

THE FREEDOM OF THE BACKCOUNTRY

words by SARAH LINVILLE



FREEDOM. ASK ANY SKI GUIDE OR BACKCOUNTRY USER AND THIS IS WHAT THEY'LL TELL YOU IS THE BEST THING ABOUT GOING OFF-PISTE—THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE YOUR OWN LINE—THE FREEDOM TO CREATE YOUR OWN CHALLENGE AND CHOOSE YOUR OWN LEVEL OF RISK.

THE WEST OFFERS SPECTACULAR BACKCOUNTRY OF ALL FLAVORS—WHETHER YOU ARE EARNING YOUR TURNS OR SITTING PRETTY IN A HELI LOOKING OUT ON YOUR NEXT POWDER STASH. AND THE GUIDES WHO HELP YOU ACCESS THE BEST POWDER AND MANAGE RISK ARE WORTH THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD.

EARN YOUR TURNS

Sara Lundy, a co-owner of Sawtooth Mountain Guides in Stanley, Idaho, with her husband Chris Lundy and fellow guide Erik Leidecker, has been a full-time ski guide since 2002. She explains that the culture of guiding in the U.S. is changing, “I’ve seen a shift where guiding is being taken more seriously by the guides themselves. They are going through the advanced guiding courses and the clients and backcountry users are starting to realize that guiding is a respectable and useful profession. It’s not in between college-and-a-real-job—it is a profession.” And for many it’s a calling.

Sure, the guides have chosen a career path that assures they get a good number of days in the backcountry, but more importantly, it’s about sharing their passion for these pristine places that gets them out of bed every day. Zahan “Z” Billimoria of Exum Mountain Guides in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, has been guiding in the Tetons for 10 years and

ABOVE: For many, the view in the backcountry is the best view there is. OPPOSITE (clockwise): Sawtooth Mountain Guides’ Sarah Lundy enjoying her chosen career path; Joe St. Onge from Sun Valley Trekking on a tour of the backcountry; the Coyote Yurt, five-star lodging in the backcountry (or more on a clear night!); Zahan Billimoria of Exum Mountain Guides in the Tetons.

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“PEOPLE WHO WANT TO BE A GUIDE BECAUSE THEY WANT TO GET PAID TO SKI ARE GOING TO REALIZE PRETTY QUICKLY IT’S NOT AS GLORIOUS AS ALL THAT. IF YOU CAN’T GET SATISFACTION BY SEEING ENJOYMENT THROUGH YOUR CLIENT’S EYES, THEN YOU’RE NOT GOING TO BE SATISFIED AS A GUIDE.”

-Chris Lundy, Sawtooth Mountain Guides, Idaho



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holds multiple bragging rights including a four-hour car-to-car ascent of the Grand Teton. “I get energized watching other people attain a goal that they thought was impossible or they thought they couldn’t do themselves,” says Zahan, “and the guide gets to be a part of someone’s life-changing experience. It’s very satisfying.”

The satisfaction that Zahan is talking about is a common thread through the guiding world. Chris Lundy, of Sawtooth Mountain Guides, advises, “People who want to be a guide because they want to get paid to ski are going to realize pretty quickly that it’s not as glorious as all that. If you can’t get satisfaction by seeing enjoyment through your client’s eyes, then you’re not going to be satisfied as a guide.”

When you hire a professional backcountry ski guide through an accredited operation, what you’re getting is a local who is well-trained in safety protocol and who is passionate about the places he or she is guiding. What you’re also signing on for is an adventure, but what the guides provide is a plan and the expertise to adapt that plan as the conditions call for it. “The goals of the tour may not always include summiting, even finding the best line,” Zahan points out. “The goals are always evolving throughout the day.”

But this is what guides love to do. Plan—and execute an amazing experience. Joe St. Onge, who has been the chief of guiding operations at Sun Valley Trekking in Sun Valley, Idaho, since 2000, describes the process of guiding as a piece of

music. It starts with the overture, the homework—checking the weather and the snow conditions and creating a tour on a map. Then all the delicate intricacies lead to the actual ski—the crescendo of the experience. “People light up,” St. Onge relates. “I love that part. Hiring a guide guarantees you a piece of great art that you can physically experience.”

THE BACKCOUNTRY ISN’T JUST FOR ADRENALINE-HOUNDS. CROSS-COUNTRY SKI OR SNOWSHOE HIKING OR SNOW-BIKING TOURS CAN BE A GREAT OPTION FOR AN OFF-PISTE ADVENTURE—LIKE THE KIND PROVIDED BY WHITE PINE TOURING IN PARK CITY, UTAH. “WITH A GUIDED TRIP, THERE IS NO WASTING OF YOUR VALUABLE VACATION TIME,” SAYS SCOTT HOUSE, WHITE PINE’S COMMUNICATION, EVENTS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA DIRECTOR. “A PROFESSIONAL GUIDE KNOWS THE TRAILS, ALL THE COOL LITTLE FACTS OF THE AREA AND MAXIMIZES THE LEVEL OF FUN IN THE EXPERIENCE.”



"I DON'T BELIEVE THERE IS AN IDEAL CLIENT AS EACH PERSON PRESENTS NEW CHALLENGES AND GUIDES MUST LEARN TO BRING OUT THE BEST IN THE EXPERIENCE. THE GOAL IS TO KEEP IT SAFE AND HAVE THE BEST TIME POSSIBLE."

-Reggie Crist, Sun Valley Heli-Ski Guide



THE PROS

SAWTOOTH MOUNTAIN GUIDES
Stanley, ID
www.sawtoothguides.com

SUN VALLEY HELI SKI
Sun Valley, ID
www.sunvalleyheliski.com

SUN VALLEY TREKKING
Hailey, ID
www.svtrek.com

EXUM MOUNTAIN GUIDES
Jackson, WY
www.exumguides.com

RUBY MOUNTAIN HELICOPTER SKIING
Lamoille, NV
www.helicopterskiing.com

WHITE PINE TOURING
Park City, UT
www.whitepinetouring.com

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www.powderbird.com

TETON SPRINGS LODGE AND SPA
Victor, ID
tetonspringslodge.com

HELI-TASTIC

Let's face it. Heli-skiing is on most bucket lists for people who appreciate powder skiing and get annoyed by lift lines. Sure, we spend lots of time daydreaming about a heli-ski trip to British Columbia or Alaska, but then we remember that there's fantastic heli-skiing out our back doors. If there's snow (come on, do that snow dance!), there's an outfitter ready to take you for your powder 8s.

If you're up for flying and footing the bill that comes with it—the West offers many adrenaline-packed rides by helicopter into untouched winter wonderlands all over the West. Teton Springs Lodge and Spa in Victor, Idaho, offers spoil-me-rotten accommodations and a heli-pad operated by High Mountain Heli-Skiing just a stone's throw away from where you enjoy your morning coffee. With over 305,000 acres of terrain south of Jackson Hole Mountain Resort, High Mountain will show you a side of the Tetons few people ever see and fewer ever ski.

In Utah, Powderbirds is a popular outfitter for bucket-list adventures. With two bases of operations, one starting from Canyons Resort and the other from Snowbird, Powderbirds sets the day's itinerary by sniffing out the best powder in the Wasatch range. A veteran Powderbird in-house

meteorologist studies the conditions and helps the guides plan. Veteran guide Jenna Malone says, "The Wasatch range is so vast, we're like kids in the candy store when it comes to choosing the best skiing for the day."

Joseph Royer has been the owner of Ruby Mountain Helicopter Skiing in Lamoille, Nevada, since he started the company in 1977. "Our ideal clients do not need to be experts," says Royer, who combats the idea that you need to be James Bond to go heli-skiing, when all you really need is the drive, the dough, and a well-honed sense of adventure. Royer says that expert skiers will not be disappointed in the terrain offered by the Ruby Mountains, but that they also have terrain for first-time heli skiers as well.

No matter how you decide to get to it or who you decide to get to it with, in the end it's all about making it out for the powder skiing. "Ultimately there is no substitute for an experience in the mountains," says Reggie Crist, retired Olympian, X-Game competitor, current Sun Valley Heli guide. "I don't believe there is an ideal client as each person presents new challenges and guides must learn to bring out the best in the experience. The goal is to keep it safe and have the best time possible." **BT**



ABOVE (top to bottom): Heli skiing for all levels at Ruby Mountain Heli Ski; Reggie Crist giving a thumbs up; skiing powder with High Mountain through Teton Springs Lodge.

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