill you can ski XC. Grandma and the kids can do it. So why not give it a go?

You may have tried it before and found it difficult. That is probably because you were using the old fashioned skinny skis and floppy boots. Nowadays we use telemark skis that are about 200 long but wider; or short, wide and wasted skis that look like downhill skis with stiffer boots and altogether they are more stable and easier to use and learn on. However this season I found that the short skis are good in soft snow but were not so stable on icy snow or heavy snow so tend to prefer the former longer skis. There are no XC lessons at Charlotte Pass but they are available at Perisher, however XC skiers in the lodge are always willing to help beginners get started but like learning any skill you need the right tuition. You don't even need to learn to turn on XC skis as hills can be descended with a series of linked zig zag traverses.

Where can you go? From the Chalet it is an easy flat ski to Sugarloaf, a small hill which is 2 km away just before Spencers Ck. The slope behind Pygmy Possum lodge is an accessible wonderland of snowgums. Further afield one can follow a marked trail over Stilwell saddle to Wrights Ck and CPV. Ski down Spencers Ck to the Snowy River. Ski to Perisher. Ski to Charlotte Pass and down to the Snowy River. Continue on to Blue Lake. All these are within an easy five hours return including lunch stop, from CPV and with more experience Club Lake, Cootapatamba Lake and the peaks of Kosciuszko, Carruthers and Tate are all possible in a day trip. Learn to ski with telemark turns and ski the CPV slopes either by walking up or buying a lift ticket, not so free but lots of fun and telemark lessons are available at CPV. Telemark ski on the main range and get 400 metre vertical runs and even ski down the steep slopes of Watsons Crags just as our earlier skiers did from the 1940's.

What equipment do you need? Certainly not downhill ski clothes as you will get too hot. Bushwalking clothes with a windproof parka are ideal. Waterproof overpants are a good idea in bad conditions over jeans or trackpants. A small day pack to carry warm clothes, parka and food and water and "just in case" an aluminised plastic survival blanket.

Will I get lost out there? A map and compass (and a GPS if you have one) and know how to use them are essential. Be aware that you could get lost in a whiteout if you are at Sugarloaf and trying to return to CPV so carry a compass and always be aware of the locations of pole lines. You can hire or buy a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) that can alert search and rescue in an emergency. A mobile phone may not have reception and is subject to battery failure. The terrain looks much different covered in snow than during the summer but a good introduction is to **stay at Pygmy Possum in the summer and walk in all the nearby areas to get an idea of the layout of the backcountry.** Areas east of CPV are not very accessible because of thick scrub in places. Mt Stilwell and beyond can be accessed from Charlotte Pass via top of the chair. The main difference is that in winter you are not confined to tracks so in summer west of Charlotte Pass you can wander off the track where possible and be aware that a weather change can occur rapidly so take a parka and warm clothes.

What about skis? Rhythm at Cooma hires XC skis and sells new and second hand skis and has discounts at the end of season. Paddy's at Jindabyne and Wilderness Sports at Jindabyne and

Perisher hire skis and the latter is good because you can change unsuitable equipment at Perisher. Make sure that the boots are comfortable and firm so that you can control your skis. There are heavy weight boots like downhill boots but they are for telemarking and are more tiring to use for touring.

What if you don't want to Ski Free? You can always Walk Free but there are no walking trails in CPV. Depending on snow conditions you can walk to Charlotte Pass or even Perisher and back. A great alternative to XC skiing is to wander around on Snow Shoes. They can be hired from Rhythm or Jindabyne ski shops or can be bought from about \$350 or less on special. A pair of stocks of a length that fits under your armpit is necessary for stability. The same clothing and safety equipment used for XC skiing is required. Snow shoeing is more strenuous than walking or skiing so a good level of health and fitness is required but once you are used to using them you can do a day trip to Blue Lake in five or six hours.

What next? It's as easy as 1-2-3

1. Make up your mind to do it.
2. Stay at Pygmy Possum in the summer to reconnoitre.
3. Any time during the winter season is suitable for Free XC but in late August and September the weather is usually milder and spring snow is softer and easier to ski on.
4. **Tell someone in the lodge where you are going and write your name and details on the board by the front door.**

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