

ALL THE MEN ARE STRONG

Hopelessly urban art director Jenny Nicholls gets to grips with a ski-lift, sheepdogs of genius, and the sublime landscapes of Lake Ohau Station.



Simon Inkersell is a tall man and strong – perfectly constructed, you might say, for the high country. He looks after 8322 of the most eyewateringly beautiful hectares in New Zealand – glacial valleys, with their scooped-out curving sides, at the head of Lake Ohau near Mt Cook. Around 5000 sheep and 250 Angus cattle depend on Simon for their existence. Every spring, he rouses the sheep from their well-appointed paddocks at the head of the lake

(pictured above) and musters them 470 metres higher, to grazing on the other side of the mountain range which cuts the station in half. He has one human shepherd, David Hoffman, and six dogs he has trained himself: Chase, Duke, Sid, Quinn, Chime and Pride. The snowy range which bisects the farm is so high there is an avalanche warning on the gravel road below it. And, oh yes, there is a skifield. In autumn, Simon and David will herd the sheep back to the lakeside, through the beautiful Maitland Valley.

JENNY NICHOLLS IS NORTH & SOUTH'S ART DIRECTOR. PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN DOWNIE.





Logan Inkersell and brother Max, six.

From the front yard of Simon's homestead, if I squint, I can just make out a ski-lift on the snowy flanks of the range. How can you have a mountain range in the middle of your farm? Such a North Island question: "How do you get across?" If Simon is surprised at my naivety, he is polite enough not to show it. "We walk. And climb."

Today, though, thank God, we are not going to walk, or climb. We clamber gratefully into the farm's 4WD, Simon's six-year-old son, Max, perching himself in the space behind our seats. He's going skiing.

As Simon cruises up the 9.6km of slushy hairpin curves till our ears pop, he recalls his own father taking him to the top of the same vertiginous snowfield, skis on, and telling him to get to the bottom. "That was his idea of teaching me how to ski. It worked."

He wears his own more gentle parenting skills as unconsciously as a tenderised oilskin. Every few minutes he calls out to his son in the back of the car. "Right there, Maxi?"

We warm to Simon.

For years I have fantasised about snow, in short supply back home on Waiheke Island. Now I am in it, and it is sparkling and beautiful and treacherous. "Well, you've got your snow!" says friend James, along for the ride. We pick our way gingerly over the unfamiliar stuff, turned to ice by passing vehicles. "Right, there?" asks Simon, amused.

The Ohau Snow Fields are a family business, and long-haired owner Mike Neilson ("I'm really a surf bum") wants to talk about wine, of all things. His snowy hobbit-hole of an office is crowded with computer screens showing live footage of the ski-lifts, a bunk (empty) for casualties and a number of trophies ("New Zealand Ski Area Service Award") jumbled on a window sill.

None of us has been on a ski-lift before. None of us has skied before. We are, innocently, not apprehensive. *North & South* photographer Ken Downie is desperate to get to the top of the

ridge, to capture the magnificent snow-drenched landscape with the reflecting lake far below.

I am struck by the number of children in sharp ski suits swishing nonchalantly down slopes which give me vertigo. But every now and then I see the same teenage snowboarder skid, slide and crash.

Skiers and snowboarders are the residents of an alien planet, with as many words for "falling over" as Inuit supposedly have for snow. An "asspass", for instance, is when you fall over and slide rapidly past other boarders on your butt. An impressive range of other disasters are described by "buttslide", "bail", "biff", "krunk", "layout", "wipeout", "splattin'", "screwed", "boomph", "eat snow", "faceplant", "scorch muffins", "scorpion" (in which your board hits the back of your head after a "faceplant"), "rolling down the windows" (referring to the helpless arm movements made by the victim on the way down), and the self-explanatory

"max air plummet". The unskilled are, naturally, savaged: "noob", "newbie", "meat torpedo" (children with zero control over their skis), "fancy pants", "gaffer", "grommet" and the evocative "wildebeest".

Even grommets like us find getting to the top of the ski-lift easy. Riding it down is a different matter.

As we make our shuddering descent, waving regally at the quizzical skiers and snowboarders on their way up, we admire the deep blue-green lake and the sun on the snow, and also some massive wipeouts, faceplants and scorch muffins. For some reason I have a large handbag on my knees.

We seem to descend horribly fast into the off-loading zone. Just as I'm trying to work out how to get off the thing, James lurches face forward into the snow, his feet caught beneath our seat – a textbook example of a max air plummet/boomph/faceplant/krunk followed by long buttslide.

As I am unwilling (and, let's be frank, unable, owing to the handbag) to leap off the speeding chair while he is being dragged politely flailing underneath it, we seem destined for a nerve-racking re-ascent – with James dangling from my chair – when the chairlift is switched off in the nick of time.

As skiers come to a swinging halt halfway back up the mountain, James painfully disentangles himself and limps heavily past an audience of delighted snowboarders. "AWESOME dismount, dude!"

Simon and Max are back in the carpark. "You right?" asks Simon, with just the right note of casual concern as James winces past him.

We nurse wounded pride back at our impressive digs: the flash new Shearers' Quarters at Lake Ohau Station. Shearers actually do stay here: this place can sleep 24. The pantry is about twice the size of my kitchen.

Liko Inkersell, Simon's wife, looks after The Quarters with Stephanie Voice, partner to station shepherd David. As the station is too far for a school bus to come, until recently Liko also homeschooled six-year-old Max for four days a week through Te Kura (the Correspondence School), driving him the 40-minute

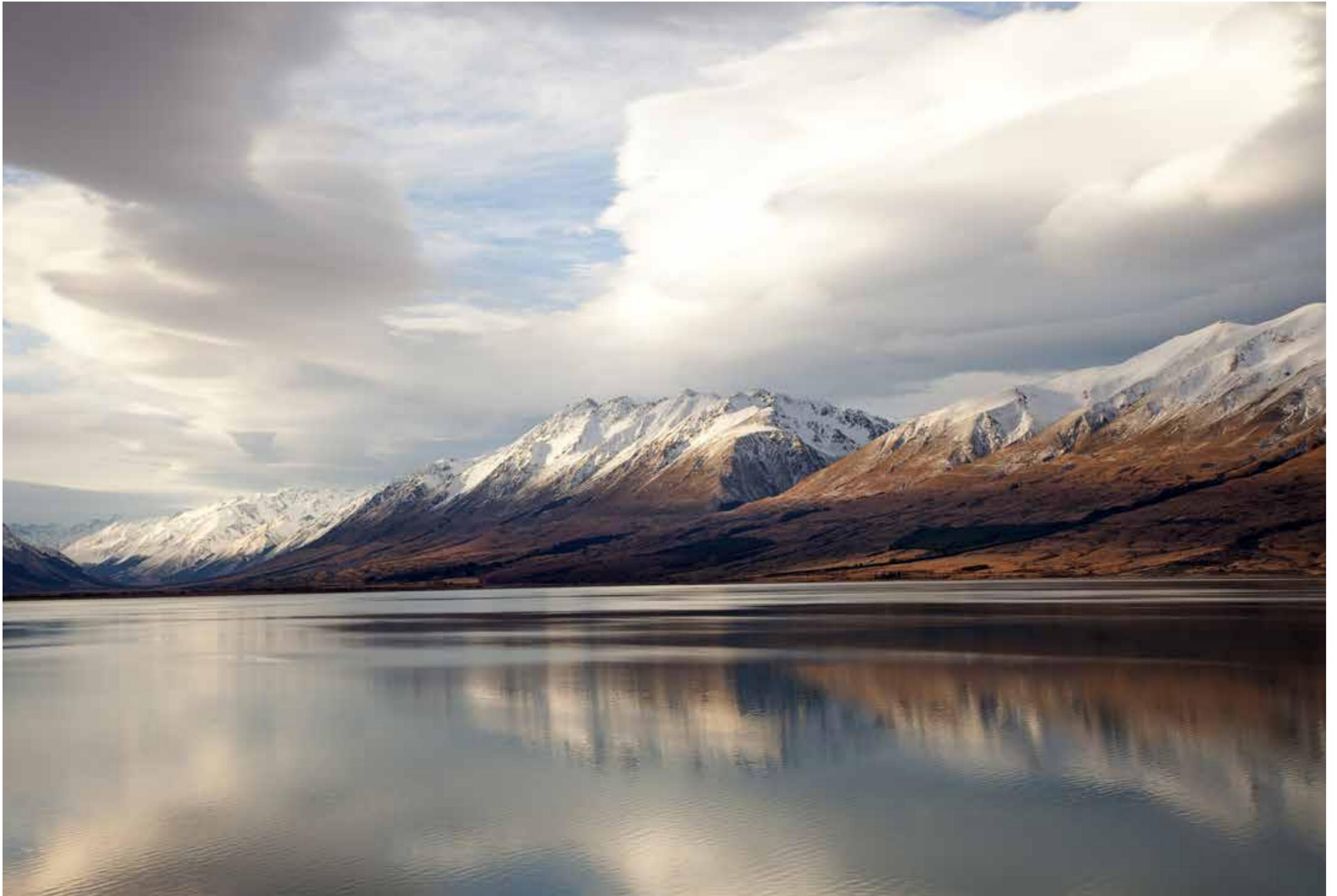


Top left: Liko Inkersell with top dog Chase and sons Max (at left), and Logan. Top right: Liko uses her woodburning kitchen stove for baking. Above: The road to the Ohau Snow Fields.

AS SKIERS COME TO A SWINGING HALT HALFWAY BACK UP THE MOUNTAIN, JAMES PAINFULLY DISENTANGLES HIMSELF FROM THE SKI-LIFT SEAT AND LIMPS HEAVILY PAST AN AUDIENCE OF DELIGHTED SNOWBOARDERS.



Left: Another view of the road to the Ohau Snow Fields. This is the range which bisects the station; the sheep are mustered over it.



trip to school in Omarama once a week, on Wednesdays.

Now, to Max's delight, he goes each day on the bus. A family equipped with three children moved into the head of the valley in January, meaning the daily 30km drive to the nearest school-bus stop could be shared with another set of parents. It isn't easy teaching a child at home, especially as Max's brother, Logan, is only three.

In winter the brick homestead is sometimes swamped in snow: the water hose freezes in the chook run, and the Inkersells fire up their three fireplaces and at least one of their four heat pumps. Finding, roughly chopping, loading, unloading and re-chopping enough firewood for winter is an epic yearly chore for Simon and David.

In summer the boys swim in the lake every day, surrounded by Douglas fir and the peaks of the Southern Alps – Aoraki/Mt Cook among them.

I have been wondering why so many trees hereabouts are lying on their sides with their roots in the air like dead cats. Some odd local tree-felling habit, I half thought.

“Does it get windy here? I ask.

Liko and Simon try not to smile. They tell me fierce gales are part of life, whipping the lake into huge waves. On the night of October 24, 2011, winds gusted up to 151km/h. Simon managed to rescue the dogs minutes before their kennels blew away. A good heading dog can be worth between \$2000 and \$3000.

On Queen's Birthday weekend last year, the station lost a lot of trees, and the roof blew off the beautiful historic stone cottage not far from the Inkersells' house.

I was raised on a dairy farm generally equipped with one or two unenthusiastic mutts, so Simon's dog-whispering skills make quite an impression on me. I watch Chase silently coagulate a large bunch of nervy merino by creeping about them keeping low and horizontal, as if suspended just above the ground, before exploding into action, alert to every move Simon makes.

Anyone who has tried to chase sheep around a paddock will recognise his description of their annoying habit of suddenly bolting



Mike and Louise Neilson run the Ohau Snow Fields, and Lake Ohau Lodge. Below: Massed merino at Lake Ohau Station.



Top: Ohau Snow Fields. Centre: The Quarters at Lake Ohau Station has a stunning view of the lake (above).

in all directions like “marbles in a bathtub”, unlike dairy cows which, sensibly, stay in herds.

On our last morning, photographer Ken, a city boy to his trainer laces, is outside loading his tripod into the car when he exclaims in surprise.

“Jenny, get out here! Come quick! *The rams are doing it!*”

I hear rhythmic clunking noises. I run outside to find two gigantic

rams running fervently at each other, heads down. “Ken, you idiot,” I say, condescendingly. “That’s what rams do. That’s why they have those things on their heads.”

Ken is dumbstruck. “Good heavens! No wonder they’re so dumb!”

The gravel drive cackles. It’s Simon coming to check the water system, having just shorn hundreds of sheep.

“You right?” he asks, unwearied.

TO STAY

LAKE OHAU STATION, THE QUARTERS

Forty minutes from both Twizel and Omarama, this handsome new building is nestled under a mountain range at the head of the lake. It houses up to 24 guests in six rooms; one double, two twin single and three bunk rooms. Centrally heated with a magnificent fireplace, laundry and gas barbecue. You will need to bring your own food, including tea and coffee, bedding and towels, although linen can be provided for \$30 pp. Tariff: \$495 inclusive for the first 10 guests, then \$30 pp including children over 12; \$15 for children over five; under fives are free. Minimum stay of two nights. www.lakeohauquarters.co.nz, ph (03) 438-9663.

LAKE OHAU LODGE

This wonderfully retro family-friendly lodge has a cult following, and it isn't hard to see why. The restaurant is outstanding, with superb cooking and

local wines. Children are welcome and well catered for. Owners Mike and Louise Neilson also run the Ohau Snow Fields, which makes booking a day on the slopes a cinch. With five different accommodation options plus breakfast and dinner rates, the lodge caters for most budgets. www.ohau.co.nz, ph (03) 438-9885. For bookings and snow reports, ph (03) 438-9885.

TO DO

OHAU SNOW FIELDS

A 15-minute drive from the Lake Ohau Lodge. Uncrowded, compared to the bigger snowfields. For tyros there is good tramping to off-piste “powder bowls”. The season opens in June.

The Avalunch Cafe has a wonderful range of homemade food from \$6 pies (including mutton) to \$3.50 noodles. Adult all-day lift pass, \$81; child, \$33. Skis/board, boots and poles, all-day hire, \$50. www.ohau.co.nz, ph (03) 438-9885 or email reservations@ohau.co.nz.

HIGH COUNTRY SALMON

It's fun to feed the salmon here: the fish seize their snacks with a lightning gleam of silvery muscle. The packaged version is tender and divinely flavoursome. The Wairepo Arm is a lake on SH8, just south of Twizel.

HOT TUBS OMARAMA

“Onsen” are Japanese wooden hot tubs, and now you can marinate in private under a high-country sky. Each red cedar tub is refilled with fresh water after use. Open at night. www.hottubsomarama.co.nz

TRAMPING, RUATANIWAHIA CONSERVATION PARK

36,800ha of gorgeous mountain country. **Ben Ohau Range** is sheltered from the westerlies which bedevil the main divide. Other awesome locations are **Dobson Valley, Maitland Valley, Temple Valley, Hopkins Valley** and the **Huxley Valley**. You will need the DoC pamphlet *Ruataniwha Conservation Park*, which has a contour map with huts, track types and access information. Ask at Lake Ohau Lodge, or DoC's Twizel office, ph (03) 435-0802; email TwizelAO@doc.govt.nz. +



Winter Driving with Mitsubishi

The alpine environment is a major part of New Zealand's great outdoors experience – and the winter trip to the mountains a rite of passage for many Kiwi families. Seasoned skiers and snowboarders within driving distance of the Southern Alps ski fields and Mt Ruapehu in the north are mostly familiar with the kind of road hazards that accompany high altitude driving. But for the unwary and unprepared, winter driving can be challenging. A blue-sky day at breakfast can deteriorate into extreme driving conditions by lunchtime; even on sunny mid-winter mornings black ice (better named “clear ice” as it's virtually transparent) can linger in shady spots and create dangerously slippery surfaces. Having a vehicle that's designed for optimum handling in these conditions, however, will give you the confidence to explore some of the country's most spectacular areas.

The Mitsubishi ASX 4WD LS Diesel will take you comfortably to our winter playgrounds – at the same time delivering nippy round-town driving in a super-stylish body. The powerful 2.2L intercooled turbo diesel engine makes any climb a breeze, and with a fuel consumption rate of 5.8L/100km a tank of fuel can stretch to an impressive 900km. The Mitsubishi 4WD features a 6-speed automatic transmission with sport mode. What this means is on steep mountain road descents, the gears can be manually controlled to use the engine for braking. A handy feature that comes with all ASX models is Hill Start Assist, which prevents the vehicle from rolling backwards when starting on a hill. Active Traction Control helps maintain traction on the most slippery of surfaces.

It's also good to know you're safe: the ASX comes with a 5-star ANCAP rating, which covers its off-road capabilities; it's equipped with seven airbags, and in the rear-seat has locking retractable seatbelts as well as ISO-FIX installed for additional child-seat restraint. Travelling to the mountains means a long drive for many of us. Cruise control will ease the long, straight stretches, and the 6.1-inch touch screen audio system (which handily acts as a live reversing mirror when backing the vehicle) with Bluetooth capability will provide entertainment en route. With all these features, it's a bonus that the ASX looks good. The swage line running through the doors is an eye-catcher, and the simple yet streamlined dash helps create a sense of ample interior space. If you don't have a roof rack, the rear seats fold down to provide ample room for skis and snowboards. Good-sized side mirrors give great visibility and fold inwards when the car is locked – a perfect feature for those “squeeze-them-all-in” ski field carparks.