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Attempted Ruapehu Alpine Lifts scam resulted in Israel Lochhead's arrest for Covid lockdown breach

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An essential worker's failed attempt to scam a financially struggling skifield out of a pair of lift passes during the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the headline-grabbing arrest of him and two others for violating Auckland's strict lockdown.

P. Israel Lochhead, 25, was convicted and discharged in the Auckland District Court this week for violating a Covid-19 order - four months after roommates Joshua Schluter and Amos Lochhead, his brother, received the same outcome.

Police arrested the trio in Ōhākune in September 2021, after they crossed Auckland's border checkpoint with legitimate essential worker exemptions stating they had business to attend in Christchurch. Auckland at the time had been in the second month of its strict Alert Level 4 lockdown following the emergence of the Covid-19 Delta variant.

But instead of going straight to Christchurch, the young men booked a two-night stay at an Ōhākune hotel with the intent to spend a day skiing at the Tūroa skifield.

Defence lawyer Thomas Newman characterised the ski "diversion" yesterday as a misunderstanding of the rules rather than a pre-meditated attempt to thwart the Covid-19 restrictions at the time. It was not the primary purpose of what was a legitimate business trip, he said.

"I've got to give you the benefit of the doubt on that, but it was a very stupid decision to make," Judge Belinda Pidwell later responded.

Police initially sought a short term of imprisonment but acknowledged that it was unlikely since neither co-defendant had received such a sentence. Failure to comply with a Covid-19 health order carries a maximum sentence of up to six months' prison and a \$4000 fine.

The defence compared Israel Lochhead's case to that of equestrian William Willis and lawyer Hannah Rawnsley, who were charged that same month with an even more high-profile lockdown breach - travelling from Auckland to a holiday home in Wānaka.

Willis, the son of a District Court judge, was fined \$750 and not ordered to serve any prison time despite him being the "mastermind of the scheme", Newman noted, adding that his client "presents very similar to Mr Willis".

During previous sentencing hearings for his roommates, judges referred to an "unrelated incident" on Ruapehu that caused police to get involved, realising shortly thereafter that the trio was in breach of lockdown orders. It was revealed during Israel Lochhead's sentencing this week that the incident was a quickly discovered attempt to fraudulently get three lift passes for the price of one.

After purchasing a \$116 lift and equipment pass online, he argued to staff that he had paid for his roommates as well. He pleaded guilty to obtaining by deception, which resulted in an additional sentence of community supervision and 80 hours of community work.

"That's simply theft," Judge Pidwell said, adding that there was "no excuse" for it. "We all know the struggle that Ruapehu has been facing, the alpine lifts. The industry is struggling. If you want to enjoy the sport, you need to pay for it."

The judge ordered an additional sentence of community work and a six-month disqualification from driving for an unrelated drink driving incident in Auckland suburb Freeman's Bay that occurred about a year after the Ruapehu charges.

Craig Kapitan is an Auckland-based journalist covering courts and justice. He joined the Herald in 2021 and has reported on courts since 2002 in three newsrooms in the US and New Zealand.