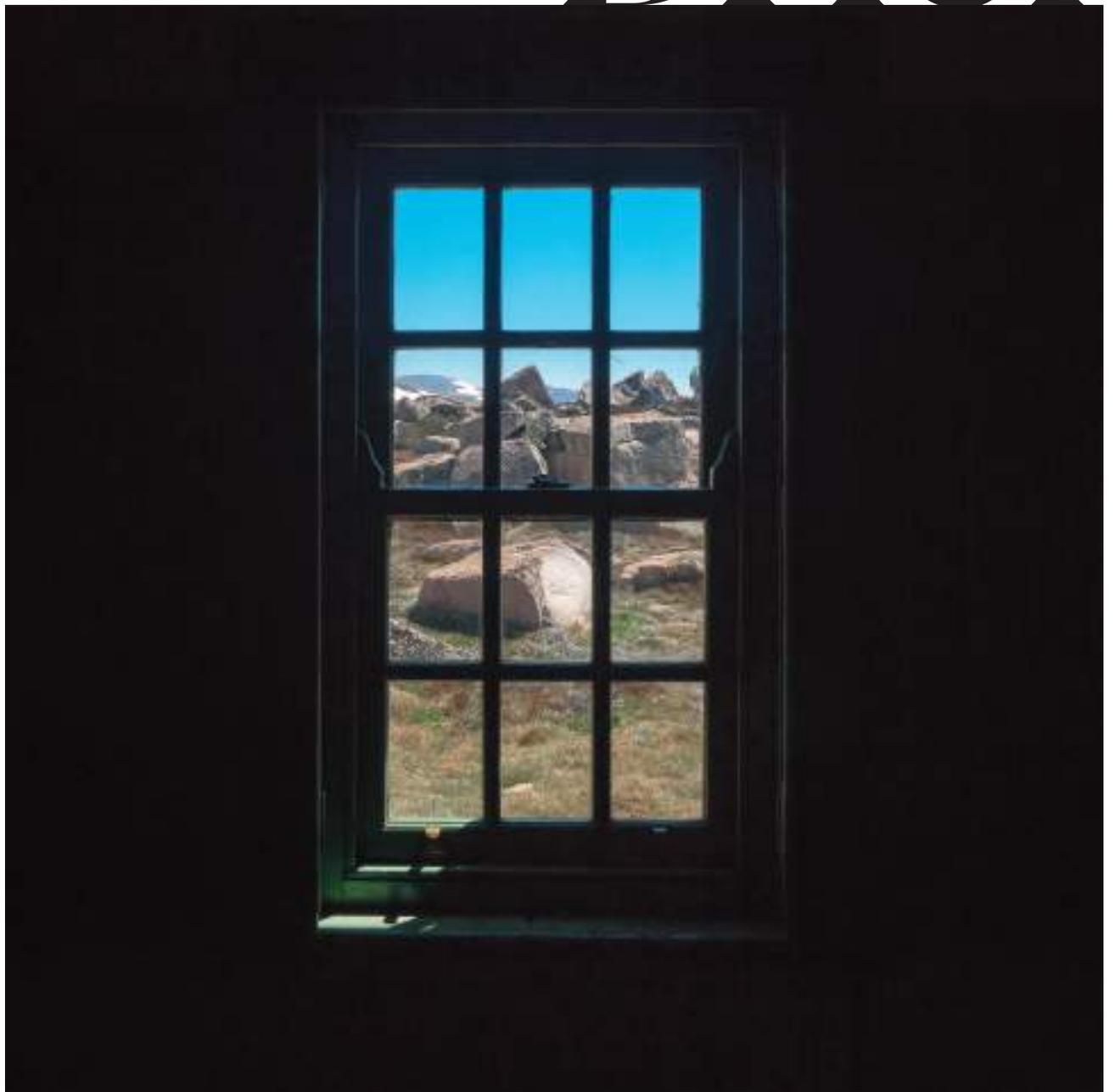


The verdict
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*Seamans Hut on the Mount Kosciuszko
summit trail from Charlotte Pass*

The Brief



The verdict

GREAT HEIGHTS Drinking from the Snowy River, camping in an alpine fairyland... Faith Campbell goes on an adventure to Australia's highest point.

From where I'm standing on a viewing platform at Charlotte Pass, the Snowy Mountains range looks deceptively slight. More like a bunch of big hills than the country's tallest mountains.

I adjust my neckerchief and yank my socks above my Blundstone boots, overconfident at the start of the two-day, 25-kilometre hike to the peak of Mount Kosciuszko with Australian Summit Tours (australiansummitours.com).

"I love it – you're inner-west hikers," says guide Josh Shukor, taking in my natty outfit and the "country hat" my boyfriend is wearing. We do in fact hail from Sydney's hipster enclave and made the five-hour drive south to Lake Crackenback Resort, the four-day package starting and ending with an overnight stay in a comfy chalet.

"You drive down here and the city deconstructs, the landscape flattens out then builds up again as mountains," says Shukor as we head off. He's been guiding in the region for five years, hiking in the

warmer months and working as a ski instructor in winter. He started Australian Summit Tours with his wife, Samantha, and he's just the kind of guy to go on a long walk with: easy to talk to and funny.

We rock hop across the Snowy River, stopping to fill our canteens (Shukor shows us how to filter our water with a UV purifier). We're each wearing packs weighing nine kilograms, containing the food and gear we need to spend the night camping, and soon I'm pausing to "admire the scenery". It's a plausible excuse: giant boulders are scattered across the slopes, some appearing to have stalled mid-tumble while others are jagged and leaning into the wind.

As we trundle on, Shukor reminds us to set our own pace while he bounds ahead.

"You've made it to Australia's largest glacial lake – it's time for lunch," he announces, shrugging off his pack and gesturing to the appropriately named Blue Lake, rippling beneath a sky of the same colour.

Eating tasty, nutritious food is an essential part of Shukor's hikes – there's no rehydrated sludge. Instead, we cook freshly made ravioli (from local restaurant and guesthouse Crackenback Farm) garnished with walnuts and shaved parmesan – fancy.

The rest of the day involves a few snow traverses, a handful of trail runners loping by and a windy pass along the saddle between Mount Twynam and Carruthers Peak, where a thick fog streams in from the Great Dividing Range. We make it to Wilkinsons Creek in the afternoon, having covered almost 14 kilometres and ascended about 700 metres.

It's at this point I need privacy. There's no toilet for about 24 hours of the hike but Shukor has solutions and a no-shame policy. "Just number one," I feel compelled to mumble as I emerge from behind a rock.

After tea and biscuits we pitch tents among boulders that dwarf us. Ringed by snow-sprinkled peaks, we're in the base of a crown that looks like a fairyland. Heath in shades of plum, mustard and green, meadows of yellow blooms and the smooth stones and mossy banks of the creek are all bathed in gold from the setting sun. Dinner is a warming Penang curry with roti and sleep comes as soon as darkness does.

I tumble from the tent the next morning, aches rendering me as awkward as a new foal. We fill up on granola and blueberries, heft our packs and set off for the summit. "We're going straight into the 330-metre ascent," says Shukor with an excitement that I can't quite muster this early.

Up and up rocky steps we climb before leaving our packs on the grass so we can summit unburdened. It's busy here, with plenty of day hikers who chose the shorter path to the top. We take our turn standing on the rock pylon that marks Australia's highest point, squinting into the sun for a photo. It's all downhill from here.

One kilometre from where we started at Charlotte Pass, I scan the panorama of what yesterday seemed like hills but now definitely look like Australia's tallest mountains. "Congratulations," says Shukor and we cover the final stretch in satisfied silence.

More Snowy Mountains expeditions...

On two wheels

Follow and cross the Thredbo River as you bump along mountain-bike trails on the 35-kilometre Thredbo Valley Track (thredbo.com.au). The well-maintained route is suitable for beginners through to advanced riders.



On four wheels

Depart from Canberra and drive the Kosciuszko Alpine Way, stopping at Cooma, where you can have lunch at the Tickled Trout Cafe (eucumbenetroutroutfarm.com), and Jindabyne, to pick up a bottle of Wildbrumby Distillery's pink gin (wildbrumby.com) to take home. Finish at Kosciuszko National Park (visitsw.com).



On four legs

Have your own *The Man from Snowy River* moment on an all-inclusive guided ride with Cochran Horse Treks (cochranhorsetreks.com.au). Trot across the ranges over three days or a week, camp at night and share stories with your fellow riders over dinner.





Robin Smith