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For the love of skiing

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Alpine lodge members enjoy luxury holidays at affordable prices.

There's nothing quite as magical as the sight of fresh snow around a snow gum. Fred Curtis, barrister and long-standing member of the Tarrawonga Alpine Lodge in Perisher Valley, says it is a sight unique to Australia.

"The wonderful thing about skiing in Australia is just how pretty it is," Curtis says. "When you can do it from a lodge, it is convivial and congenial. It's about family bonding. And the sum is worth more than the parts - more than just the seven days you might spend on the slopes."

Curtis is one of the lucky few Australians who is a member of a ski lodge. Perisher Valley is part of the 675,000-hectare Kosciuszko National Park. The park includes all of the NSW ski fields, the Snowy Mountains and six wilderness areas.

In NSW and Victoria, groups of friends got together in the 1950s, '60s and '70s to build non-commercial lodges, which were set up as not-for-profit co-operatives or sports clubs.

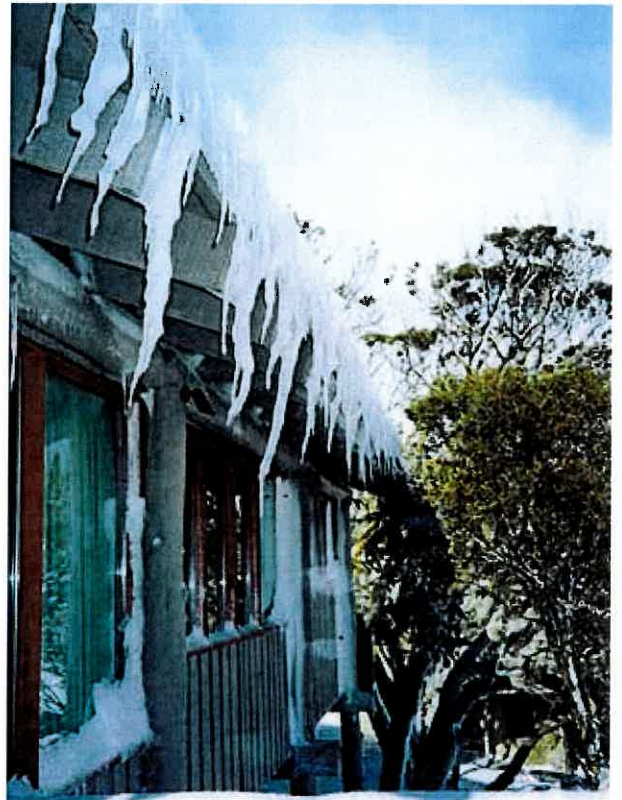
Graeme Anderson, the president of SLOPES, an organisation representing 88 privately run lodges in Perisher, Smiggins and Guthega in NSW, says that in the early days much of the pre-fabrication work was done in Sydney.

"People who got together had something in common: a few lodges came together with people from Port Kembla, others were formed by teachers or accountants. The one thing they had in common was a love of skiing."

John Lillis, the secretary of Ullr Lodge in Perisher Valley, started visiting Ullr in the late '60s, not long after it was finished.

"I joined because I wanted to become part of it rather than just an outsider," he says. "I wanted to get involved."

Ullr members published a book on the making of their ski lodge. The original 21 members, all part of an advertising crowd, raised the money to finance the building by issuing 50 shares at £1 per share.



Winter wonderland ... snow aplenty at Ullr Lodge.

Photo: Gary Medlicott

They also held roof-top parties in Sydney's Castlereagh Street, above one member's office, with gluwain (hot, spiced wine), a band and a temporary dance floor, to raise funds.

It was estimated the lodge would cost £10,500 to build, mostly using members' labour. A £1490 community services contribution was to be paid to Kosciuszko State Park Trust.

"Each member was required to put in two weeks' work on the site and those that could not, were required to find an alternative worker of equal strength to themselves or pay the rate of £30 a week so that a professional worker could be paid to replace them," the book says.

It was 1965. The lodge was finished in six months by a group of people who had never even renovated a house. The lodge has 16 beds, eight bathrooms, a big kitchen, common room and a huge open fireplace. A couple is employed to manage the lodge during winter, taking care of cleaning and cooking.

"We are all people of similar interest who get together to ski," Lillis says. "It adds another dimension. It is our lodge and not just a place to stay."

The folklore surrounding Ullr includes problems members had with financing the lodge.

"Ullr-ites were creative and they knew how to have a good time," the book says, documenting wild parties during blizzards or after a day of perfect skiing.

"Unfortunately, these attributes rarely go hand in hand with financial acumen."

In the end, the lodge increased its membership slightly and members went guarantor for a bank loan that secured the lodge's future.

Geoff Abbott, a member of Victoria's Mount Hotham Langi-Taan Ski Club, says lodges started in Victoria primarily because ski accommodation was expensive.

"We put in a small amount of money in 1972 or 1973 and we built our lodge," he says.

"We became a government-backed co-operative, which meant we could borrow some money, maybe \$28,000. We all paid that off every quarter. We paid it off in small amounts."

Borrowing money as a group and building a lodge with friends underpins the way lodges operate today.

In NSW and Victoria, many lodges remain private, open to members and their families only. This reflects the way those lodges came into being - a collective effort by a group of close friends to build a home-away-from-home.

A lot of emphasis is put on the communal nature of the lodge and ensuring everyone gets along.

Curtis says that prospective Tarrawonga members are carefully vetted. Even paying guests are screened.

"A member must sign you in and that member takes full responsibility for you," he says.

"The lodge is not commercial and we don't take bookings from people off the street."

Some lodges have closed their membership. Only members' children can buy shares and become members or associate members.

Others periodically open membership to ensure the lodge remains viable. Many take in paying guests to ensure that they have the income to keep the lodge in good shape.

But there is a fine balance between fundraising for renovation and keeping membership at a manageable level so that all get access to accommodation during the peak ski season.

Some lodges with large memberships operate a peak-season ballot system. A booking secretary may draw names from a hat and families who secure a week skiing during school holidays one year may not be permitted to return at the same time the following year.

Architect Peter Sandow, a member of the Peninsula Ski Lodge at Mount Hotham, says even for paying visitors, lodges can be cheaper than hotels or apartments.

"But more than that, it is a heck of a lot of fun," he says.

"Getting together at the end of the day's skiing is wonderful. Ours is a family lodge and having a membership that uses the lodge is the lifeblood of the lodge.

"Even to the point where when one person grows out of their skis, they hand them on. We all share. Regrettably, that sort of community spirit is shrinking."

Peter Doyle, a member of the Shepparton Alpine Club at Mount Hotham, says lodges have a community environment that can't be replicated in a hotel or apartment.

"Club accommodation is a peg below commercial rate accommodation," he says, adding it is a great way for young families to have what would otherwise be a prohibitively expensive holiday.

A bonus is the social interaction, especially for children.

"They have to deal with people they know, and lots they don't know, in a semi-communal environment that requires interaction. That's not often found these days.

"And club people are typically members of a club because they enjoy skiing and care about all aspects of the mountain - like the cattlemen."

WHEN A CO-OPERATIVE EFFORT PAYS OFF

Lodges in NSW and Victoria are managed slightly differently.

The Mount Hotham Resort Management Board, appointed by the Victorian Government, leases the land to each lodge and charges each an annual fee for services, much like council rates, says communications manager Ian Young.

Service fees cover the provision of basics such as water, sewerage, garbage and snow clearing, he says.

In Thredbo, NSW, lodges have leases for the land they occupy, with a head lessee, says NPWS director southern, Alistair Henschman.

In Perisher, Smiggins and Guthega, each of the lodges has a direct lease with the Minister for Environment and the lease is managed by the NPWS. The leases cover the rental of the land, Henschman says. And there is a big difference in charges applied to commercial premises as opposed to not-for-profit clubs.

NSW lodges also pay an annual levy to cover the cost of basic services. Lodges must carry insurance and pay for maintenance. Most provide either a basic larder or a cleaner, chef and sometimes a paid manager. These costs come out of membership fees, accommodation charges and annual levies paid by members or guests.

Mark Robins, the booking secretary at the Alexandra Ski Club at Perisher Valley, says some weeks the lodge employs a caterer; in other weeks, guests must provide their own food.

The lodge has 180 members. About 33 are very active, regularly using the lodge. Charges vary depending on whether visitors are guests or members and whether it is peak or off-peak season.

Membership at a lodge can range from \$6000 to up to \$25,000.

Costs reflect the proximity of the lodge to the ski field, the age and state of the premises and the number of existing members. A lodge with a very small membership base would normally be expensive to join but have a greater chance of accommodation during the peak ski season.

Usually, membership entails buying shares in the lodge and paying an application or entrance fee. Members then pay a reduced nightly accommodation rate, getting access to rooms before non-members and full-fee paying guests.

The lodge board then offers the shares for sale, controlling who gets access to membership. Bert Sheridan, a director of the South Perisher Alpine Club, says before joining a club, prospective members should look at past balance sheets.

South Perisher's shares currently sell for between \$4000 and \$5000, and members pay an annual fee of \$600, of which \$250 is refunded against accommodation bookings. The lodge has 60 members. Membership covers the member's partner, children, adult children and their partners and children, as well as the member's parents. Coverage differs from club to club.

South Perisher is best for cross-country skiing. Accommodation charges for peak season are \$250 a week for members and \$125 for children. This compares with \$460 a week for non-members' guests and \$230 a week for the children of guests who are not members. The membership fee for Ullr lodge is about \$12,000 with an annual fee of \$250. During peak season, members and their families pay \$700 a week, which includes breakfast, dinner and lunch on request. Guests pay \$1155.

FUN FACT

Rock drawings in Norway suggest people were skiing some 5000 years ago.

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