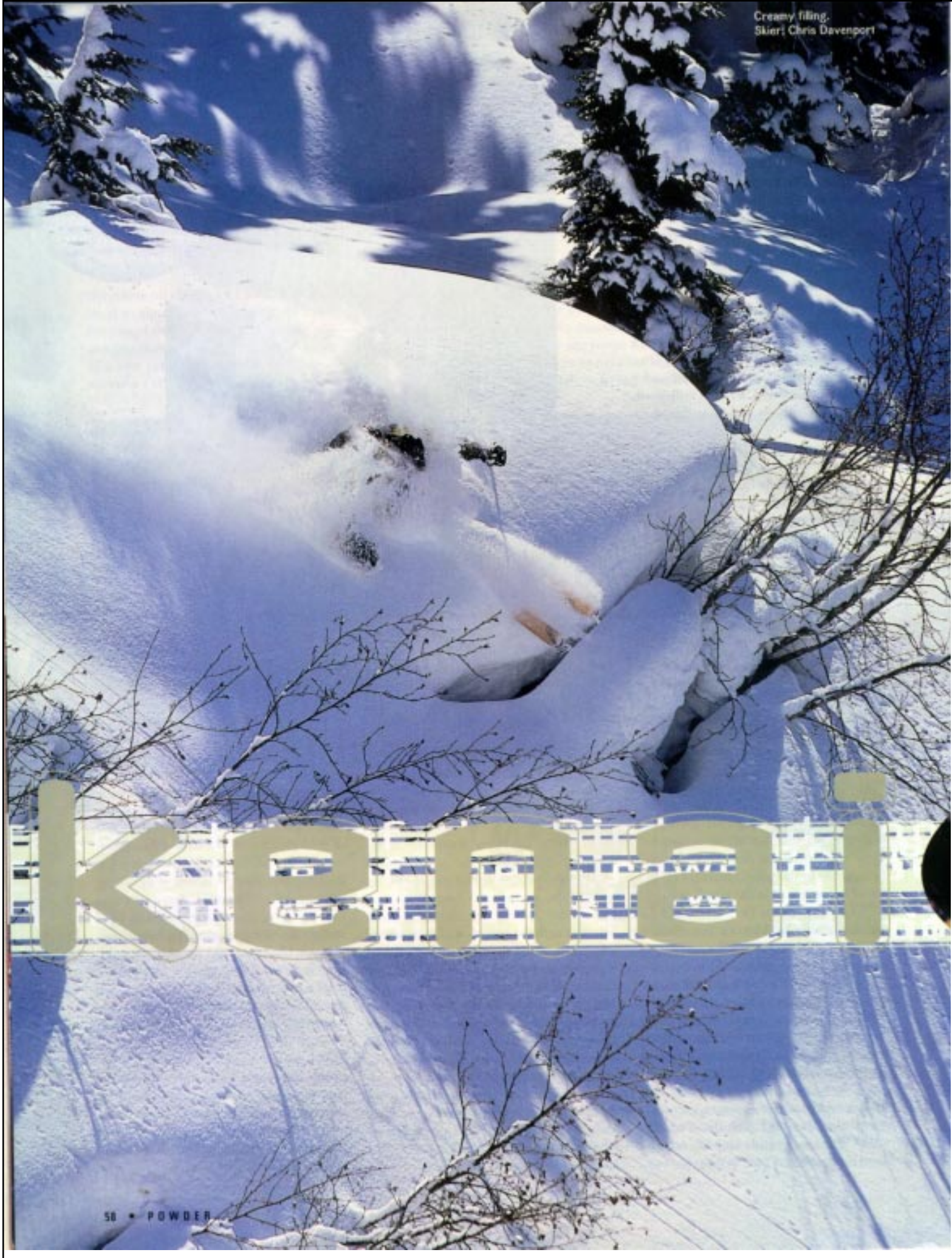


Creamy filling.
Skier: Chris Davenport



kenai

The week before the World Extreme Ski Championships this past spring, the usual Valdez crowds were conspicuous by their absence.

Due to minimal snow and generally bony conditions in the now-traditional vernal mecca, at least half the talent could be found elsewhere filming and warming up for the big event. Not that they were all that far away. Flying out of Alyeska Ski Resort in Girdwood with Chugach Powder Guides, the likes of Pony Boy Campbell, Chris Davenport, Braly Joy, Brant Moles, Jeremy Nobis, Kim Reichhelm, Dave Swanwick, a Warren Miller crew, and photographer Joe McBride were busy tearing open some huge gashes on the glaciers and steep, big-ass faces that have made the Chugach famous. Except this was the western Chugach and the Kenai Peninsula, a whole new kettle of Alaskan halibut. There was no shortage of snow: a couple powerful spring storms that only teased Valdez with wind and maritime misery had turned up the voltage on the local powder meter. Spread these conditions over a 1,000-square-mile leasehold with no competition from other heli operators, and Girdwood was indeed the place to be.

Run by Dave Hamre, former snow safety chief for the Valdez venue and an avalanche consultant for ski areas, highways, and railroads, Chugach Powder Guides only really got off the ground last year but has already hit big with the rotorclub crowd. Other partners in the operation include consummate avalanche technician Dave Marshall; former lead guide for Valdez Heli-Adventures, Mike Overcast; and Tommy Moe (if you don't know who he is stop reading here). Based at the Westin Alyeska Prince Hotel, Chugach Powder Guides' A-Stars ferry skiers from Girdwood airport and other staging areas along the Seward Highway, across the impressive tidal flats of Turnagain Arm, and into the vastness of the Western Chugach.

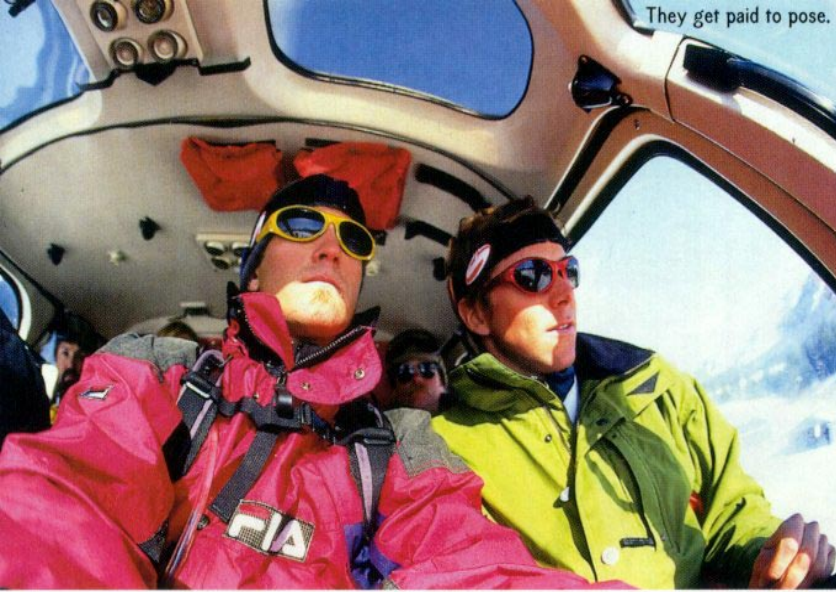
In case anyone thinks that being banished to Girdwood is tantamount to sitting in purgatory awaiting the call to Valdez heaven, forget it. Your mind will be boggled. Think Valdez with way more snow: big glaciers, gnarly chutes, knife-edge ridges, super-steep pow shots, open-end glacier runs of 2,000 to 5,000



pie

TAKE A BITE OF THE GIRWOOD, ALASKA, GOODS

BY LESLIE ANTHONY \ PHOTOS BY JOE McBRIDE



Think Valdez with way more snow: big glaciers, gnarly chutes, knife-edge ridges, super-steep pow shots, open-end glacier runs of 2,000 to 5,000 vertical feet, and—the one thing Valdez lacks— tree runs of 1,200 to 1,700 feet.



vertical feet, and—the one thing Valdez lacks—tree runs of 1,200 to 1,700 feet. Dodging fronts that seemed to wage a daily game of hide-e-seek with the horizon, constantly threatening to spread inland over the peninsula from the great snow machine of the Gulf of Alaska, this spring's crew was more often treated to sapphire skies and diamond dust underfoot as we plied a succession of west-running valleys. Most runs had the same layout: steep-sided glacial cirques with mellow basins that then spilled over a steep break and onto meandering moraine benches that spread down the valley. J1, Vador, Big Lip, Huega, Kingdom, and the oh-so-epic Blue Lagoon became tip-of-the-tongue words for a week; in reality, though, between us we probably skied a dozen unnamed—and at least half as many previously unskied—runs ringing these bread-and-butter shots. The somewhat bombproof conditions allowed us to rip up some nasty couloirs. Yessir, there were no shortage of Surprises in Hamre's refrigerator for those who craved another slice of forbidden Kenai Pie.

One sketchy day, when flying south to the traditional grazing grounds wouldn't have been the best aeronautical move, we got a taste of another appetizing Alaskan dish: In addition to the nascent heli operation, CPG has plans for expanding into the upper Glacier Creek valley, adjacent to Alyeska Resort, with snowcats. With the main cirque emptying quickly onto heavily treed rolling benches above and B.C.-style tree chutes below, Glacier Creek provides an A-1 alternative on down days (think about that while you're waiting out a six-day blow in Valdez). Add this to a raging ski area in Alyeska Resort for backup and access to all the touring you could possibly handle, and you gotta figure they have all the bases covered. There's literally no way to miss a day of skiing here, unless, of course, you're a putz or just want to spend the day in Girdwood's Chair Five saloon, participating in another time-honored Alaskan tradition: drinking and shooting pool, which, coincidentally, is also a good warm-up for Valdez.

To ski with the Chugach Powder Guides you don't have to be an expert, but if they know you are it helps your cause, and they will hand you the goods on a silver platter. On one memorable run last spring, as our load of salivating shredders stood atop a short but super-steep face with ski tips pointing off into space, guide Mike Overcast was courteous enough to inquire, "Is everyone OK with this?" Nobis, myself, and POWDER contributing editor Bruce Edgerly all looked at each other with the same thought etched on our faces: Oh yeah, baby, we're cool with this.

*There are many flying options to choose from, but a full-day package is \$450. CPG operates January 31 to June, when you get into the "Kings and Corn" season: corn snow skiing combined with king salmon fishing and whitewater rafting. You read it here first. Call 970-783-4354, e-mail skiheli@alaska.net, or go to www.alaska.net/~skiheli for information and reservations. **



Breakfast of champions.
Skiers: Chris Davenport and Dave Swanwick