

First Tracks:

WRITTEN BY **MIKE HENDERSON**

Steep hills, big lines, no lifts

Backcountry days start early. The alarm goes off and there's that moment of truth: snooze awhile longer or hit the road in the dark and make first tracks. Then the phone rings, and it's all on...

Have the coffee and gear ready the night before. Get yourself dressed. Grab the car keys and the dog. Pick up a buddy or two on the way and you're there, past the golf courses and the parking lots and almost up to Mt. Rose Pass. There are always cars there before you, looking hastily abandoned, though it's cold and dim in the strangled light of the morning.

You begin hiking on the snow in stretchy awkward strides. The sound of high-tension wires rises through the air every time a ski abrades the snow. Bindings and boots complain against the movement. Air scalds your lungs with its chill, and cold sweats bead up under high-tech materials.

"Avoid the crowds," says Sean Martin, an experienced backcountry skier. "The resorts feel too much like Disneyland nowadays." It's an awkward thought for those who've never done it, but hiking the hills to ski, earning your turns as it were, is far more

exciting than you would think. In the winter, trails are meaningless, streams are only memories and the mountains are covered with an ephemeral skin that changes every week, day or hour.

Backcountry skiers can be found in three forms: the randonee skier uses bindings that pivot under the ball of the foot and function like a cross-country ski but lock down for alpine style descents. The telemark skier can be commonly sighted at resorts, dropping one knee all the way to the snow in turns—this is Martin's chosen mode. Sp-

litboarding involves a backcountry snowboard split in two, allowing him to hike like a skier, and then the skis can snap together to descend as a normal snowboard.

With the aid of skins—high-tech straps that hook to the tip and the tail of the ski/board and adhere to the smooth wax surface with rubbery glue—skis can grip the snow and climb incredibly steep slopes.

Once at the top you drop your pack, shed skis or boards and set about switching things over. It's a different process depending on who you're with. Some guys are ready to ski within seconds. My crew and I like to savor the moment atop the mountain like you would with fine wine or fresh-baked brownies. It's also a good chance to catch your breath and cram an energy bar down your throat.

Then you select a person to go first and, one-by-one, you slide off the edge into the steep fluffy slope below. The experience of slicing through fresh snow, down a lonely face with no one in front of you, and no tracks but the ones leading back behind you is sublime. The

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sound of your skis and body slicing progress through the snow and air is symphonic white noise. When it's all over, you find yourself beating an exhausting path back to the top.

"Resort snow, even off-piste [off the main run], tends to be relatively consistent from grooming and skier traffic," says Martin. "Unconsolidated snow [like you find in the back country], however, can be crazy variable from turn to turn, creating much more of a challenge."

Anyone who likes skiing the fresh powder at the resorts or finds themselves skiing further and further off-piste will love skiing in the backcountry. You can get your first taste without buying any new gear as easily as boot-hiking the Fireplug, the hill immediately off Mt. Rose Highway in a broad left bend below the pass. Also the approach to Tamarack Ridge from the Mt. Rose Trailhead is often packed down enough for

boot hiking. Some snow shoes will fit your ski or snowboard boots, and a lot of people get to the top of some of the shorter runs that way.

"Buy an avalanche beacon and learn how to use it," Martin advises. "We live in one of the most active avalanche areas in the lower 48, but a beacon always seems to be the last piece of equipment a novice backcountry adventurer can afford [it should be the first]. Going out without one is like not wearing a helmet while mountain biking." Know the conditions by checking www.sierraavalanchecenter.org before you ski.

The Backcountry in Truckee and Tahoe City rents randonee and telemark gear by the day and is also very close to good terrain. Reno Mountain Sports and REI rent snowshoes by the day—that's the cheapest and easiest option. Backcountry Access makes a binding adapter, the Alpine Trekker, for skinning that you can use on any binding.

Reno is an awesome place for learning backcountry skiing. "I like to hit Hourglass 'cause it's close to my house and a short skin," says Martin. A little bit of work gets you heaps of fluffy white rewards in the solitude of the mountains. ❄️

Mike Henderson has been following his friends around the Tahoe Backcountry for the last few years. His three favorite words are: Winter, Storm and Warning!!!

