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SNOWSHOES, A LOVE STORY

HOW AN AVID SKIER LEARNED TO EMBRACE
THE GENTLER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

BY EVERETT POTTER

Much of snowshoeing, a 6,000-year-old means of getting from Point A to Point B in winter, is common sense. Putting on a pair of snowshoes is as simple as putting on a pair of sneakers; learning how to tighten the bindings literally takes a minute. The telescoping poles you use for balance and counterpoling are intuitive, and the action itself — walking — is something most toddlers have mastered.

Moving On Up

But there's one thing about snowshoeing at Colorado's Beaver Creek Nordic Sports Center that feels anything but natural: riding the Strawberry Park Chairlift. Built exclusively for snowshoers and cross-country skiers, it whisks you up to McCoy Park, which sits at roughly 10,000 feet above sea level. As the lift glides to a stop you hop off, catch your breath and take in the surrounding Rocky Mountain peaks before setting off to explore nearly 20 miles of trails at an altitude best suited for low-flying aircraft.

POWDER PLAY
Today's snowshoe equipment makes the sport extremely accessible.

Since it opened in 1980, Beaver Creek has carved out a formidable reputation as one of Colorado's best ski destinations. But few people have experienced its gentler side — albeit here raised to an adventurous extreme. At many resorts, snowshoe centers invite guests to tromp around a snow-covered golf course with predictable excitement. Beaver Creek's facility comes with an adrenaline rush.

I first sampled it more than 25 years ago, accompanied by a guy named Nate Goldberg, who was working at the Nordic Center. I was an avid skier — cross-country as well as downhill — and had returned to Nate's office after a morning at McCoy Park. I saw a few pairs of snowshoes hanging on the wall, early versions of the high-tech aluminum snowshoes that are now commonplace. Back in 1989, there were no snowshoes for rent — these prototypes were what serious winter gearheads played around with on their day off. We went out on Nate's snowshoes, taking the lift to McCoy. It was easy and exhilarating, a remarkably hassle-free way to experience the pure beauty of the mountains in winter.

Fast-forward to 2015. Beaver Creek stocks hundreds of rental pairs of Atlas snowshoes and Nate is the manager of the Beaver Creek Nordic Sports Center, spearheading the remarkable growth of snowshoeing at the resort and throughout Colorado. It was clearly time for a return visit.



A Quiet Constitutional

So one morning last winter, Nate and I grabbed snowshoes and boarded the Strawberry Park Express Lift, also known as Chair 12. To be honest, it was still disconcerting to get off a chairlift on something other than skis. But that sense of disorientation disappeared quickly given the vistas of high peaks that surrounded me. At this altitude, it's literally breathtaking. While McCoy is studded with small stands of trees, what you'll remember most are the wide-open bowls and endless views.

But why snowshoe? People who spend their winter on alpine skis ask me that all the time. "The old saying is that if you can walk, you can snowshoe, and I think that holds true," says Nate. "It's soft adventure and a unique way to enjoy the mountains." It's easy to learn, relatively inexpensive and poses little risk of injury. If you're reasonably fit, you can put on a pair of snowshoes and set out immediately.

The radical change in equipment in the past 25 years has made it even easier. The white-ash-and-rawhide snowshoes that adorn cabin walls have long since been replaced with aluminum and carbon fiber models as well as ergonomically designed shoes for both men and women. Easy-to-use binding systems are akin to those found on snowboards.

Looking for a heart-pounding hike? Put on a pair of snowshoes and head uphill. In a matter of minutes, you'll be shedding layers and getting one of the world's most efficient aerobic workouts. Desiring a Zen-like stroll? A leisurely amble on a pair of snowshoes can literally be a walk in the woods. Been skiing hard on the downhill slopes for days? Snowshoeing is a great way to stretch your muscles and relax a bit.

That said, there are techniques you can learn to enhance the experience. Going off-trail and into the deep powder, Nate taught me the kick-step technique, where you pick up your foot and kick into the snow with the toe of your boot to

HAPPY TRAILS

Clockwise from top left: An homage to the early days of snowshoeing; kicking back with an alpine view; lightly packed trails are a snowshoer's best friend.

create a step. The point of this is that it plants the snowshoe cleats into the snow, directly under the balls of your feet. You can master it in a morning.

Taking It Up a Notch

Nate and his staff have created packed trails to make the going as easy as possible for beginners, keeping in mind that at this altitude, everyone is working a lot harder just putting one foot in front of the other. On our morning walk, we set off on trails that are designated green and aimed not just at novices but anyone who wants to ease into the altitude. Blue trails such as Morning Star, Blue Diamond and Sanctuary Loop take it up a notch or two with more climbing and steeper, more challenging descents.

We kept moving and by late morning, we were working our way up The Wildside, which is McCoy Park's longest



SNOWY SERENITY

Clockwise from far left: The charming architecture of Beaver Creek; getting a lift up to Beaver Creek's best snowshoe touring; powder patrol.



Black Diamond Nordic track. It starts at 9,700 feet and goes up and up to 10,186 feet at Discovery Overlook. At the top, I was breathless and gulping water, though Nate hardly seemed to be beyond a resting pulse. We took in the panorama of mountains, but at the first tinge of cold, it was time for a gradual descent and for lunch at Mamie's Mountain Grill, which offers do-it-yourself grilling and a sweeping view of the park's expanse from the deck.

As Nate and I made our way back to the village, I asked him what kept him snowshoeing, considering he's an accomplished alpine skier, telemark racer and cross-country skiing instructor. Without hesitation he replied, "You get to see things you wouldn't see otherwise. The world is not going by you at 30 miles an hour. McCoy means access to Colorado backcountry, but it's only six minutes from Beaver Creek Village."

He's right. Exploring the Rockies' quiet backcountry, a near-mystical experience usually reserved for hardy skiers with years of experience, is readily available here. Remarkably, 25 years after I first discovered its allure, snowshoeing at McCoy Park remains one of winter's best-kept secrets.

VAIL VALLEY VICTUALS

Snowshoeing burns calories like nobody's business. Powers van der Mandele, concierge supervisor at The Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch, knows where to refuel.

BREAKFAST

NORTHSIDE COFFEE & KITCHEN The locals' favorite is well-known throughout the valley for exceptional fresh-baked pastries and creative doughnuts (maple bacon!). The menu is homestyle and the portions are hearty. 20 Nottingham Road, Avon; northsidecoffeekitchen.com

LUNCH

LA TOUR Situated in the heart of Vail Village, La Tour is a contemporary French restaurant with excellent outdoor seating, perfect for soaking up the Colorado sunshine. The lunch menu has a contemporary twist with a French flair, such as a chicken paillard club. 122 E. Meadow Drive, Vail Village; latour-vail.com

MOUNTAIN STANDARD Emerging from the success of its big sister, Sweet Basil, Mountain Standard has developed its own following of foodies who come for meats and seafood cooked over an open fire. 193 Gore Creek Drive, Vail Village; mtnstandard.com

DINNER

SPAGO At The Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch, Spago by Wolfgang Puck serves up some of the most imaginative cuisine in the Vail Valley. A talented team of chefs sources ingredients both locally and globally to create a delicious experimental American menu. 130 Daybreak Ridge, Avon; ritzcarlton.com/bachelorgulch

SWEET BASIL A fixture of Vail Village since 1977, Sweet Basil's menu draws from many cuisines, with a distinctly mountain feel. Among the standouts: foraged mushroom cavatelli and Kobe bavette steak. 193 E. Gore Creek Drive, Vail Village; sweetbasilvail.com

Nuts and Bolts

Our journey can be easily replicated. Throughout the season, the Beaver Creek Nordic Sports Center offers guided Nature Snowshoe Tours every morning and afternoon, a daily Mamie's All Day Snowshoe and Lunch Tour, twice-weekly Fit Tours and a Nature Valley Complimentary Family Snowshoe Tour every Tuesday.



KATIE ARMOUR

WHAT: Wrote and photographed “Chicago’s Designer Dozen”

WHY: Writer, social media consultant and design enthusiast Armour created her blog, *The Neo-Trad*, in 2009 to share her fascination with contemporary and bygone fashion, décor, destinations and tastemakers. Prior to blogging, she worked in interior design in San Francisco and New York City.

WOW: “The Renzo Piano-designed modern wing of the Art Institute of Chicago took my breath away. Cy Twombly canvases never looked so at home.”



Noe DeWitt

WHAT: Photographed “Winter Warmup”

WHY: When not hiking in Yosemite, California-born DeWitt was tagging along on photo shoots with his family. His work can be seen in *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Travel & Leisure* and *Vanity Fair*, and in campaigns for Anthropologie, J Crew and Ralph Lauren.

WOW: “Shooting in Florida’s stormy season was incredibly exciting. Dodging afternoon thunderstorms with the sun breaking through was wonderfully dramatic.”



Claudia Lebenthal

WHAT: Wrote “Traveler on the Run”

WHY: Lebenthal launched the website *Style of Sport* in 2013, celebrating the intersection of sport, fashion, design, art, news and culture.

WOW: “Having trained for marathons in Paris and London, and realizing it was the best way to see the sights, I brought that mind-set home. On long training runs in New York, I became a tourist in my hometown, experiencing its landmarks like a first-time visitor.”



Christine Lennon

WHAT: Wrote “City Guide: Los Angeles”

WHY: L.A.-based writer and editor Lennon started her career at *W*, *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. Her first novel, “Gainesville,” will be published in 2016.

WOW: “People love to complain about the driving in L.A., but while researching this guide it occurred to me that traffic helped each community develop its own personality. Every corner has a unique flavor. It makes venturing out feel like an adventure.”



Katherine O’Leary

WHAT: Wrote “A Family Guide to Philadelphia”

WHY: Co-author of Cindy Crawford’s book “*Becoming*,” the new *Philadelphian* owns an 1800s stone barn that allows her kids to answer “Yes” when she asks them, “Do you think you live in a barn?”

WOW: “This was an opportunity to dig deeper into my new hometown and combine things I love: eating, writing and exploring with my kids. There’s nothing like seeing how much art they can tolerate.”



Everett Potter

WHAT: Wrote “Snowshoes, a Love Story”

WHY: A columnist for *USA Today* and a *National Geographic Expeditions* lecturer, Potter is an award-winning travel writer whose work also appears in *ForbesLife* and the *Robb Report*.

WOW: “It became clear that snowshoeing is merely a high-tech excuse to play in the snow, which I’ve been doing since I was kid in suburban Boston.”



Elizabeth Toal

WHAT: Researched and edited markets for “*Style Navigator*”

WHY: Toal’s work for clients such as *Marie Claire* and *The Wall Street Journal* keeps her finger on the pulse of the fashion and design worlds.

WOW: “By far my biggest wow moment was visiting Hartwood in Tulum. The open-air wood-fire restaurant just steps from the sea deserves the hype. Get there early — the line starts at 5:30 p.m.!”