



FEATURE

Snowy Paws & Happy Tails:

A Pet Parent's Guide to Taking Your Dog to the Snow

Words | Photography: KERRY MARTIN

It's quiet and I'm all tucked up in bed. Our dogs are snuggled tight in the crook of my knee. The unfamiliar light wakes me; a strange blueness glowing through the window. Suddenly I'm awake, remembering where we are. I leap out and gaze out the window to find the world transformed. The snow has fallen silently overnight, blanketing the trees, making uneven ground even. Crisp. Sparkling. Bright. Inviting us to leave pawprints on this new pristine world.

The dogs pick up on the excitement before we've said a word. We dress hastily, pulling on each layer until our limbs are plump with clothing. I grab the leads, my camera, and we step out.

This is Dinner Plain in the Victorian High Country. And for the past decade-plus, it's been the place Sam and I plan our winter around.

The Snow Country Catch

Australia isn't known as a snowy country. Compared to most of the world, our snow is limited, seasonal, and often fleeting. But it does fall, and NSW gets its share of it, particularly across the Snowy Mountains, the Blue Mountains, and the Central and Northern Tablelands.

The catch is that most of NSW's reliable snow falls inside National Parks and Alpine Resorts, where dogs aren't permitted. That means if you've ever stood in your kitchen looking at a snow forecast, dog at your feet, and thought "we should go," you've probably also discovered that "we" doesn't include the dog.

There are exceptions, and they're worth knowing about. Jindabyne, the town that sits below the major NSW resorts, sometimes sees snow on the ground when it falls at low levels. Other spots, including Oberon, Hampton, the Blue Mountains, and Orange, all get the occasional dusting, more so in big-snow events like the so-called "Blizzard of Oz" winters. None of them have reliable snowfall. When it comes, it will mostly be fleeting. The trick to experiencing snow in these parts is to keep an eye on the forecast and be ready to move when conditions line up.

Corin Forest in the ACT, just 45 minutes from Canberra, takes a different approach. Each September it holds a Dog Day Out (or two) in its Snow Play Area. It's the only time dogs are allowed in. It's on-leash, can get busy, and suits sociable dogs better than the worried ones, but for Canberra and Sydney pet parents wanting a snow sampler, it's a worthwhile day trip.

So when pet parents ask me where I head with my dogs for snow play in Australia, with chalets to stay in, deep snow to play in, and trails to walk on, I tell them about Dinner Plain.

What Makes Dinner Plain Different

Dinner Plain sits at 1,500 metres above sea level on the Great Alpine Road, between Mount Hotham and Omeo. It's a small village of architecturally designed chalets built in the spirit of the old high country huts. Think tiny European alpine village... with possums.

It's also the only place in Australia, above the snowline, where dogs are welcomed without a permit or special permission. Nowhere else in this country can you wake up in your own chalet, open the door, and walk straight into fresh snow with your dog.



Because of the altitude, the snow here is more reliable than at lower elevations, and the village itself is sheltered enough by Mount Hotham to be spared the worst of the western storms. Peak snow cover historically runs mid-July to mid-August, with the season stretching from June through September depending on what the weather feels like doing. Occasional snowfall from May through to December can also occur.

What makes it work for dogs (and the people who love them) is the village itself. Dinner Plain is small and walkable. You can enjoy a hot chocolate around a fire pit with your dog by your side. Some of the cross-country trails double as hiking routes. There's a general supermarket for essentials, with Bright and Omeo down the mountain for anything more substantial.



Above: Dinner Plain Village

The First Time Your Dog Meets Snow

But the village description doesn't really tell you what the place is. The dogs do. I'll never forget our first morning at Dinner Plain with Keiko, our Japanese Spitz. We didn't tell him where we were going (this conversation would have been one-sided). We just arrived, opened the door, and watched.

Cue the head-tilt. Then the cautious paw-lift. Then the dawning realisation that his world had turned into the most extraordinary playground of his life. Keiko went on to spend the weekend alternately overjoyed and amused, chasing snowballs with the kind of focused commitment usually reserved for treats. Summer, who came along on later trips, took an entirely different approach: she demanded snowballs be thrown for her, then performed elaborate aerial interceptions. Scout, our newest pack member, hasn't met snow yet... but I can't wait to experience this first with him this winter.

Every dog meets snow differently. Some bound. Some dig. Some stand quite still, nose lifted, working hard to find the smells they expect to be there and aren't, or trying to figure out where the few that remain are coming from. Some do the full snow-spraying zoomies, and others quietly contemplate it like serious philosophers. Whatever kind of dog yours is, the snow brings out a side of them you've not seen before, with the kind of puppy-like exuberance you don't see often once they're grown.

For me, that's the bit I keep coming back for. The photographs are everything I hope they'll be, proof that the moment happened, that you were there together. But there's also what happens between you and your dog in a place this far from ordinary. The TV stays off. The pace slows down. You walk through the snow gums with your dog beside you, sharing the same crisp air, the same hushed quiet, the same wide-open beauty.



*Images (opposite page): Australian Shepherd 'Aspen.'
Right: 'Squirt', the Bull Terrier.*



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Planning Your Snow Trip (And What Not To Do When You Get There)

For your Snow Dogs trip, aim for July through August for the most reliable snow. Booking early helps especially for dog-friendly accommodation, which can fill well ahead of the winter season. Snow Dogs photography sessions, if you'd like photographs to be part of your experience, run for a fixed window each winter and are intentionally kept small. They also fill before the season gets underway.

Dinner Plain has a range of dog-friendly accommodation, from cosy chalets for two to larger lodges for groups. Bright, Omeo and Harrietville offer more accommodation options within day trip driving distance.

From Sydney, Dinner Plain is roughly an eight-hour drive. From Canberra, around six. The most direct route passes through Albury and Bright, then up the Great Alpine Road, which is one of the prettier drives in the country. Stop in Bright if you can. It's worth a visit, and is a pretty spot for a leg stretch.

You'll drive through Mount Hotham to reach Dinner Plain, but don't stop here. You'll need a paid day pass to do so, and unless you're a resident with a permit, dogs aren't permitted within the Mount Hotham Resort during snow season. Keep moving, and you'll be at Dinner Plain in another ten minutes anyway.

These are mountain conditions. Carry chains, and check road conditions before you set off. Pack everything you might need for your dog from home, including their usual food. The Dinner Plain supermarket is lovely and handy, but it has limited product lines.

Above: Newfoundlands 'Primrose' & 'Maple'. Below: 'Keiko' & 'Summer' at Dinner Plain.



Worth Holding Onto

Snow with your dog is not an everyday experience in this country. That's a large part of what makes it worth doing. There's something about the combination of altitude, snow gums, low light and a dog moving easily through it all that genuinely stays with you. Of all the places Sam and I have travelled with our dogs across Australia, Dinner Plain is the one we keep coming back to. There aren't many places where you can wake up and find your dog in deep snow at the door. We've never grown tired of it.

If a snow trip with your dog has been on your "one day" list, this might be the year to plan it in.



About the Author /Photographer

Kerry Martin is a dog photographer, author and storyteller behind Puppy Tales, based in Melbourne and travelling Australia.

She currently travels with her husband Sam, their Border Collie Scout, and their cat Mr Magoo. Since 2018, she and Sam have driven over 250,000 km together, photographing dogs in some of the country's most beautiful and remote places. Kerry's credentials include Master of Photography and Australian Pet Photographer of the Year.

She is the founder of the Australian Dog of the Year Awards and the author of Dog Tales of Australia, a guidebook for travelling with dogs.

[Find more on the Snow Dogs photography sessions at puppytales.com.au/snow-dogs-photography-retreats](http://puppytales.com.au/snow-dogs-photography-retreats)

Above: 'Blackie' the German Shepherd Dog.

Below: Kerry Martin with 'Keiko' & 'Summer.'

