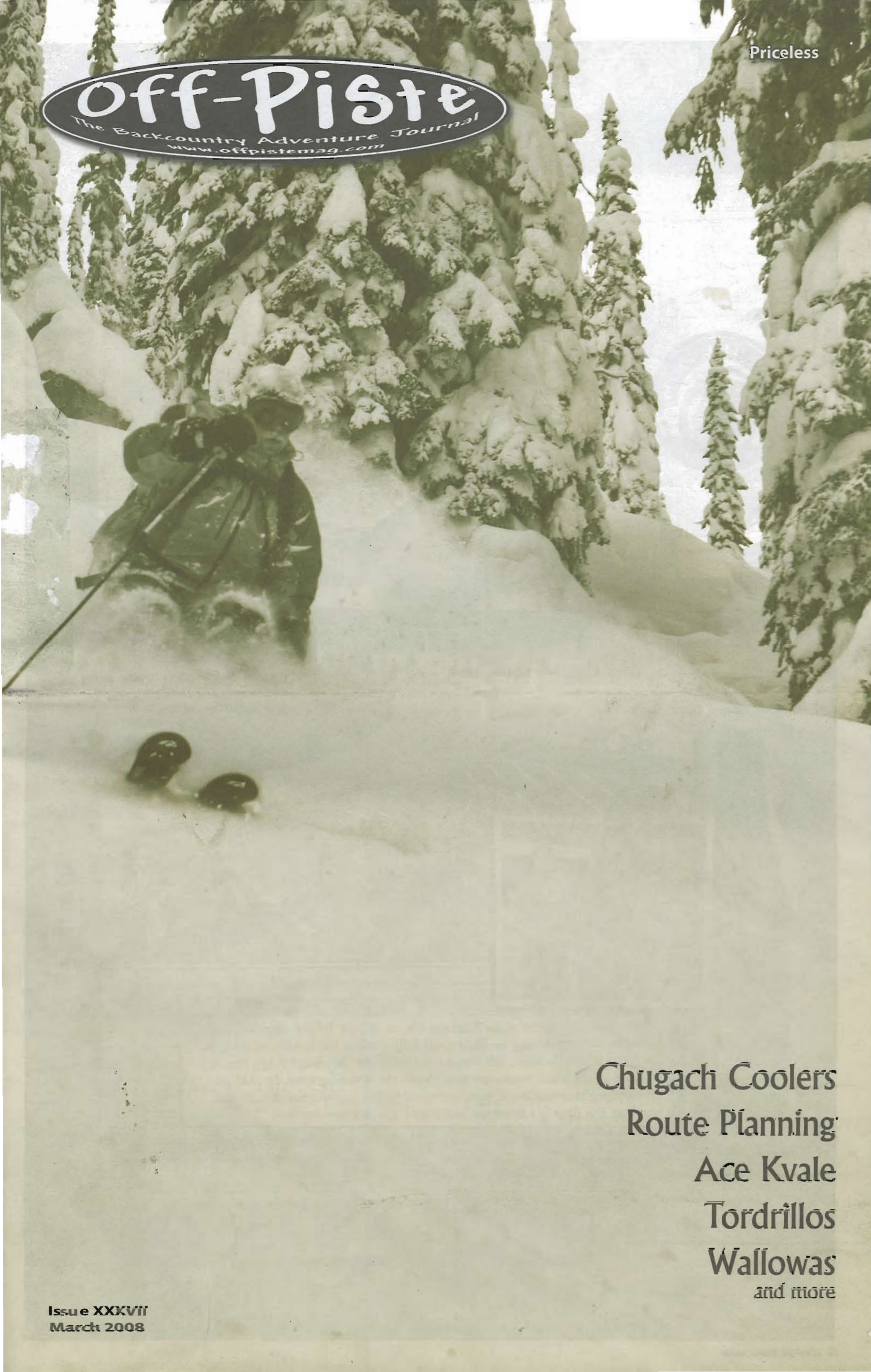


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The Siren Song of the Wallowas



Joe slunk into my house and sat down at the kitchen table. "It's raining at 7,000 feet," he muttered.

"Impossible. I've been skiing the Wallowas for 15 years and I've never been skunked," I replied.

I was packed and ready to go, had already said goodbye to the family, and was jonesing for our departure. My holiday break from teaching school was slipping away with some badly needed turns in short supply.

"I think we should wait and see what tomorrow's weather brings and decide then," said Joe. "It's supposed to get colder."

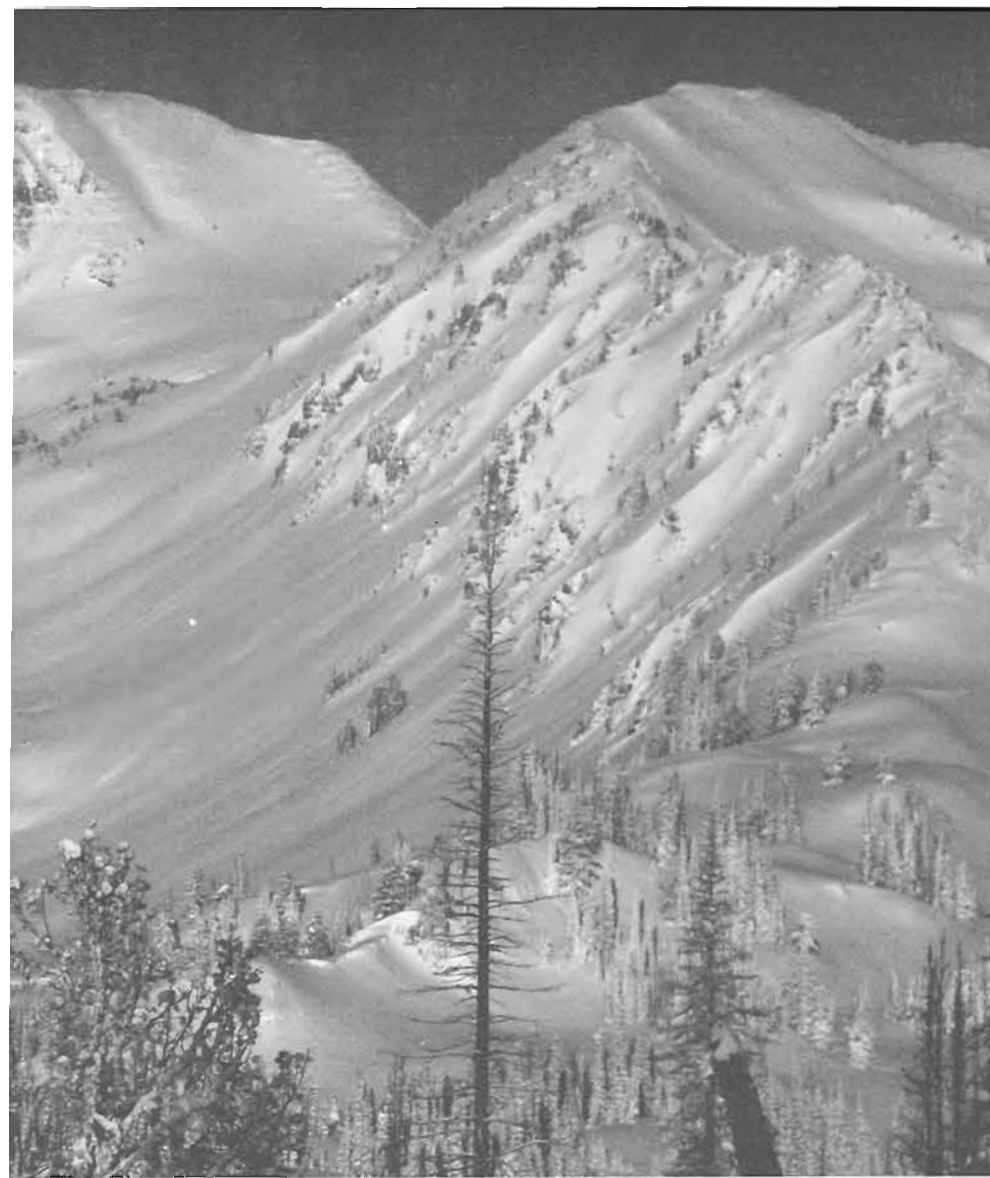
So, instead of driving to Joseph, Oregon, I got to work on the kitchen sink, a little project that had fallen on my priority list due to our ski plans. These little setbacks are good for me. They test my resolve and my love of skiing, and sometimes, as in this case, give me time to earn points on the home front.

Joe returned the next morning. My house had a new faucet, which allowed my departure a higher level of marital blessing, and the snow level had settled to a more seasonal 2,500 feet.

Finally, we were headed for eastern Oregon's Wallowa Mountains. The Wallowas are a gem of a range located in the Columbia Plateau of northeastern Oregon, and are famous for giving Mt. Hood cement skiers a taste of the dry, fluffy goods associated with a continental snowpack. The range was formed between 160 million and 120 million years ago, and runs about 40 miles northwest to southeast. Specifically, we were headed for the McCully Basin yurts operated by Wallowa Alpine Huts, an idyllic yurt village at 7,500 feet within the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area. Surrounded by peaks approaching 10,000 feet in all directions, the yurts provide access to a huge variety of ski terrain.

I have heard the stories about exotic British Columbia hut trips. Friends come back with tales of amazing meals and limitless powder skiing. It all sounds too good to be true, but you don't have to cross the border to have an idyllic hut trip experience. Wallowa Alpine Huts owner and jack-of-all-trades Connelly Brown and his crew serve up the whole experience hot and fresh. Earning the title "itinerant wave farmers," Brown (known to many as CB) and his crew spend the summer river guiding and the winter in pursuit of fresh tracks. These guys put on as good a show when it comes to cooking as they do skiing. All ideas that this trip would help offset my holiday food hedonism were proven wrong.

Once we arrived at the yurts, CB and crew ran us through a safety briefing, and then out the door we skinned to whet our appetites

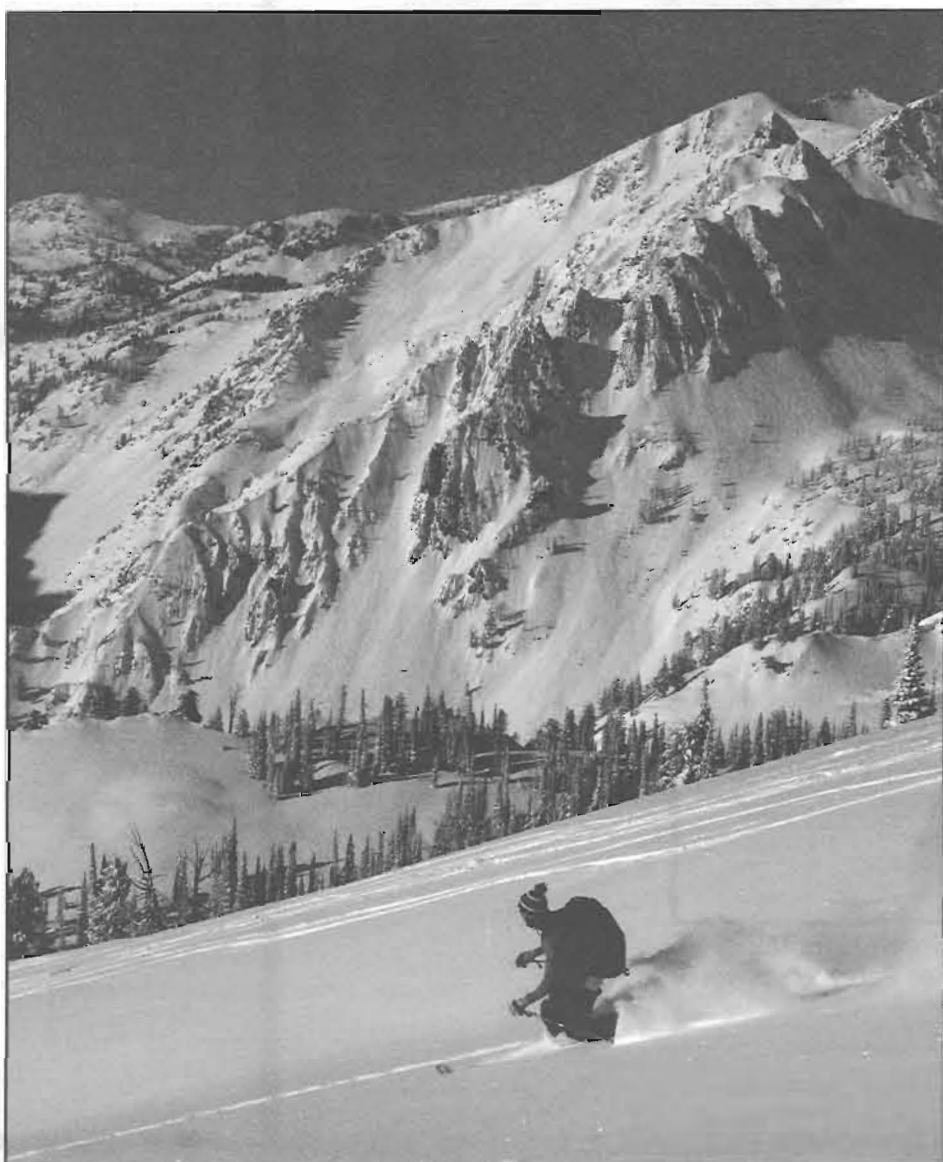


Words - Michael Becker
Photos - Michael Halle

for the coming days. Although our departure had been delayed by unseasonably warm temperatures, the tables turned as our trip got underway, and Ullr graced us with snow for the next three days. With the sensitive snowpack scenario, skin-track talk inevitably turned to avalanche hazard and safety protocol. Our crew applied the "red light, green light" concept of hazard analysis as we scoped out lines in the terrain around us.

Despite heightened avalanche hazard, we managed to find good skiing and stay out of harm's way. That is not to say we did not hear the sirens calling, for any time the ceiling lifted, we could see into

continued on page 29



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Photo: Scott D.W. Smith



Pack Your Passion. Go.

Wallowas continued

the upper reaches around us. The chutes, with their narrow waists and perky steeps, called to us in sweet powdery voices, "Ski us if you can." We stayed tied to the mast, following our host like good lemmings. After all of the avalanche discussions about the red lights we were seeing, we dubbed these areas "red light districts." We decided our wives would prefer we stayed away from the red light districts, as no one wanted to be responsible for explaining any STD's (Snow-Transmitted Deaths).

Our last day dawned clear and cold, and finally we saw the majesty of the range around us. The sun sped our climb, and we reached the high point of the trip by 9 a.m. Above about 9,500 feet the wind had not left much good snow, so we turned around and slid through 20-plus inches of soft snow back into the trees. We got a couple of nice runs in that morning, but reality was calling, and we reluctantly headed for home. It was hard to leave the basin in those conditions, with so many slopes asking for our signatures. But in a way it was O.K., because McCully Basin is one of those places that once you've been there, you know you'll go back.

Wallowa Beta

The Eagle Cap Wilderness is nestled in the Wallowa Mountains, an intimate range located in northeast Oregon. The traditionally sleepy region has, like so many places, discovered the value of tourism. Nonetheless, Wallowa County is still refreshingly low-key when compared to mountain communities elsewhere.

Accommodations

Chandlers Inn, Joseph, OR. A popular launch pad for folks heading in on multi-day hut trips, Chandlers is also a viable base-camp for day skiing from the Salt Creek Sno-Park.
www.josephbedandbreakfast.com 541-432-9765

The Indian Lodge, Joseph, OR. Clean, affordable and close to all the Joseph nightlife. www.indianlodgemotel.com 541-432-2651

Wallowa Lake State Park offers year-round yurt rentals in the campground. The park is six miles out of town and offers the do-it-yourself crowd a clean, dry base-camp from which to launch day trips into the area. www.oregonstateparks.org 800-551-6949

Food

Terminal Gravity Brewpub, Joseph, OR. Wallowa County's only brewpub, they offer a wide selection of local brews and good food to match. 541-426-0158

Embers Brewhouse. Joseph, OR. Friendly staff, good food, and a great beer selection on tap. 541-432-2739

Lears Pub and Grill, Enterprise, OR. Eastern Oregon steakhouse with high quality local meats as a specialty. 541-426-3300.

Skiing

Wallowa Alpine Huts has operated the McCully Basin camp since 1980. Two sleeping yurts, a cook yurt, and a sauna nestled at 7,500 feet inside the wilderness boundary get you as close to the action as you can be. The approach is a four-mile skin through the trees with 1,800 feet of vertical. New this year is the Norway Basin camp. Located at the southern end of the range above Halfway, Oregon, Norway Basin features a single 20-foot yurt accessed by a 6-mile tow with a snow machine and a 2-mile, 2000-vertical-foot skin. Our crew had a bit too much of a good thing on the area's inaugural trip this winter: eight and a half feet of snow in four days. The snow made for some difficult traveling. So although I have seen the terrain, we had to leave before things settled out enough for serious exploration. All Wallowa Alpine Huts trips are hosted by Wallowa Alpine Huts staff.
www.wallowahuts.com 800-545-5537

Wing Ridge Ski Tours operates the Wing Ridge and Big Sheep Shelters, which have been popular destinations for many years. Located at 7,220 feet, Wing Ridge Shelter offers quick access to high glades and bowls and spectacular scenery. It is reached by a 2-mile, 1,100-vertical-foot skin from Salt Creek Sno-Park. The Big Sheep Shelter is at 6,220 feet and is reached via a 4-mile, 100-vertical-foot approach gentle enough for lighter Nordic gear as well as skiers in search of turns. The Wing Ridge area sees day tripper traffic from Joseph, but Big Sheep is far enough back that it sees less traffic. Both areas offer two wall tents for sleeping, a kitchen tent, and a sauna tent. These shelters are open for both guided and unguided skiers. www.wingski.com 800-646-9050

Day tripping from Salt Creek Sno-Park is a very viable option as well. From Joseph it is about a 30-minute drive to the Salt Creek warming hut, a beautiful structure located at the end of the plowed road. Although the air in the parking lot can be thick with two-stroke exhaust, this is quickly left behind, since the area has a well-defined separation between snow machine users and skiers.