

DETOUR

Back to the Backcountry

by Steve Ogle

“The true skier... is not confined to a piste. He is an artist who creates a pattern of lovely lines from virgin and uncorrupted snow. What marble is to the sculptor, so are the latent harmonies of ridge and hollow, powder and sun-softened crust to the true skier. By a wise dispensation of providence, the snow, whose beauty has been defaced and destroyed by the multitude of piste addicts, does not record the passage of the [racer]. It is only soft snow that records the movements of individual skiers, and it is only in soft snow that the real artist can express himself.”

—**Arnold Lunn**, *The Mountains of Youth*, 1925

Skiing is the quintessential amalgam of form and function—arguably the most active and exhilarating artistic expression (body-painting notwithstanding). Using skis as instruments of our own creativity, we skiers leave our marks upon the world—gracefully at times, abstract on occasion—in a substrate of the utmost purity: ideally thigh-deep powder. We do it with a zeal that cannot be learned in the classroom but is more likely a genetic predisposition: a gift received at birth, perhaps? Gretzky; Maradona; McConkey: All of them artists capable of influencing the masses via great works. These masters, and others blessed with similar physical aptitude and exceptional vision, often become the most revered of their chosen—or destined—genres. Possessing some measure of social eccentricity don’t hurt either.

There are many varieties of skiing and skiers, the gamut running from progressive to postmodern. Consider those blacksmiths working the metal rails, or park rats chewing away at new jump sequences—all within spitting distance of purist telemarkers. In one era or the next, each rider will have his or her moment in the limelight, exchanging laps with others on the same mountain. How long each style remains in vogue depends on many factors such as economy, geography and culture. For example, you’re unlikely to line-up and watch a cross-country skiing loppet unless your country is vying for Olympic gold. Like storms, these periodic fascinations help keep things fresh. Yet one thing remains clear from an artistic perspective: the most enduring trends are those that most closely reflect the fundamental essence of the sport. If you understand what this means you may indeed be a true *artiste*. And you’ll probably understand why backcountry skiing is making a comeback.

Of course, we know that off-piste skiing, as the Euros call it, never really left. It was the original form of getting around in snow, used by Mongolians, Slovenians or whomever (insert obscure snowbound culture here) to deliver messages through blizzards or to put meat on the table. Or perhaps it was just to get outside—carbon dating on this is still pending. One thing is certain: there was an epoch where backcountry travel was the *only* form of skiing, and given the current economic climate as well as the disintegrating state of the global climate itself, there may come a day when it will be again (pro skiers take heed—someone better invent a solar snowmobile soon).

Just over 100 years ago a gravity-defying revolution took place, beginning in 1908 when the first rope tow was installed in Germany’s Black Forest. The better part of a century ensued amid an industrial revolution, bulldozing over would-be tracksetters who skied under their own

power. Many found havens in Scandinavia; others were cast out to faraway lands, exploring new ranges and naming them after ski partners. The mechanization of skiing, on the other hand, was busy culminating with modern-day wonders such as Chamonix's Aguille de Midi and Hans Moser's A-star helicopters. These and other conduits delivered the art of skiing to the general populous, transforming it in the same manner that Play-dough and Etch-a-sketch created a wave of attention-deficient baby boomers. Soon enough, however, creative juices began to trickle into the mainstream. Mechanized skiing advanced this movement by providing opportunity for progression—of skill, technology, and style. Previously viewed with trepidation, steep couloirs and one-piece suits became the new horizons that, though tangential to the classic approach of simply getting down a mountain, were pretty cool at one time or another. To this day, it takes rebellious pioneers to push these limits and create new genres.

Bearing all of this headway in mind, for the past couple of decades skiing's venerated *Mona Lisa* style has been replaced with something more akin to the black-velvet rec-room classic, *Dogs Playing Poker*. For too long the simple pleasures of skinning up at the trailhead have been graffiti-fied by lift-line conglomeration, and the silent lessons taught by a lonely peak diluted by a noisy swirl of rotorwash. Backcountry skiers are finally taking back the mountains one untracked ridgeline at a time. They are a guild that still prefers to hunt for its own meat.

In this regard, the French are of course leading the way. When envisioning a skier bivouacked at a windy col, nothing in her gloveless hand but a crusty piece of bread for sustenance, that skier will probably be a Frenchwoman—a reclusive dirtbag finding inspiration from nothing more than steep, untracked snow, easel tilted to plus-50°—an angle that will allow deliberate strokes to fall as they may. Here is a culture that scoffs at heli-skiing. A “heli-drop” in Chamonix usually means landing at the hospital after a rescue. To be sure, backcountry touring does not equal wide-stanced telemark turns down “practice slopes”—as the long list of fallen heroes who would rather die skiing than of decrepitude would attest.

Of course, the recent surge in ski touring is not so much measured by the number of people tracking up your local stash. It's about market share. The buying power of skiers foregoing season passes for touring set-ups cannot be underestimated. Even where touring is intrinsically linked to lift-accessible slopes, as in Davos or Jackson Hole, the trend is the same. Backcountry skiing (off-piste in the Alps—segregated into freeride/slackcountry and alpine touring) is on the rise. Nomenclature notwithstanding, the market direction is—go figure—uphill.

“The trend will continue and grow,” says Thomas Hodel, Black Diamond Europe's marketing director. “It fits perfectly into our time where people return to their roots and take more care about the environment and sustainability.” Hodel sees it as more than a retrospective, however: “Ascents with your own manpower, far away from stress—the pure experience of nature—these will be the future themes in the skiing world,” he says. Buy stocks now.

Economist or not, you'd be hard-pressed to convince most diehard ski touring types that the quest for bottomless powder is just another blip on the flowchart. Nestled in mountain communities where turns and other core values run deep, skiers devote their entire lives to nurturing creative urges such as what new line to shred or which traverse to link up. In many parts of the world, the options are far beyond the limited slopes of scattered resorts and, more importantly, the snow is deeper. Simply imagine a world where crossing another track is a rare occurrence and you can see why the renaissance is at hand.

There is much art in skiing, but one style remains on permanent display. Carving is so passé. Sculpting huge trapezoids in terrain parks is contrived at best, and forget about brasswork sliding. Even the rabid and artful revolution in graphic design is overrated (topsheets really shouldn't be visible while skiing).

For the purest form of artistic expression, strap on a pair of your softest skis and brush your way down an empty white canvas. You may be the only critic to review your work but that's just fine. In the life-long pursuit of perfection, dedication is the key to garnering inspiration and eventually creating a true masterpiece. To attain this, one must paint with relentless fervor.