



SAWTOOTH SANITY

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The American story has always mythologized adventure. From Thoreau to Hemmingway to Kerouac, our greatest word-smiths have repeatedly magnified the sheen of the unexplored place. Mountains, oceans, and forests loom larger when filtered through their poetic lens and even plodding epics have been shamelessly transformed into heroic tales. In the end, their crime is forgiven because these tales furnish the mental roadmap and scenery that compel our own sojourns.



Snowboard writers stand guilty of the same string of white lies. Perfect azure skies, deep snow on demand, bottomless budgets, and always a raging party (and always with a DJ). These idyllic page-turners serve their purpose, surging us with adrenaline during the off season, lifting our gaze to marquee destinations, or simply inspiring us to ride at a new level. These scenarios fit the frame of perfection, but it's a tough standard to meet. The untold tale is that with travel comes travail, and paradoxically, therein lies the real reason to take a turn in the unfamiliar.

As with all good trips, ours was sparked by a tantalizing account: a firsthand report of craggy peaks, a friend's friend who rented out plush backcountry yurts, and a previously untapped destination that triangulated our four western state locations. Eager to cultivate our own adventure, six of us signed on for a mid winter Idaho tour. We found a week in February before the annual spring pilgrimage to

Alaska that was free of industry trade shows and resort-town work commitments, and firmly locked in the dates for a trip to the jagged spires of southern Idaho's Sawtooth Range.

Not only did these peaks gleam with riding promise, but the surrounding area echoed an adventurous past. Long before an army of Bogner-clad retirees laid claim to Sun Valley, hardened Basque and Scottish immigrants tended their flocks in the shadow of this rugged range 60 miles to the north. With the discovery of gold in them there hills, the late 1860s brought a flood of prospectors to the remote Salmon River valley. Unlike the other neighborhood ghost towns, a downsized Stanley endured when the boom subsided. Successive generations of residents became toughened by exposure and isolation, and the ethic of rugged self-reliance continued to reverberate through the hemmed-in valley.

The town of Stanley was officially incorporated in 1942, solely for the purpose of legalizing the distribution of whiskey. Summers now bring



heaps of whitewater-seeking tourists to the area, but winters are still a different story. Officially ranked as the sixth-coldest town in the United States, the dark months in Stanley are isolated and harsh, shedding some light on why bourbon was (and remains) such a high priority. The upside is that the adjacent Sawtooth Range boasts 50 10,000-foot-plus peaks packed into a compact 40-mile string. Marked by rugged ridges that elicit comparisons to the Swiss Alps, the looming lines and ridges are on par with anything North America has to offer.

I met Eric Jeffcoat, a friend and filmmaker, in Portland to begin our trip. We planned to meet up with the rest of our contingent in Sun Valley and then head over Galena Summit to the trailhead. Day one, however, deviated from this expediency. Six hours outside Portland, and somewhere inside the Burley (Idaho) triangle, Eric's Subaru stubbornly refused to go any further. Encumbered with packs, gear,

boards and countless pounds of camera equipment, we pulled off to the side of State Route 20 to assess our situation.

The clues were familiar and the realization gradual. Steam pouring from the half-tightened, recently repaired radiator, and the sullen look of disbelief on Eric's face as he peered under the hood told the tale. With no coolant left in the reservoir, the engine had been completely fried and we now sat immobilized on a desolate stretch of Idaho two-lane.

As the evening chill descended, the tight timing of our trip seemed about to unravel.

Hatching an alternate plan, Eric quickly dialed up his old friend Tim. We caught a tow to Tim's house in Boise, temporarily dumped the car on his doorstep and headed for the airport — where we secured a shiny Dodge Neon to take us the rest of the way.

The Neon's radio pulled us through the last few hours of darkness with an endless repetition of stale FM hits — Foghat, Loverboy, and The

Boss boomed as we rocked out the last straight stretches of mileage. We pulled into the property management office well past midnight and found no keys waiting in the night drop. A wake-up call to our compadres solved the day's last setback, and Troy Kindred, a former snowboard coach, one-time pro rider, and current carpenter from Jackson, arose and led us through the maze of Warm Springs condos. Seconds before pulling in for the night, a single coyote raced through the beam of our Neon's headlights, wondering what we were doing in his neck of the woods at such a strange hour.

Everything changed for the Wood River Valley in 1936 when Averell Harriman, chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad, resolved to transform the area into America's first destination ski resort. A marquee lodge was constructed, the finest Austrian instructors were imported, and a new method for uphill transportation was conceived: the chairlift. Installed on Proctor and Dollar mountains, this exponential improvement in lift technology made getting up the hill a whole lot easier, and ushered in the modern era of downhill alpine sports.

With the aid of modern marketing, Sun Valley quickly became a vortex of celebrity and wealth. Figures such as Gary Cooper, Nelson Rockefeller, and Ernest Hemingway visited the resort regularly, their presence widely publicized in well-polished advertising campaigns. Strengthened by a movement away from the excess of the '20s, visitors flocked to the valley to be active, rub elbows with the rich and famous, and experience the splendor of the mountains in five-star comfort.

With the exception of the war years, Sun Valley's alpine culture continued to flourish. A combination of regimented Austrian Arlsberg instruction and modern resort technology boosted destination ski travel to a high profile, fueling the dramatic post-war expansion of sliding sports.

And, while widely recognized as the birthplace of the chairlift and an incubator of modern ski instruction, Sun Valley was also the first place on the continent to embrace Euro-style Alpine Touring. A precursor to today's guide services, the imported alpinist instructors built a string of cabins in the high mountains around the valley and led clients to steeper lines and remote bowls. A stark contrast to the disciplined in-bounds approach, this adrenaline-inducing alternative introduced Americans to the freedom of the backcountry.

Hiking for turns, ripping down steep slopes, and bunking in the alpine didn't appeal to everyone, but for an individualistic few, this style struck a chord. Sixty-five years later, the same theme rings true — touring is tougher than the controlled resort experience, but for the converted choir the riding reward is worth extra effort.

The next day we endured an early morning wake-up, packed up the rest of our gear, and sucked down coffees at the famous Java on Fourth (with the legendary "Bowl of Soul": Mexican chocolate, caffeine, and morning bliss). Adding Chris Ankeny — a photographer from Bozeman — and two off-duty guides from Jackson, Jamie Weeks, and DJ Donahue, we now numbered six. After a few false starts, our train was now truly on track, caravanning up and over Galena Summit toward Stanley's isolated mountain valley.

We arrived at the trailhead on time, a miracle considering the logistics involved, to meet Sara the hutkeeper and get the rundown on the yurt we had rented from Sawtooth Mountain Guides. She laid out the details of the approach route, composting commode etiquette and





wood-fired sauna operation, while we fidgeted with our gear and tried to stay warm in the crisp morning air.

Our momentum seemed to shift as Jamie's friend Schnell, the summer hutkeeper with a slow Texan drawl, showed up unannounced and offered to show us around. Even though we were breaking a cardinal rule of the backcountry — never trust your safety to someone you don't know — a lucky seventh seemed like a good change of plan, and he was a local. This fateful decision was later validated at the yurt when Schnell pulled a 12 pack of Guinness pub-draft cans from his pack.

After the final preparations, we began the six-mile and 1,600 vertical-foot climb slowly. Equally divided between approach skis and split boards, we began humping 50-pound packs and one overloaded plastic gear sled upward. We were all for roughing it, but lugging two sets of camera gear, a buffet of foodstuffs (including six pounds of frozen chicken) and the right ration of alcohol required an effort-for-comfort compromise. The pre set track was a relief, allowing our minds to shift focus from route-finding and trail-breaking to enjoying the views of the peaks and the Zen of being in the woods.

Over the next few hours we split into two groups, with the iron-lunged guides and well-acclimated local charging ahead to set up shop in the yurt and dig a pit to evaluate the snowpack. The rest of us shuffled upward at our own pace and struggled to keep the sled from plunging into tree wells on the sketchy sidehill sections of the trail. Hours of effort, buckets of sweat, and hundreds of calories later, the Williams Peak hut thankfully emerged in a picturesque locale at the base of a beautiful bowl.

The lead party was geared up, rested and ready to head up Williams ridge to recon the area for tomorrow's riding possibility. After dropping our packs and claiming our bunks, we planned to follow. The switchbacking climb was painful, but we soon reached Dead Snag — the midpoint of our evening's climb. The connection between the Dead Snag and the aptly termed Jerry Garcia Bowl spread a few smiles of recognition around, but mostly we grimaced through the day's final ascent.

The Motorolas squawked some encouragement and a few more minutes in the skin track landed us at the top. The view from the 9,600-foot route's summit was spectacular — gnarled ridges, razor-thin chutes, and imposing peaks stretched to each horizon and, as if on cue, the sunset shed alpenglow on the highest peaks. We celebrated the day's ascent in traditional fashion, roughed out a plan for the morning and picked three perfect two-person lines back down to our nightly accommodations. We would eat, drink and dream well tonight.

The Sun Valley region was a onetime haunt of Ernest Hemingway, whose words spawned an entire genre of literature that championed rugged individualism. Lured at first by Sun Valley's forward thinking marketing department, Hemingway soon adopted the area as his Western home. He completed the novel "For Whom the Bell Tolls" in his complimentary suite at the Sun Valley Lodge, hunted and fished in the surrounding patches of wilderness and returned for good after revolution forced him to leave Cuba.

Hemingway's tales are legendary and his legend is mythical. He traveled to dangerous destinations — sub-Saharan Africa, war-torn Spain, the untamed wilderness — drank like a fish and had a talent for attracting, and then repelling women. His legacy counted four wives, a Nobel Prize and a worldwide string of adventures that formed a dramatic backdrop for his sparse writing style.

His books and stories celebrated the unknown, the active, and the rough edges of the individual, often ending with a tragic outcome. He gained fame, fortune, and respect with his exciting tales of the unfamiliar.



More than any other, he permanently colored our enduring stereotype of the American author. His influence still remains great primarily because his voice induced generations of us to explore.

Before I could open my eyes, the hiss of the portable espresso maker jarred me awake. It was still dark outside, but the smell of gourmet French roast provided enough motivation to climb out of my fluffy down bag and start gearing up to explore the heart of the Sawtooth. We planned for a long day and prepared accordingly, but, of course, hit the first incline with no clear objective.

A midwinter thaw had turned the weather climactic warm and our climb toward the top of Thompson Peak quickly turned into a scorcher. One intermediate hike up, a quick couple of turns down, and a big cirque traverse brought us to the base of the biggest mountain in the immediate range. Faced with real slope exposure, we unbuckled and bootpacked up to the next ridge, single file and spaced apart style. We broke for lunch and tried to settle on a plan of attack.

The snow at the higher elevation was poor and rotted in places, and the pack was marginal. Turns way up here held little excitement, but we were engulfed by epic scenery. Summit fever soon took hold and the group was charging up a sketchy and frozen scree field to the top of Thompson's 10,832-foot peak.

Sliding backward in treadless boots, losing ground on the lead, and incubating a blister the size of a four-hole pattern, I made the disappointing decision to turn around. Enticed by radio reports of the climb's simplicity, it wasn't an easy choice, but respecting limits is a trait that takes on new import in mountains of this size. Troy and Eric thankfully joined me in a retreat back to the ridge, while the remaining party of four scrambled up to the top.

Summit photos were snapped, a can of Guinness was quaffed to toast the view, and a sketchy descent was successfully completed while we three waited in the sunshine to make some turns. My sour outlook turned positive as we all made the first good arcs of the day on the big descent back to the yurt. The alpine bowl beneath Thompson's near-vertical wall held sheltered fluffy shaded snow, the bottom flats opened up into a nice one-two punch of a high-angle couloirs and a filled-in rocky waterfall — a perfect cocktail of speed and steeps. It was a draining day, but our one continuous run seemed to soothe the craving for now.

Back at the yurt, we raged immediately. Our evening was filled with cups of Spro, Gatorade and vodka cocktails, gourmet brie appetizers and smoky storytelling about past, present and future riding adventures. Schnell injected signature Texan-turned-northerner character into stories of Alaska, Idaho and points further, and spirits continued to soar. Jamie and DJ cooked up a massive chicken/shrimp and pasta meal, and Troy topped it all off by pulling out a bag of oatmeal and chocolate chip cookies homemade by his wife, Hollie. At nine o'clock, with the woodstove stoked to furious, my eyes circled the room to find all six members of our expedition contentedly out cold in their bags.

page 092/093 | **Jamie Weeks** surveys paradise

page 094 | "Whaddya mean happy hour's over?"

page 095 | Skin-way to Heaven

page 096/097 | **Troy Kindred** hauling ass back to the yurt bar

page 098/099 | **Mix Master Troy** doing his liquid DJ act back at base camp

left | **Jamie Weeks** enjoys lunar turns and no tracks

Day three proved to be a struggle. Whether it was the pressure to maximize our last day, the energy drain from charging up Thompson, the morning's greybird skies or simply divergent goals and strong personalities, things fell apart fast. It also could have been the hangover or my sea-level lungs.

We climbed back up the JGB in close contact, but then the group dynamic fractured. Jamie and DJ headed straight for a toothpick-thin couloir off Thompson's ridgeline, while Troy, Chris, Eric, and I searched for better snow in the treed ridges. It hadn't dumped for weeks and the four of us milked what was left of the chopped up fluff. We then traversed to the lower aspect of Thompson's main finger, hoping for one good run in the steep tree chutes shouldering the couloir.

Postholing up the blown-in ridge proved almost as tough as Jamie and DJ's epic bootpack up the gut of the chute. The gray skies meant challenging photo potential and the temperature fluctuations had solidified the underlayer into a fluid death crust. Troy and I rode what we found in the woods, Jamie and DJ bagged the chute, and Chris rode behind them snapping off a few shots from inside the rocky couloir walls. The terrain was epic, the potential limitless, but the snow conditions, well... we were only inspired to return and nail it better. It was time to head home.

We left the yurt in three groups and the six-mile shuffle out was a slog. My blister had now grown to base-plate dimensions, short skis and heavy packs turned the treed sections into a kamikaze downhill, and the rolling terrain required more unstrapped portages than I'd care to count. Faced with a shorter drive and no mechanical problems to resolve, Troy and Chris left a few hours later but had even worse luck. Troy's trailing toboggan found every hole and tree on the descent, delaying their exit by hours. Returning to the trailhead with their truck sitting alone in the darkness, they threw down their load. Their hopes for a back-at-the-truck celebration were shattered as their frozen bottles of remaining Guinness had exploded over their change of clothes long before they were meant to be opened.

In a cruel twist of fate compounded by spiraling depression, Hemingway's story ended in his Sun Valley home. The icon of American authorship felt his talent for the word had disappeared, and fearing this the most, he tragically unloaded his favorite shotgun on himself. He is buried in the Ketchum Cemetery and etched on his understated memorial is a eulogy he once composed that celebrated passion for the wilderness and honors his still powerful legacy to adventure. Foreshadowing his own end, it resonates with the words, "He has come back to the hills that he loved and now he will be a part of them forever."

There was, fortunately, no suicide spiral to end our adventure although our re-adjustment to the mundane repetition of reality proved a shock to the system. A dark, icy drive on winding mountain roads, days stuck dealing with auto mechanics in Boise, and a return to overflowing workloads left long untended. Our tour-a-day pace rapidly accelerated back to normal life speed and the vistas of the Sawtooth Range began to slowly fade into memory. Like all authentic explorations, the trip was a mixed bag of stoke and struggle, but promised to sustain us until restless souls, empty two lane, and big mountains call us out once again. **▲**