

Traveller Victoria



Trail blazing / Jumping for joy / Weekend without kids

DESTINATION
HIGH COUNTRY

Access all seasons

A new walking trail is being forged between Falls Creek and Mount Hotham, writes **Andrew Bain**.

Australian ski resorts have traditionally had two disparate seasons: ski season and no season. In recent years, however, Thredbo and Mount Buller have partly breached the divide by establishing themselves as downhill mountain-biking destinations. Now it may be the turn of Falls Creek and Mount Hotham, with the two resorts bookending a walking track they hope to transform into one of the Victorian high country's iconic day hikes.

Stretching approximately 25 kilometres between the two resorts, the trail links the Bogong high plain and the lodge-wrapped summit of Mount Hotham, providing for a full and varied day of walking in view of most of the state's highest and most impressive peaks.

"The walk cuts through a lot of really good terrain," says Falls Creek resort's natural resources manager, Ben Derrick. "You really don't have too many areas like this in Australia – the big, grassy alpine plains – and it goes through a range of vegetation types."

"There's some historical value as well with Derrick Hut and Dibbins Hut, so there are interesting things along the way, plus it's a great nature walk."

From Falls Creek, the walk crosses the high plain to pass beneath Mount Niggerhead, before descending to Cobungra Gap along either of two spurs. The more direct route passes the moody Basalt Temple volcanic outcrop, while the second track passes the rubble of Weston Hut, an authentic 1930s cattlemen's hut destroyed in the 2006 bushfires, before following the Kiewa River to its headwaters.

At Dibbins Hut the track heads upward again, rising through blackened remnants of the 2003 bushfires that scorched more than a million high

country hectares, and passes some of the most striking snow gums in the country as it approaches Derrick Hut and Mount Hotham.

A rare alpine point-to-point walk, it offers walkers a definite goal (and a soft bed at the end), though it does also complicate transport arrangements, with walkers currently needing to leave a vehicle at each end of the track or hike back on the following day. Falls Creek resort hopes to overcome this problem by establishing a shuttle service between the two resorts, which Derrick says may be in operation by next summer.

The lodges at Falls Creek are also pinning some of their off-season hopes on the walk. Nelse Lodge, in particular, is planning an accommodation package that will provide walkers with dinner, bed, breakfast, a packed lunch and a seat on the anticipated shuttle service.

"I've already got a couple of people in for it, but I haven't even put my toe in the water yet," owner Graham Parker says. "The walk isn't that difficult, and everyone who's ever skied Hotham or Falls Creek thinks, 'I'd love to do that'. I'd happily walk with them, or my daughter might walk with them or my wife, or they could go on their own. Then they'd be met at Mount Hotham and brought back for a glass of champagne around the bar."

The walk is along existing tracks and is clear to follow, though the tracks are unmaintained, presenting another challenge to Falls Creek's short-term trail ambitions.

"We'd be looking at areas of track we could improve, even though it's a well-known trail along its entire length," Derrick says. "The majority of the walk is in the Alpine National Park, and joint projects between resorts and national parks always take a lot of planning,



In the woods ... the snow gums along the walk are some of the most beautiful in the country.

particularly when there are facility upgrades. That's a challenge we face, but the guts of it is that we've got a walk facility there and it has been identified as something that's really worthwhile promoting."

For the resorts it is an unshamed attempt to boost summer visitor numbers. "Most ski resorts around the world have summer seasons nearly as big as winter," Parker says – but Derrick says the idea to promote the walk came not from a boardroom but from the outdoors passion of workers at the resort.

"Most of us live up here and have a real attachment to the area," he says. "There is a commercial value to it but we just want people to come up and enjoy it because it is a unique part of Australia. It's really worthwhile for people to come and look at a part of the country that not a lot of people get to."



On a high ... Dibbins Hut serves as a resting place, while an alpine ridge near Mount Hotham offers panoramic views of the high country. Photos: Andrew Bain

WEBSITES

Alpine National Park
parkweb.vic.gov.au/park_display.cfm?park=41

Falls Creek
fallscreek.com.au

Mount Hotham
mthotham.com.au

Nelse Lodge
neliselodge.com



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