



The Wallows have miles of untracked powder. You just have to work for it, and that's a good thing

no lift, but a big HIGH

OREGON | BY MARK LARABEE
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL G. HALLE

As the bold morning alpenglow fades from orange to white, nine backcountry skiers gaze from an 8,000-foot-high ridgetop across Norway Basin in eastern Oregon's southern Wallowa Mountains. It's the last morning of a four-day yurt trip, but the first with shining sun. The view of jutting rocky peaks plastered with snow takes our collective breath away.

Our group of friends, old and new, including two camp hosts, prepares for another weightless ride down a steep slope covered with powder as light as an angel's breath. We've already climbed and skied more than 20,000 vertical feet over the long January weekend without seeing another soul, but we've barely touched the possibilities.

We've named never-before-skied runs, whooped and hollered on the way down and grunted back to the top for more untracked faces. None of us can believe how good it is, and no one wants it to end.

From the ridge, we stare across at a bare canvas of snow marked only by curving lines we left the day before. Then, one by one, we dive down another soft, untouched face, powder wisping behind us in the cold, blue air like smoke. »



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This is my second ski trip into the Wallowa backcountry with Wallowa Alpine Huts, the Enterprise-based guiding service owned by “yurtmeister” Connelly Brown. For years, Brown and other operators have run trips out of Joseph into the McCully and Aneroid basins in the northern Wallowas.

Brown’s operation is full-service. For \$600 to \$700, meals are catered, and the hosts cook, clean and stock water and firewood. The yurt is outfitted with sleeping bags and pads, so skiers need only personal gear, making their packs lighter and approaches easier. Because of the proximity — five to six hours by car — the trips are especially easy from Portland.

Advances in equipment design and the desire to get away from ever-growing lift lines have spurred backcountry skiing’s popularity. Brown, who learned to ski powder as a college student in Boulder, Colo., says backcountry skiing is not just a way to find good powder turns, it’s also a way to travel through the landscape. He calls the sport a celebration.

He learned the yurt trade out of Driggs, Idaho, guiding clients on the west side of Wyoming’s Teton Range. A friend suggested he test the snow in the Wallowas after the McCully operation went up for sale. He was reluctant at first, given that the words “powder” and

“Oregon” rarely appeared in the same sentence. But his trip to the Wallowas was like discovering a secret, and he bought the business in 2002.

Like the miners who settled in these hills generations back, Brown sees a new rush into the backcountry to mine something just as precious as gold — powder snow. With the opening of his yurt camp in Norway Basin at the southern end of the range, his dream of creating a European-style “haute route” across the Eagle Cap Wilderness is one step closer to reality.

This season will give Brown and his crew time to shake down the Norway operation and do some reconnaissance into the interior of the range. Perhaps as early as spring 2009, he hopes to guide small groups of the most hearty skiers across the spine of the range. There’s still much fine-tuning to do, but the effort is worth it, he says.

“What’s out there is the most incredible heli-skiing terrain in Oregon, but it’s all wilderness,” he says, referring to the federal law that does not allow anything mechanized to be used in wilderness areas.

Our adventure begins in Halfway, 60 miles north of Baker City, near the Idaho border. Seven of us caravaned in two vehicles from Portland to the White Fir >>

BACKCOUNTRY SKI PRIMER

No lifts: In the backcountry, skiers earn their turns. Skiers must climb using stick-on climbing “skins,” a carpetlike material that holds skis to the snow surface. (These were originally made with seal skins; hence the name.)

Skis: Skiers climb with “free heel” setups. Telemark ski bindings are the true free-heel setup for backcountry tours, requiring a special downhill turn and lots of practice for steep terrain. Alpine touring, or “AT,” gear is a big-mountain hybrid, allowing for free-heel ascents and lockdown-heel descents.

Snowboards: Boarders have options. Some use a “split board” with changeable bindings that climbs like a pair of skis and reassembles into one board for the downhill. Others carry their boards on their packs and use short approach skis with skins for the tours and ascents.

Safety: Everyone in a backcountry party carries a shovel, probe and an avalanche beacon. The beacon puts out a signal in case a skier is buried. The other skiers can use their beacons to detect a buried partner. Collapsible probes are used to find buried skiers, and shovels are essential for digging them out fast. Avalanche and snow-stability training is recommended.

SKI OUTFITTERS

Wallowa Alpine Huts:
www.wallowahuts.com

Wing Ridge Ski Tours:
www.wingski.com



TOP // Yurt living is cozy, warm and comfortable, though the space is tight. ABOVE LEFT // Connolly Brown, owner of Wallowa Alpine Huts, digs a pit to check for weak layers in the snowpack. Before skiing, it's prudent to see if the slope has the tendency to avalanche. ABOVE RIGHT // Snow is the only source of water for backcountry skiers in the Norway Basin camp. The wood stove is used to melt snow for water. OPPOSITE // The group stops atop another ridge to admire the lines before dropping in for another run.



MAP BY TANYA JOHNSON



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Lodge, a snowbound cabin at the foot of the mountains. Brown gives us a rundown on the approach, the camp and the avalanche danger, which is significant but manageable. After a hearty sunrise breakfast, we gear up and get moving.

Ours is only the third group to venture into the Norway camp, and if the conditions we experienced are the norm, then Brown has truly struck white gold.

We put on our skis, and a snowmobile tows us six miles up a service road. Then we attach climbing skins to the skis and start a two-mile, 2,000-foot ascent. We reach 7,000 feet 2 ½ hours later, finding the yurt nearly buried in snow.

Steps descend from the trail to the wooden door, and the smokestack barely juts above the surface. On the first trip in, Brown says, they shoveled 6 feet off the roof, which was bending from the weight. Still, the new snow that's falling is so light, a leaf blower would be useful.

Brown had hoped to have this yurt operational in December 2006. In fact, he had portaged and stashed the lumber for the structure that fall. But a lightning fire at the end of August torched the area — and his camp

supplies with it — putting the plan on hold for a year.

Whatever damage the fire did to Brown's plans, it made for some stunning scenery. While the forest of grand firs around the yurt is blackened, the fire cleared much of the lower limbs of the standing deadwood, creating a beautiful contrast between black and white as well as open tree skiing.

To get the downhill, though, we must climb.

On Friday morning, the air is cold as the moon, the sky gray as cement. Snow falls, and we break a trail uphill through the burn area, an aerobic lesson for the sea-level Portland crowd. But hosts Joel Williams, 34, and Mike Hamann, 56, are acclimated to the elevation and strong from working the hill. They cut through the deep snow like a pair of hot knives through butter.

Hamann and his wife do summertime contract work for the U.S. Forest Service, taking tree surveys throughout the Northwest. Williams guides rafting trips on Colorado's Arkansas River in summer and, for the past two years, has worked for Brown in winter. He's a carpenter by trade and a schoolteacher by profession, and we all think he's living the dream. He agrees, but says

Ski host Mike Hamann takes a moment to enjoy the solitude of the backcountry. Far from the lift line, backcountry skiers earn their turns while they feed their souls.



there's a price to pay. He says he's essentially homeless (not counting his storage unit in Grand Junction).

It's a topic we all think about. The discussion turns to the delicate balance between work and fun and how we all desire more time in the outdoors because it feeds our souls. Bob Williams, 48, was a ski bum in Lake Tahoe in the early 1980s, living in a cabin, cooking in a Mexican restaurant at night and skiing every day. "It was good for a little while, but I knew it wasn't going to last," he says.

Tim Browning says his most precious commodity isn't money: "I'll dig a ditch if I could have more free time."

We climb to a high point named Rocky Top and traverse a ridge north into the heart of the basin. Most of the runs are virgin, and as we ski them, we name them. A Grateful Dead theme seems to stick.

We ski a run that Browning names "Sound Check," appropriate given that we're all fine-tuning our legs to the deep powder conditions. It doesn't take long. On the east face of the cirque, we set a skin track and farm the powder over and over, never skiing the same run twice. I name my favorite run "Walk on the Wild Side." (I prefer

Lou Reed to the Dead.)

The climbs are tough but rewarding. By the end of the day, we're all tired but happy.

"I'm definitely battling myself when I'm out there," Ralph Bloemers says as we snack at the yurt after a satisfying day. "But my attitude is that you pay a little and there's big reward."

We all agree.

The days pass and the runs go by. There are warm drinks and tasty meals around the wood stove, a cribbage tournament and lots of talk about past outdoor exploits. Sleep is welcome and long, and the first steps of the day seem the hardest.

Standing on the ridge for our last run on Sunday, we all marvel at the view. It's David Weymann's 46th birthday, and he's getting a special treat for sure. Smiles tell the story better than words ever could.

We hesitate before dropping in for one more line of untracked perfection. Hamann looks across the valley, the church of the mountains towering above us, drenched in sunlight.

"This is truly a gift," he says.

LEFT // The alpine tour is the purest form of skiing, giving participants a real feel for the winter mountain landscape. ABOVE RIGHT // Tim Browning of Portland gets a taste of light powder. BOTTOM LEFT // Ralph Bloemers of Portland shreds another powder run on his telemark skis.