

Taken from <https://www.ski.com.au/xf/threads/thredbo-to-charlotte-pass-chair.6978/page-2>

Since people have said they want to know lots more, what follows is a history of the lift. It is extracted from:

Rick Walkom. *Skiing off the roof: the Kosciusko Chalet at Charlottes Pass and it's â€*, Arlberg Press, 1991. Reprinted by Tabletop Press, 2000. Pages 110 - 117.

The book also has nine photos of the chairlift and a route map.

To satisfy the Charlotte Pass regulars and to halt defections to the new resorts, three new lifts were built in 1963 - 1964. The third lift, considered to be the key to the success of the enterprise, was a chairlift linking the Chalet to the outside world.

Whilst the new resorts were blessed with virtually snowfree roads to their doorsteps, the Charlotte Pass area was disadvantaged by being snowbound. Plans were drawn up to syphon off some of these skiers by building a 'skiers-access' chairlift over the Ramshead Range to link the Chalet with the Alpine way. News of this rather courageous scheme generated a lot of excitement, curiosity and scepticism among the skiing public.

A chairlift of such great length was a challenging engineering exercise. The company was advised that the lift would have to be divided into three linked sections - an Alpine Way section, a Ramshead top section and a Chalet section. For the sake of expediency and economy, the engineers were to design and build only two linked lifts. The two adjoining drive stations and the transfer platform (including a restaurant) were to be located midway between the Chalet and the Alpine Way. To cater for day skiers, four intermediate stations were to be built at Bella Vista, Snowline, No. 2 and Wright's Creek. In the Alpine Way terminal a restaurant and medical centre were planned with a large parking area and a service station. A 'sedan' design chairlift was chosen with an expected capacity of 350 people per hour in both directions with each chair partially enclosed in fibreglass cupolas. The lift line position was chosen by the engineers, surveyors, managers and directors, and work started on the project early in 1963.

The contract was given to Transfield and other companies assisted. Transfield was involved in constructing high steel power towers for the Electricity Commission. The construction proved a large and difficult project. About 130 workmen were employed, working day and night shifts. One team worked from the Chalet, whilst another established a work camp at Bella Vista Platform near the Alpine Way. Helicopters were used and a Muskeg Bombardier worked non-stop carting men and materials up to the various towers. The Mueller towers went up at the rate of one per day, and progress was so rapid that by the June long weekend the top drive stations were completed, the cable was on and the two lifts were all but ready to test run.

Some formidable engineering headaches and Department of Labour and Industry (D.L.I.) regulations put paid to any hopes of starting the lift for the 1963 season as planned. The first trouble was caused by the rubber on the pulleys. The cable pressure the rubber to stretch and break, and it had to be replaced when work resumed at the end of the winter. Hans Ambrusch, a Chalet ski instructor, did his best to ensure that work proceeded at a spirited pace; he built a potato-peeling still in Wright Creek basin but the Muskeg apparently fared better on this lethal fuel than did his fellow construction workers.

By the end of 1963 the two chairlifts were ready to be tested again. Once again the rubbers on the pulleys broke. At this time E.P.T. Pty. Ltd. Took over the contract from Transfield and new rubbers ordered from America proved to be satisfactory.

In May 1964, the lifts were tested by the D.L.I. once again. Louie Reinstadler recalled, 'All started well until the cable derailed on tower 36. Herbert phoned from Bella Vista platform to say there were no chairs passing over tower 35. We stopped the lift and walked down to tower 36, and there, on the ground, were all the chairs; they had been dropping off as the cable went over the tower''. This problem was also solved and on the day before the lift was officially opened for the June long weekend in 1964 the D.L.I. undertook its final inspection. Safety requirements required that the staff had to show D.L.I. inspectors that they could rescue people stranded on the lift in twelve minutes. This exercise, which terrified those who 'volunteered'', proved successful. The lift was allowed to open the next day and hundreds of skiers lined up to take their first aerial adventure from the Thredbo road to the Chalet at £1 per ride.

The basic concept was simple, yet far sighted. The chairlift opened up about 50 square kilometres of excellent downhill skiing terrain that included the George Chisholm run on the Thredbo side and the Wright's Creek run on the Charlotte Pass side. Skiers wishing to ski at Charlottes Pass had only to park their cars in the snowfree Alpine Way car park, throw their bags and skis on the lift and enjoy the 35 minute ride. They could thus forget about the drive up the slushy dirt road to Smiggin Holes followed by the slow chaotic trip into Charlotte Pass in a Sno-Cat. The lift was also expected to prove extremely popular with summer tourists.

Gliding for 5 km over the frozen top of Australia on a clear windless day and lunching at 2,057 metres above sea level in what was undoubtedly the highest, windiest and most isolated restaurant in Australia, must have been a rare and unforgettable experience. On a clear day, it was said, one could see the Pacific Ocean. Alas, not many people were destined to experience such joy. The chairlift, which had been entered in the Guinness Book of Records (incorrectly ) as being the longest in the world, was a disaster from the start.

The Snow Gods wasted no time in showing their disdain for the sea level engineers. With the first snow falls in 1964, a variety of design faults became glaringly obvious. The lift had been built across the direction of the prevailing westerly winds. Incessant strong winds on an extremely exposed plateau hit the chairs at right angles, causing them to swing violently and nearly collide with the towers. The buffeting inevitably caused derailments and lengthy stoppages, resulting in some celebrated rescues by the ski patrolmen who sometimes had to go out armed with bazooka spear guns with broom handle spears to shoot ropes over the cables so that passengers could be brought back to earth. A stoppage might well have been an unexpected bonus for a rugged alpine bachelor stuck on the same seat as a frightened, cold, nubile novice, miles from anywhere with only a bottle of schnapps and the warmth of his gallant personality to ward off the blizzard. But more often than not, a busload of sightseers, complete with high heeled shoes, cameras and pom-poms, ended up dangling in the icy winds awaiting rescue. Inevitably a few passengers fell out of the chairs, but, according to Herb Brenniger, a fulltime ski patroller at the time, no one was ever badly injured whilst the chairlift operated.

Dumped on top of the teething problems during the 1964 season were the exceptionally heavy, near-record snowfalls. The prevailing westerly winds caused huge drifts to build up and bury ski lifts, buildings and roads in the N.S.W. and Victorian Mountains. During the season the snow depth at Spencer's Creek was 355.6 cm.

The blizzards started in July; one lasted 31 days. Louie Reinstadler who lived at the top station, said 'I had two wind gauges and when the bad weather started. I went out to read them - they registered over 180 km per hour. As the days passed the winds got worse, the gauges finally blew away and it was impossible to even go outside. After the blizzard subsided we went out to survey the damage.

Chairs were ripped off from the cable, towers were twisted and some parts of the lift were completely buried in the drifts''.

The heavy falls caused many problems for skiers and resort operators everywhere. For a while people were able to catch Sno-Cats to and from Wilson's Valley. Incoming guests were asked to shovel the lifts out in return for a free day ticket (which could not be used anyway). They fought a losing battle. With all the lifts at Charlotte Pass closed for days at a time skiers could do little but marvel at the spectacular sight of the Chalet buried to the eaves in snow. Some joined the privileged few who could boast that they had skied off the Chalet roof.

Engineer Ivan Kyling tried all sorts of methods to dig the chairlift out, from crosscut saws to gelignite, the latter costing a number of chairs. When the chairlift was started up again, the staff found food supplies that had been in the chairs for a month and were still quite fresh. During one particularly frustrating period, the staff had to find and repair the power cable which was not only buried in the ground but also hidden under a 12 metre snowdrift. Men from Cooma and Jindabyne were employed daily in an effort to shovel out the trench. It was frustrating because on a clear day they made considerable progress but, on revisiting the trench the next morning to complete the digging, they would find the trench two-thirds full of drifted snow, caused by the strong winds so often experienced that year.

Kosciusko Chalet Ltd. was faced with some very awkward logistical problems. The general manager, Morrie Persson, his assistant Gerry Barwick and staff, had the unenviable task of sorting out the transport chaos. Information centres were established at Cooma Airport and at Jindabyne in order to give incoming guests weather reports and information on whether or not the chairlift was operating. Guests still got stranded and transport had to be arranged for them from the Alpine Way, from Smiggin Holes and from various points along the chairlift. After a derailment, baggage and skis destined for the Chalet often ended up swinging high above the snow in the special cages for hours before being returned to frustrated owners. Eventually the fibreglass canopies were removed from the chairs and holes cut in the seats to stop the seats swinging so violently in the wind. This was not done (as rumour had it) to make it easier to take photographs!

24 staff were needed to operate the chairlift and their quarters were mainly in the 'Cell Block'' at Charlotte Pass. The key staff included Benny Zeller, Louie Reinstadler, Rick Phillips, Mike Robinson and Adi Richter. Whilst they battled to get guests in and out via the chairlift, the alternative life-line was maintained by the Sno-Cat drivers Kjell Rudd and Peter Rupert. Ansett Pioneer held the transport franchise in the New South Wales snowfields at the time, using the big Canadian built Nodwells or Snow Clippers to transport guests, and the Chalet boys helped out with their Tucker Sno-Cats, a couple of Porsche Sno-Taxis, the old Weasels and a Muskeg Bombardier. Drivers that season were expected to have radar in their backsides.

Much depended on the success of the chairlift. The company made the lift operable for summer tourists in 1964-5 and again for the winter of 1965. Clive Randerson promoted Martin Walkers from breakfast chef to mountain manager during the chairlift's second season, entrusting him with the task of keeping it moving. This time the season was mild, yet the winds still caused problems. Martin Walkers recalled one particularly disturbing tale: in the summer of 1964-65, Morrie Persson and the assistant manager of the Chalet, Mark Dujic, were riding on the chairlift. It was not open to the public at the time and as their chair approached Tower 15, a tower notorious for derailments, they saw to their horror the chair in front of them rip off and crash to the ground. Fortunately the ever watchful Louie Reinstadler was on duty and stopped the lift in time for the relieved pair to be rescued.

After only two seasons a decision was made to close down the £1.2 million chairlift and alpine skiers lost their potentially fabulous asset. Even with sufficient public patronage the costs of operating this lift had proved prohibitive. Had it succeeded, the company would have solved most of the Chalet's access problems, filled the beds, sold lodge sites and put the Chalet well and truly back on the map. For better or worse, the Chalet seemed destined to retain its isolated status.

In retrospect, the wind defeated the scheme and it still mocks this monument to a failed endeavour. Today the old restaurant has all but flapped itself to death. Some said the grand scheme had simply come before its time.

Kosciusko Chalet Ltd. went into receivership in November 1965 and the chairlift did not operate again on the decision of the receiver. The company could not generate sufficient funds from its operations to finance further trading.

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