

By Susan Reifer

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*In Alaska's
newly famous
Chugach
Mountains,
the waiting
is the
hardest part.*

Waiting for a break in the weather, hell-skiers kill time with sporting clays on Cook Inlet, Alaska.

Clouds hang wet and low over Alaska's Cook Inlet. The ocean's surface looks oily and grey. Twenty would-be heli-skiers mill around on a low bluff. A bright orange clay target slings out over the inlet. There's a crack of a shotgun, the hiss of a can of beer opening, some rough laughter. Another Gun crack and the clay pigeon splatters. Sleet begins to fall from the sky.

The skiers take turns in a line of three shotguns, raising the guns to their shoulders, sighting the bright saucers, feeling the satisfying crack. Every time a shotgun fires, the loitering spectators laugh. Crack. Heh heh heh. Crack. Heh heh heh. A dog howls and whimpers from the back of a truck

Tommy Moe stands in the Shotgun line, his hands resting easily by his side, a black knit cap pulled

low on his brow. He's no beginner; he's an Alaska man. He doesn't raise the gun to his eye until the bright clay pigeon soars out over the water. His sharpshooting gets them again and again. Crack. Heh heh heh. Crack. Heh heh heh. "Yeah Moe," someone says encouragingly. The bright disks explode in the air.

Its been Snowing and raining in the Coastal Town of Girdwood for a week. Seventy inches of snow have fallen in the surrounding Chugach (pronounced "chew gatch") Mountains, the steep and wild range that has brought so much notariety to the town of Valdez, 100 miles to the east. Everyone standing on this shale topped bluff is waiting, waiting for the skies to clear over the Chugach so that the heli-skiing can resume. Skeet shooting is weather relief Alaskan-style, blowing the gloom right out of our heads



The Chugach Mountains

ramble in a crazy, rugged jumble for 300 miles from Anchorage east toward Canada, running roughly parallel to Alaska's south-central coast. The massive, ice-carved peaks rise straight out of the waters of the Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound, hit timberline at about 2,000 feet, and continue to heights of more than 13,000 feet. The summits number in the hundreds and harbor some of the world's most outrageous powder steeps, made famous by Valdez's recent heli-skiing boom. Otherwise, the range remains largely untouched, a pristine land with few marks of human hands.

Just 40 miles southeast of Anchorage lies the funky little town of Girdwood, where skiers at the Alyeska Resort have been nipping at the edges of the Chugach for 40 years. It's a place where classic ski culture, Alaska woodsiness, and destination-resort comfort meet - a sharp contrast to the oil-port experience in Valdez.

Girdwood lies in Glacier Valley, the northernmost rain forest on earth. Caribou and bear wander through what passes for the center of town: two restaurants, a bar, a post office, a grocery and liquor store, a candle shop, and a ski shop. Girdwood's homes, ranging from ramshackle log cabins with outhouses to newly built weekend trophy retreats, are ostly hidden from view among thick groves of birch and spruce. Up one rutted dirt road lies an old gold mine, Girdwood's original raison d'être, where a few bristly Alaskans still eke out a living working their claims. In another direction lies the Alyeska Ski Resort and the luxurious Westin Alyeska Prince Hotel.

The hotel is an eight-story, 307-room Alaskan incongruity, an oversized chateau with a mix of contemporary Japanese and classic Alpine styling. Opened in 1994, it is the

only hotel in Alaska with a four-diamond rating from AAA. The ski area, about to celebrate its 40th anniversary, offers 2,500 vertical feet of open and mostly treeless terrain, great for high speed carving a la hometown hero Tommy Moe. The North Face area, opened in 1997, adds variety with 300 acres of off-piste, black-diamond steeps. The view from the slopes - ocean waters, tidal flats, soaring mountains - is as stunning as views get. The 560-inch average annual snowfall makes it a powder paradise. All of this makes it Alaska's most popular ski area.

What makes Alyeska one of the world's great ski adventure experiences is the presence of a company operating out of a small counter on the hotel's second floor: Chugach Powder Guides.

My first day in Girdwood dawns windy and clear. The phone rings early. It's Abbie Wittke, CPG's girl Friday. "Hey girl. Are you up? Are you ready to go?"

At 8:15, 18 people sit in the hotel lounge, listening with increasingly somber faces to a detailed safety briefing from one of CPG's owners, Mike Overcast. Overcast, 28, is big, blond, and brawny, with eyes like a Siberian husky and a calm, commanding presence. He spends a solid half hour explaining the day's protocols, from following the guide's instructions to what to do in the event of avalanche.

After our briefing and a short shuttle ride, we climb into a red and white A-Star helicopter in groups of four or five, each with a guide, and fly southeast over the Cook Inlet's Turnagain Arm, to a region of the Chugach called Placer Skookum. The assembly includes freeskiing stars Chris Davenport, Jeremy Nobis, Alison Gannett, and Brant Moles, as well as advanced intermediates like New York chefs Trudy and Steve Ainge.



The winds are high so we land low. The sky is big and open, blue and clear. Enormous, hulking mountains and endless fields of untracked snow surround us. We feel deep in the wilds and very, very small. We spend the day hunting powder on low-angle slopes. Even so, the guides dig snow pits every time we ski a new angle, and they snow-cut every slope.

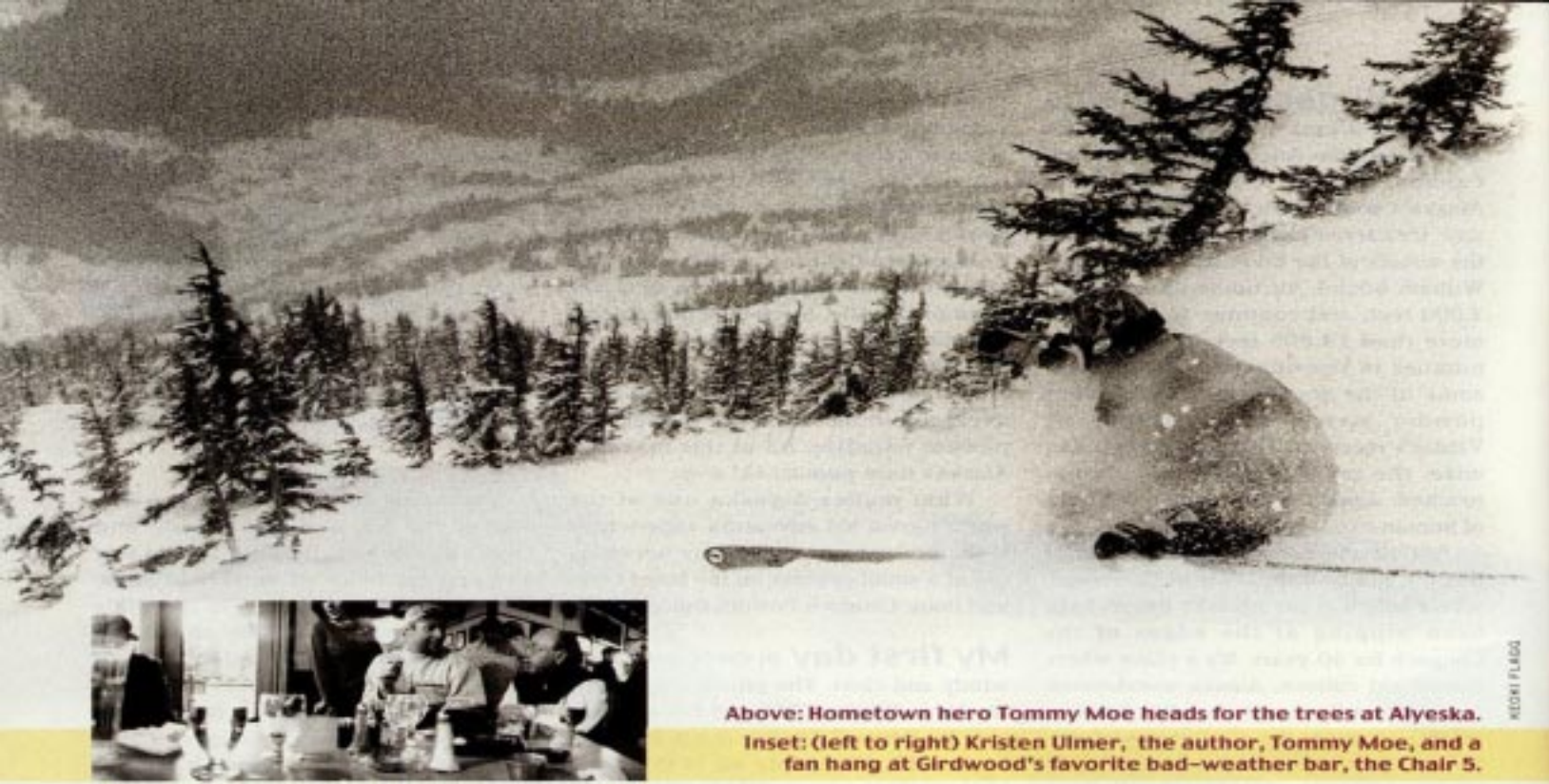
By late afternoon, the wind is abating, and we hunger for something steep. The pilot drops us as high as he can and we hike to the summit of something dubbed Comet. Two of the groups opt out and watch with a guide from a safe distance away.

I peer over the edge. The wind blasts me with a strong gust. The rock-flanked couloir is steep, with a blind rollover. I feel afraid and delighted at the same time. The guide, Dave Marshall, is encouraging: "You can do this," he says. "Do you know your line?" I nod. He gives me the go-ahead.

I am surprised by the deepness of the snow -but only for an instant. I am diving into gravity, completely in the moment, nothing in my brain. The descent is long, but I ski it nonstop, wholly immersed



All dressed up and nowhere to fly: The TGR film crew surveys its options at Alyeska



Above: Hometown hero Tommy Moe heads for the trees at Alyeska.

Inset: (left to right) Kristen Ulmer, the author, Tommy Moe, and a fan hang at Girdwood's favorite bad-weather bar, the Chair 5.

KECKE FLAUG

in the flow. I feel adrenaline, fear, and relief mix with joy and powder, exploding in exuberant tingles in the marrow of my bones. This is the sensation that brings me back to the Chugach year after year, the sensation no other experience can touch. What a great, great way to end our first day! I am psyched for more.

That night it begins to snow. By daybreak, ten inches have fallen. The sweeping view out the bay windows of my room is blocked by a wall of swirling white. There will be no flying today.

I am channel surfing for the latest weather forecast when the doorbell rings. An extremely solicitous person from room service rolls in with my fatfree breakfast and a vase containing a rose. I settle onto the settee, eat my *petit déjeuner*, and stare at the ceaseless wall of snow.

But the day is not a total loss. Down the elevator, past the CPG desk, and out the back door is a 60-passenger tram that speeds 2,300 feet up Mt. Alyeska in less than four minutes. Lifts open at 10:30 (a concession to Alaska's short hours of daylight in winter). At 10:15 I meet an excited group of CPG glides and guests in line. We get on the second

tram, and the operator cranks up the rock and roll. At the top, hyperagitated by the snow and the music, skiers run out of the tram building, jump onto their boards, and take off in a wild, high-energy glee spree, racing to the bottom for another ride. The entire mountain is laughing, whooping, and having a blast.

Our pack makes laps on Chair 6, a high-speed quad that accesses Alyeska's high Alpine bowls. CPG staffers pair up informally with clients, leading the way to favorite shots where the powder lingers or the pitch is particularly steep. Abbie tells me to keep my eye on Glacier Bowl's High Traverse, and when patrol opens the fence we are the first ones through, bounding and giggling down untracked snow as sweet as the previous day's low-angle heli-descents.

We regroup with the pack above the roped-off-North Face. Moments later the gate opens and the mornings tram madness is revisited: One hundred and fifty powder fanatics jump off the starting block en masse. The pack points them over to Lolo's, a short cliff band that drops into trees, but Trudy, the chef, tears down the North Face centerline and doesn't look back. We catch her

2,000 feet below, laughing giddily and waiting in a pile of snow. "I couldn't help it," she says. "I just had to go for it!" We jump on the next tram, groove to the music, and scamper out of the terminal to hit the North Face again.

I have waited out weather in much, much worse places than this.

In the spring of 1958, fifteen months before Alyeska's official opening, founder Francois de Gunzburg and a few brave souls, including U.S. Olympians Penny Pitou and Betsy Snite, began helicopter skiing in Girdwood—a North American first. In the '60s, ski planes flew adventurers onto Girdwood's glaciers, where skiers could begin a 14-mile descent back to the valley. In the '70s, a helicopter-skiing company first grudging forays into the nearby Chugach.

In 1983, a few keen Girdwood locals began hiring a private helicopter to explore the western reaches of the range. Before long, pioneering Valdezians were doing the same thing in their corner of the Chugach. But in Girdwood, there was a difference: One of the early heli-skiing keepers was also one of America's top avalanche experts, a big, blue-eyed ski



The reward for waiting out the weather is getting the goods. Skier: Jeremy Nobis

mountaineer named Dave Hamre. Hamre had been a patrol-
ler at Alta in the early '70s; within two years he
became Alta's first director of snow safety. In 1978,
he moved north to run snow safety for Alyeska. Two
years ago, having explored large handfuls of the Chugach
National Forest, Hamre and partners Mike Overcast and
Dave Marshall started Chugach Powder Guides.

Hamre and I meet for a late lunch at Chair Five,
Girdwood's favorite hangout. In front of Hamre, next
to his cell phone, sits a plate of halibut tacos and a
cup of black coffee. He wears a plaid shirt, a fleece
vest, blue jeans, and sturdy work boots. His brown
hair and blandish mustache are both lightly flecked
with gray. His pale blue eyes look straight into mine
from behind aviator frame eyeglasses as he recalls ten
years of first descents.

"We were getting 33,000 to 35,000 vertical in a
day," he says, And we just kept working our way through
Placer Skookum, Bench Peak, and all the areas we now
have under permit. Even then we were insistent that
everything be done in a safe manner. We did safety
briefings and Pieps drills and everything else. He
makes a point of this because safety has not always
been a top priority elsewhere on the Alaskan heliskiing
scene, such as in Valdez.

"We are conservative," Hamre says. "I'm going to
tell you that categorically. We are conservative, we
are older, and we have a lot of experience. What a
lot of avalanche experience does for you is it makes
you more and more conservative. All those certain-
ties you might have felt at 26 have been whacked out
of you by being in the wrong spot at the wrong
time."

I think about what Hamre is saying and watch the
snow fall outside. Somewhere out there are 800-foot
faces, 1,500-foot couloirs, 55-degree steeps,
5,000-foot powder-glutted descents. Wisdom says, It
will be at least three days after the storm cycle
before it is safe to get into the most radical ter-
rain. Desire says, To hell with waiting. Nothing
bad's gonna happen. Let's go now! Hamre's restraint
is a healthy thing.

For six straight days the sky spits and storms.
The powder on the mountain gets deeper and deeper.
We ski a foot of fresh at Alyeska every day. Ski-
ing the resort is great fun, but it can't match
the tingle of heli-accessed summits and steeps.

We fall into a dazed rhythm: Wake up early, peer
out the window, see the wall of white, feel the
disappointment rise, go back to sleep. Wake up again,
ski the resort for a few hours, have lunch at The
Bake Shop, go for a swim or work out in the gym. The
vacationing chefs, Trudy and Steve, spend their af-
ternoons reading books in front of a roaring fire on
the cushy couches in the hotel lounge. Others hide
out in their hotel rooms, watching new releases on
pay-per-view.

Abbie and Overcast make sure everyone stays enter-
tained, day and night. They invite guests to meet
them for breakfast, dinner, and cocktails. They throw
a moose-taco feed, haul out the shotguns and clay
pigeons, coordinate trips into Anchorage and down to
Portage Glacier, and provide tides around town. In
the evenings, we all wind up at Chair Five, dropping
coins in the jukebox, shooting Pool telling tall
tales, mingling with Alaskans,

feeling great about life, and drinking the bar dry of Jack Daniels and Coke.

On the seventh day, I peel open heavy eyelids to wilting roses in the **window and more stormy white.** In the middle of my reindeer sausage and double espresso breakfast at the hotel’s Pond Cafe, Abbie walks in and smiles. neat up girl and get your gear together,” she says. We’re going to try to fly.n

Moe meets us at the hangar. Overcast puts us in a group with a blond Texan oil heiress and her handsome French-Canadian ski instructor, Daveed. We fly northeast into Winner Creek. The light shifts on the peaks, turning flat then rising again. The waters of the inlet look for a moment like liquid mercury then shift back to flat gray. We wait on a knoll Below us, Marshall and Overcast scrutinize the day’s first pit. They measure and examine, bang on a column of snow, peer at crystals, and take notes. “It’s always real interesting the first day out after a serious storm,” says Overcast. “It’s like going into a dangerous animal area. You proceed slowly and poke around.”

The Texan princess turns out to be a phenomenally good skier, a mountain loving spirit trapped in a socialite’s life.

Her husband manages one of the largest mutual funds in the U.S. Their only prenuptial stipulation was that she be able to ski six weeks a year, no dispute. “So here I am” she says with a drawl and a laugh. “Woo hoo!”

Moe zips ahead, popping off small hits and ski-cutting on top of rolls like a kid in a playground. He lets loose a slab and excitedly calls Overcast over to examine it. Later, we pull out of a gully and watch slow-moving snow snails (snowballs created when the top layer of snow peels downslope in a strip, curling up on itself like a carpet being furled) grow as big as monster-truck tires and roll right on by.

We spend the day skiing perfect powder on wide-open rolling benches and through low-elevation trees. All around us rise lovely walls and couloirs, but Marshall and Overcast say the danger is too high to get near the steepes. And they are right: Back at the resort, a chute on the North Face avalanches. It was closed at the time so no one was hurt. We fly by to take a look. The debris lies in a riotous heap far, far below.

The next day the sky spits out more snow, at the rate of two inches an hour. We ski waist-deep powder at the resort. Three days later, dawn reveals

the jagged high lines of the Chugach, sharp against the brightening sky, clear for the first time in ten days. Finally! But my bags are packed and I have to go.

Downstairs, Overcast gives another safety briefing. “My name’s Mike Bluebird,” he says. “Over a period of 11 days we have received over 110 inches of new snow. You can dig ten feet down and still not find the bed surface. I am not here to scare you. I am here to tell you things you need to know....”

As Abbie drives me out of Girdwood, the A-Star rises overhead. I look with longing at the rock-flanked couloirs and the big faces, the wide-open powder fields and thrilling steepes. I hope that when I return, nature’s dance card won’t be so full. Until then, I will dream of the Chugach, feeling it lure me to its high peaks, enticing me back into its fierce arms.

CHUGACH POWDER GUIDES

Where: Alyeska is a 40-minute drive from Anchorage International Airport. Multiday packages with CPG include airport transfers. Otherwise take a taxi (about \$50) or rent a car.

Who, when, what, costs: Chugach Powder Guides operates from February through April. February tends to be colder but with excellent skiing—the sun is not strong enough to crust the snowpack on south-facing slopes. CPG has exclusive license to guide heli-skiing in a 1,000-square-mile section of the Chugach National Forest, and, new this season, has an exclusive permit to operate snowcat skiing in Winner Creek, which will enable CPG to deliver full days of backcountry skiing no matter the weather.

Weather permitting, CPG ski weeks are progressive, with more radical terrain being offered later in the week. Rates are based on vertical skied, not on number of lifts with the helicopter. A full day (\$495) includes lunch and guarantees between 16,000 and 20,000 vertical feet. Vertical in excess of the maximum is charged at \$18 per 1,000 vertical feet;under the minimum is refunded at the same rate. For the coming season, a six-night, five-day package (about \$2,625, per person, double occupancy) includes accommodations at the Westin Alyeska Prince Hotel, unlimited lift service at the Alyeska Resort, and 48,000 to 60,000 vertical feet of heliskiing. A seven-day, eight-night package (about \$3,950) includes 80,000 to 100,000 vertical. Other packages are available.

Coolest oddity of nature: The Turnagain Arm’s Bore Tide, the second largest tide in the world (39 feet), which can roll in as a wave up to 10 feet high.

What you’ll need: Good goggles, top-notch waterproof/breathable outerwear, and some wide powder boards.

For more information: CPG, P.O. Box 641, Girdwood, Alaska 99587; 907-783-HELI. Alyeska Prince Hotel, 907-754-1111 or 800-775-6656.—s.r.

