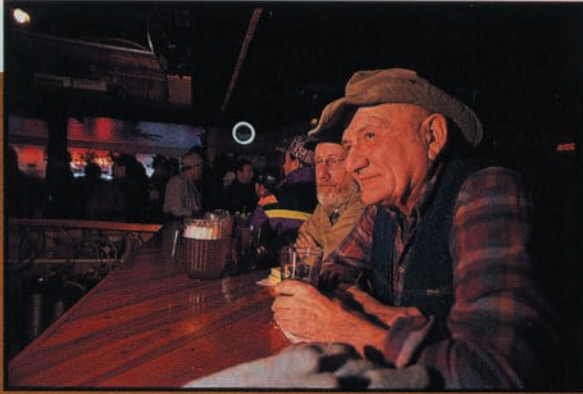




THREE ONLY ONE



Little Big Sky

TWO SEASONED WORLD TRAVELERS EXPLORE THEIR OWN MONTANA BACKYARD—AND DISCOVER THERE'S PLENTY OF ADVENTURE TO BE HAD RIGHT CLOSE TO HOME.

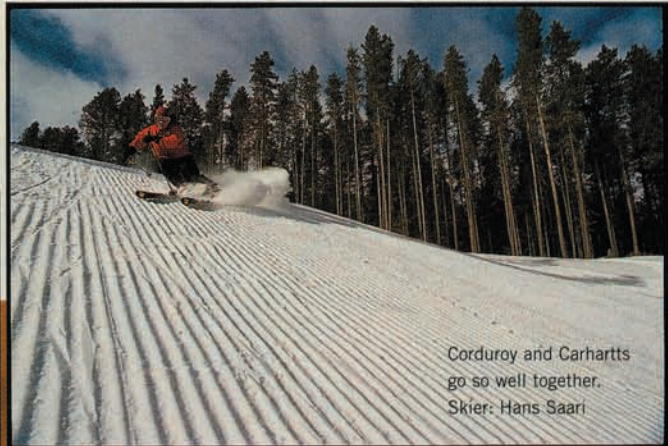
BY HANS SAARI / PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRISTOFFER ERICKSON



We leave Bozeman on Friday, February 16. Longtime friend Kris Erickson and I are road-tripping to three of Montana's 16 ski areas—Bear Paw Ski Bowl, Turner Mountain, and Maverick Mountain—which are spread hundreds of miles apart across the western half of the state. We're doing this because we realized that we've skied all over the world together, yet we've never fully explored our home state. So, with visions of rustic hot springs, Carhartt jackets, and cowboy saloons in our heads, we head out into the Treasure State, seeking our own fortune.



Bear Paw's No Dogs
ALLOWED sign doesn't
apply to honorary
patroller Mundo.



Corduroy and Carhartts
go so well together.
Skier: Hans Saari



Hans seeing
the light in the
Dark Side.

After a couple of hours, we pass Great Falls, where the wheat fields of the Great Plains give way to the Rocky Mountains. An hour outside of Havre, the wind starts ripping across the highway, sending temperatures well below zero. By the time we reach Havre, it is minus 20.

We hit Bear Paw Ski Bowl at 9 A.M. the next day. I already have my boots on in the car, but when we arrive there isn't a soul in sight. At least the temperature has warmed up into the teens. I glance at the hill. A lone ski lift runs up a 900-foot grassy knoll, which is covered by a thin layer of wind-hammered snow.

Just before 10, Noel Henderson, a member of the Eagle Creek Ski Patrol, shows up with his wife, Jennifer, and their golden retriever Mundo. I point to a No Dogs ALLOWED sign. "She's a 'doo-gie,'" he says with a smile. I ask him for a snow report. He tells me with half a smirk, "There are rock hazards. It's been a bit windy. Thin in spots."

Bear Paw Ski Bowl lies on the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation

and is owned by the Chippewa-Cree. It is one of two ski areas in the United States on Native American land. In the 1970s, the tribe got a government grant to build the ski lift and a Swiss-style lodge. Less than 10 years after it was built, the lodge burned to the ground; as a result, the ski area began to decline. In the '80s, a local volunteer group called Snowdance took over, managing the area and employing members of the tribe as lift operators.

At 10:15 the lift ops are still not to be seen. The 20 or so people, most of whom sport red ski-patrol jackets, don't seem too worried about it. Then Dave Martens, a key member of Snowdance, arrives.

"Hi, ya bastard," he says with a toothy smile, acting as if we're old friends. The lifts begin to run, and he waves us on. As we sit on the chair, I hear him again: "Put a glide in your stride, a dip in your hip. Have a balloonic day." As we ride up, the sun appears from behind the clouds. I glance to my left and see Baldy, a 4,000-foot domed mountain, where the tribe performs

its vision quests.

With six inches of powder on top of grass and volcanic tuff, the skiing is thin to say the least. I try not to edge too much, but I still weld my skis to a rock on the way down. I am smiling, though, as I glide back to the chairlift. To be laying turns in such an unlikely spot would make anyone grin.

Two ski patrollers, Wayne and Tom, offer to take us to the "Dark Side," a secret spot off the back side that is going to be the site of a new poma lift. At the top of the lift, called Ice Station Zebra, we sneak through a fence to a meadow that glows in the sun. We ski 10 inches of fresh on top of dry, golden grass. The shrubbery brushing against Wayne's Gore-Tex pants makes a sound like a broom hitting a wooden floor.

After a quick traverse back inbounds, we wind up at the base of the lift. As we log run after run, we pick up a rat pack of local kids eager to ski with the two out-of-towners. In our matching, bright red jackets we feel like Team Geek. Our pack falls apart, though, as skiers begin to gather for lunch at Bikini Beach.

I can't wait to try a Hermie Burger or an Auggie Dog. For \$2.50 I'm handed a Hermie with cheese. Herman, the man behind the

burger, sits next to me. He has been skiing at Bear Paw for 17 years and lays into his burger like a lion after its kill. He smiles with ketchup all over his face.

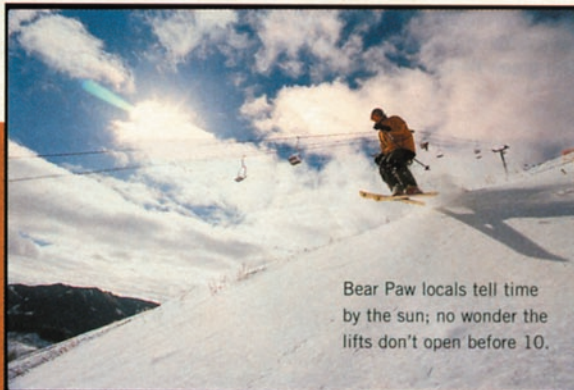
I ask Dave what time it is. With a quick glance at the sun, he informs me it is 1 p.m. Herman laughs. The Rolling Stones blast over a radio.

"Wait, guys, listen to this," Dave says, "It's my commercial."

The radio announcer yells, "So rack 'em up 'n' roll 'em out and ski knee-deep cheap at the steep 'n' deep Bear Paw Ski Bowl." It's the classic Dave Martens one-liner. After lunch we ski laps of variable, grassy moguls with the occasional log or rock digging into our skis.

As we head west at sunset, past the Sweetgrass Hills and into the heart of the Rockies, I wonder if the other areas will be

*He lays into his burger
like a lion after its kill.*



Bear Paw locals tell time by the sun; no wonder the lifts don't open before 10.



Hans makes crossing to the Dark Side look easy.

as much fun as Bear Paw. We are greeted at the eastern slope with a blast of icy wind and snow. The road is polished ice.

After a night in a cabin outside of Glacier National Park, we continue west to Kalispell, then all the way north to Libby, making our way toward our next stop, Turner Mountain. We see an owl, almost hit a deer, and spy two eagles along the Kootenai River. From Libby, we head north for 22 miles on Highway 567—cleverly marked 508 on our highway map—to within 50 miles of Canada.

Kris makes a call to the snow phone to check conditions. The snow phone answers back, "Dad, someone is on the phone for the snow report."

"They're checking on it. Should know here in a minute," Kris tells me.

With a favorable report of eight new inches, we roll into the parking lot right next to a modified green Kenworth truck. The semi has been

converted into a camper, complete with double Packasport rocket boxes, two exhaust pipes, and a license plate that reads HAMRDWN.

Glancing up for the first time, I notice there are no chairlifts—only a T-bar that stretches for what seems like miles into the horizon. Tom, the owner of the snack bar, informs us that the T-bar is a bit over a mile long. "The longest in America," he claims. I plop down the old credit card for two \$19 lift tickets, but my action rouses a cackle from behind the counter. Apparently it's a cash-only joint. Luckily Kris has some cash.

"No electricity or running water here, either. Sorry," Tom says, just to add to our incredulity. That explains the plastic outhouses in the parking lot.

At the base of the lift, we poke our heads in the motor room. We meet Merlin, who runs the 1949 International Skidder, an 1100 CI, six-cylinder tractor motor that powers the T-bar. He

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At Maverick Mountain the trees are bigger than the base lodge.



*Glancing up for the first time,
I notice there are no chairlifts.*

Two minutes into the ride, my rump feels like raw meat.



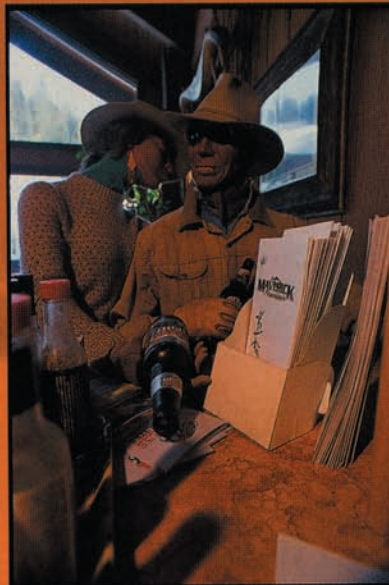
Turner Mountain's T-bar is much longer than it is wide.

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tells us that there is a gallon of diesel and oil in each T, and that you have to watch out for the bars with no pads.

Quickly forgetting his advice, the first bar I grab has no pad, and two minutes into the ride, my rump feels like raw meat. Kris and I sit like restless birds on our roost, shifting weight from cheek to cheek, squatting, standing, doing everything we can to make the bumpy ride comfortable. We pass a steady stream of snowboarders who periodically get ejected from the T-bar. As we ride past the towers, the T-bar springs compress with sounds like lasers from *Star Wars*. The 2,110 vertical feet take us 17 minutes.

The reward is sweet. We romp down a steep, fall line run, passing snow-ghost trees covered in heavy rime.



Not all Maverick Mountain locals are quite this stiff.

The snow is soft, and we arc fast turns to the bottom. With so few tracks on the hill, it feels like we're in the backcountry.

Back at the bottom, Kris and I avoid each other like rotting fish since we suck so bad at riding the T-bar. I head up with a local named Tim. He tells me about the famous Red Dog Saloon, where everyone will congregate for beers and pizza at the end of the day.

"Sometimes my car just conks out there," he says. With the soreness I am developing in my posterior, I can hardly wait for the Red Dog.

Tim takes us down the back side for some tree skiing. The pines are perfectly spaced for large-radius powder turns. It's tempting to continue past the cat track and poach another thousand feet of untracked fluff, but the hike out looks horrendous.

At lunch I have the famous T-bar burger, which runs me \$1.90. On the wall, I notice plans for an expansion. For \$444,000 Kootenai Winter Sports (KWS), the group that runs the hill, wants to add a new lift and lodge. I also notice that the KWS projected net income for 2001 is \$10,000. Compare that with American Skiing Company's 1999 revenues of around \$290 million, and you can see why KWS has applied for nonprofit status.

By the end of the day, Kris and I have done eight runs, or eight miles of towing, and are dog tired. We're ready for a pesto pizza at the Red Dog. After gorging ourselves, we stumble into Turner for a night of sleep. Tomorrow is Community Ski Free Day, and we want to be there early. Despite our best intentions, though, we sleep late and

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