



DREAM LINES IN ALASKA

You have to be pretty brave to ride the extreme spines in the great state of Alaska. It also costs an arm and a leg – unless you go DIY.

I don't really know what the weather is doing tomorrow, but my iPhone has just one snowflake on it, so maybe it'll be clear?" said Joe Schuster, owner of Sportsman's Air Service in Anchorage, Alaska. We were standing inside his one-room office on the tarmac, wearing our snow pants and packed for a two-week winter camping and ski expedition. Being that he was an experienced bush pilot in remote wilderness areas, we expected Schuster to have more sophisticated weather forecasting technologies, or at least some kind of radar map. Once we realised he wasn't kidding, we made another shop run for last-minute supplies and waited by the phone for a green light.

Weather windows can take weeks to materialise in Alaska, but clear skies blessed us early the next morning, so our team of four loaded all our gear into the single-engined, propeller-driven DHC-3 Otter aircraft, equipped with skis for snow landings, and took off for the Tordillo Mountain range, scouting a landing spot on a glacier in a steep-walled cirque 500 miles (804km) from civilisation. Three long-time Pacific Northwest ski adventure buddies and I had been scheming up a trip in search of the steep Alaska spine lines – the ones that you typically see top pros boosting big, long tracks down in ski movie segments. More often than not, those clips are shot from a gyro-stabilised camera mounted to the front of the same



UNITED STATES





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helicopter that dropped them on the peak. The thing is, we didn't have Red Bull or Teton Gravity Research picking up the bill, nor a film crew to procure weeks of helicopter time for many tens of thousands of dollars.

Consider us, big mountain ski bums – 'dirbags' with the chops to shred big lines – without the resources to stay in, or have any interest in, a luxury one-percent hill-lodge (like the very lodge that typically accesses this area) for two weeks in bathrobes and slippers. Instead, we encircled to have Joe drop us off in a well-positioned base camp in a cirque of trophy lines and we'd access them by skinning and climbing under our own human power, making exclusively fresh turns in untouched snow on slopes between 40 and 55 degrees.

There's an eerie feeling when you're standing on a glacier next to a pile of food and equipment, watching your plane and last connection with the outside world take off – you're completely on

your own, far away from any kind of help, until the sky stops dumping snow long enough for the pilot to come back and pick you up. The feeling quickly subsided when we looked around at the amphitheater of 3000ft (600m) snow curtains hanging from the jagged peaks in every direction we could see.

Weather is always the biggest variable to just about anything in Alaska, and flying is only part of the game. After we'd done a day of warm-up laps just above camp, the infinite blue sky faded into a low fog and we hunkered down in our tents for two full storm days, periodically surfacing to stare out from inside the ping-pong ball, or hit a few laps on the binding-less powder surfer.

Then the weather broke and the crystal-clear skies sparkled warm April daylight on several new feet of fresh maritime snow glued to the walls, leaving the steepest, north-facing cirques refrigerated in the shade. These wet, coastal storms come in heavy before below-

zero overnight temperatures cement the snow in place, providing relative stability from avalanches as early as two days after they fall.

Every day, we'd rope up in teams of two with our crevasse rescue gear on our harnesses, meander around depressions in the glaciated terrain and push out a little further, skinning to the base of our scouted lines and switching over to crampons and ascent plates (like snowshoes for steep, loose snow that's too deep for just boots). Then we'd climb the snow ladders several thousand feet in a few hours to the top of whatever wide-open face looked tastiest. From the top, we'd each paint our own pristine, untracked line down the spines with snow sloughing to either side of us, then boost off cliff drops and straight-line the snowy aprons over mostly covered bergschrunds (crevasses) to the valley floor.

Despite the reliability of Alaska snow in spring, avalanches are always a consideration, but so is cold and frostbite, crevasse fall, rockfall released from warming snow, and any injury big or small that might not receive medical attention for days. But beyond those back-of-mind concerns, it was all-time steep powder-skiing with almost an entire mountain range to ourselves – except on day nine when we woke up to the sound of a helicopter in the early morning.

The bird circled our camp twice and proceeded to drop a load of skiers off on a saddle between the peaks above us. We were miffed that they'd chosen to drop right on top of our remote, human-powered camp rather than fly their aircraft somewhere else, but then had a laugh as we watched them ski our mellowest warm-up run, which we'd already tracked up days before. We mooned the chopper as it flew the guests home for brunch at the nearby Tordillo Mountain Lodge. They'd just paid \$17,500 per person for a week of luxurious warm beds and second tracks on our run, not including gratuity. Our willingness to walk and climb and sleep in -30°C sleeping bags put us right in the hotseat of the top 0.1 percent of ski terrain on the planet for less than \$4,000 each.

We'd gotten exactly what we came for. But after 30 days of staring at one particular pronounced spine cutting across the face of a down-glacier cirque in the northerly shade, we decided to go for it. The Alaska Factor – where everything looks much closer and smaller than in reality – was real, and our approach took the whole morning of skinning, climbing and billy-goating into position at the top of the 45-plus-degree line.

It skied like an eternal dream – every turn scream-inducing and it never seemed to end, until it did, with our entire crew party-shredding down the apron and into the sunshine, our hands rained to the sky and our adrenaline portals flung wide open as feelings of stroke and accomplishment coursed through our toes and fingertips.

When the plane came to pick us up, we admired our work from the sky. Later, we looked into the last line we had ridden. The once rider, never climbed, '3000ft face', the internet called it. Then we watched a video of Red Bull athlete Travis Rice rip the same line top to bottom – after being dropped off by his helicopter flight from the Tordillo Mountain Lodge. **SV**



The infamous alternative to the DIY version of this trip is a stay at the legendary Tordillo Mountain Lodge, a base camp for the wealthy, with a helicopter on standby, salmon fishing guides at the ready during down days, and top-shelf liquor. The Tordillo Mountain Range is home to 11,070ft (3370m) Mt Spurr, the highest volcano of the Alutian Arc.

Left: human-powered ascents. Previous page: grizzly-powered descents.



DIRECTIONS

Best time to go // Early April is really the only month when weather and snow-stability line up.

Gear required // A full winter camping and expedition setup: four-season tent, -30°C sleeping bag, cook tent, Camp Chef Mountaineer aluminum cooking system, several days worth of fuel, lots of cheese.

Nearest town // Talkeetna is a three-hour drive from Anchorage.

Getting there // Fly to Anchorage, then drive to Talkeetna and hire a bush plane, often through a hunting outfitter.

Where to stay // In Talkeetna, the Danell Fireside Cabins are great in the backcountry, your tent.

Things to know // This is an expedition for very experienced winter campers and skiers and riders, with avalanches and basic first-aid training. Also, cucumbers don't last long in subzero temperatures.

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PIKA GLACIER

Located in Denali National Park in the Alaska Range, this popular summer rock-climbing destination is known as Little Switzerland for its scenery, with a clear view of Mt Foraker 17 miles (27km) to the northwest. Denali is about 30 miles (48km) to the northeast, but hidden behind the spires that enclose the Pika. Fly in from Talkeetna using Sheldon Air Service and make camp below the steep skiing lines of the Trolls and the Crown Jewel spires. Rope up to ski down the glacier and get on runs like Hobbit Hop and the northwest-facing couloir off the Hobbit that's 1500ft (460m) and over 42 degrees. Ski down the Pika to Italy's Boot for laps on the toe of the steep northeast-facing couloir. To get a view of Denali, head over to towards Munchkin and look down the Crown Glacier with a few laps on Milk Run. Watch out for Ravens eating your food, rubbish and waste.

Nearest town // Talkeetna

WRANGELL-ST ELIAS NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE

With 13.2 million acres (5.3 million hectares) encompassing three entire mountain ranges and one partial, the largest US national park – the size of six Yellowstone – has endless possibilities for some of the biggest and most remote skiing terrain in the world. Among nine of the 16 highest peaks in the United States, this is an entire world of its own and requires local skiing and pilot knowledge to get you into the right zones for skiable lines. Some fix their gaze upon 16,428ft (5005m) Mt Bona with a summit reaching more than two vertical miles (3.2km) up from the glaciers below. Like every big peak in Alaska, conditions can be finicky depending on weather and crevasse openings, so consider a lower elevation option like the Granite Range, 60 miles (97km) to the south, with fewer tall peaks and more snowy couloirs. Look out for willow ptarmigan making appearances around camp.

Nearest town // McCarthy

CHUGACH MOUNTAINS

Terrain, snowpack and accessibility have made Valdez and Thompson Pass a mecca of Alaska's ski-skiing, but if you don't want to spend \$50,000 to sit in a lodge and watch it rain, plane-camp options abound. Tok Air Service offers flights into legendary and well-known areas like The Tusk and The Books as well as to the remote and relatively unexplored Dora Keens. Pick from a full menu of mellow glacier runs, 'trainer spines' with lower consequence exposure and clean runouts, to big league peaks and long, steep couloirs. The advantage of a Chugach mission is being able to wait comfortably in Valdez until it's time to fly, with the added bonus of flying into a camp from which you can ski out and back into town, regardless of weather issues that might delay your pickup. This option lowers your flight costs even further with a one-way ticket.

Nearest town // Valdez



Clockwise from top: Alaska backcountry feels as big as it looks; sunshine and blue sky at base camp on the Pika Glacier; aerial view of a glacier in Wrangell-St Elias National Park

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