



POWDER TRIP

A PRO SKIER'S EPIC QUEST TO CARVE THE
BEST SKI RUN IN MONTANA.
IF SHE CAN FIND IT.

story by Lisa Densmore
photos by Jack Ballard



Showdown Montana, Dec. 31

Ben Haugen, Showdown Montana's energetic operations manager, insisted I visit on New Year's Eve. "It's the best day of the year here," he exclaimed. "You gotta see our torchlight parade and come to our party!"

Starting my adventure on New Year's seemed apropos, even if it meant diluting my pursuit of the most epic piste in the state with parties, fireworks, a torchlight parade and, as it happened, a beer-fueled game of butt darts. I was on a quest—a 3,332-mile mission to check out 15 Montana ski resorts and find the best run, the most knee-trembling inbounds thrill ride. In 13 days.

There'd be challenges: the sub-zero temperatures, the dives down rock-rimmed chutes, the dining on ungodly numbers of base lodge burgers. En route, I'd arc turns with dedicated, diehard skiers while braving every kind of snow that falls from the sky. I'd carve around towering timber, through thigh-deep powder and some of the most seriously badass bumps I've ever encountered.

For the name alone, Showdown, in Niehart, Mont., was the perfect place for the kickoff.

"I'll be there," I told Haugen.

Upon my arrival, Jim Gold, one of the local skiers who offered to show me around, took me directly to the mountain's three signature black diamond bump runs, Cliff Hanger, Glory Hole and one he called "Oh My God."

Oh my god, after finishing my legs felt like I'd fallen off a cliff, and I surely didn't earn glory in the Hole. All three

runs were short and steep with VW-sized moguls. I preferred Dynamite, another quick blast down an open glade. It was less visited and naturally rugged, and I could make a lap in eight minutes from the chairlift's midway station.

After skiing hard all day, I looked forward to relaxing with a beer and watching the evening show-on-snow from the deck of the lodge, but plans changed. When the guitar player for the après-ski party called in sick, Gold, a budding musician, got his first chance to perform live—under one condition: I had to take his place in the torchlight parade.

I donned his coveralls over my ski clothes, then spent two hours after the lifts closed in the small summit lodge drinking Bud from gallon milk jugs and playing butt darts with 50 other Carhartt-clad torch carriers.

A highly competitive game of agility, concentration and precision, butt darts pits two athletes in a race across the room while squeezing a coin between their butt cheeks (clothes on; yeah, it's hard). The first person to drop their coin in a plastic cup gets a point. My fellow torchbearers convinced me to join the fray in the second round, when the stakes doubled—two coins at once.

Shoving two shiny quarters up my crack, I waddled across the floor and released them toward the cup. Score on the first try! Showdown skiers were certainly a gregarious group.

Some people might wonder why I would travel thousands of miles on icy roads to check out 15 Montana resorts during one of the snowiest winters in memory. They obviously aren't ski addicts.

I made turns as a toddler at Whiteface, the Olympic mountain in Lake Placid, New York. As a teenage downhiller on the U.S. Ski Team, I spent most of the late 1970s schussing at 75 mph down premier slopes in the Alps and North America. I was a member of the Dartmouth Ski Team, one of the Division 1 powerhouses

on the NCAA's skiing circuit. I joined the women's pro tour in 1985 and have skied professionally ever since.

The only problem with my ski obsession was figuring out how to get my fix. Last year, I planned to move from New England to Montana. I'd be a stranger in new ski territory—a Meriwether Lewis on sticks. I needed to know where to go.

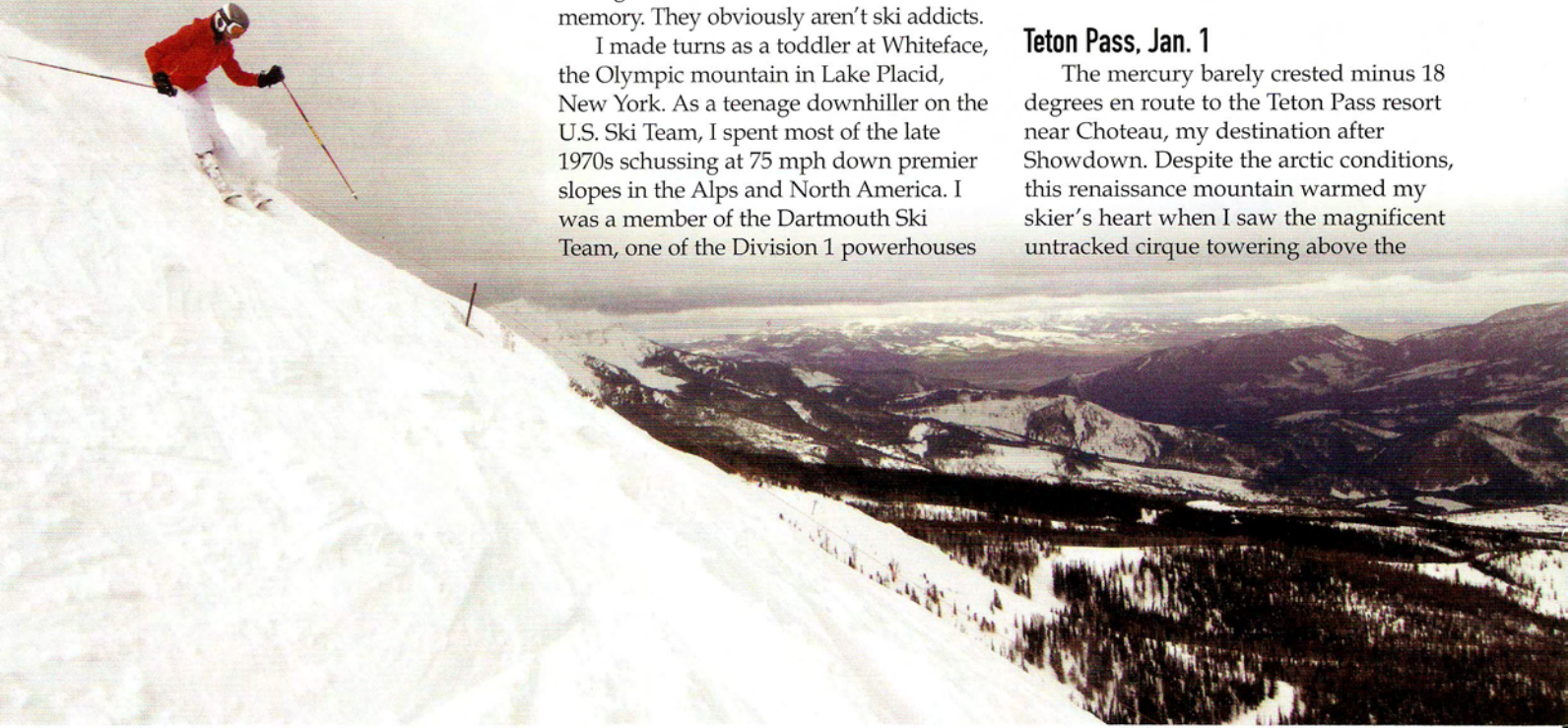
As much as I love to go fast, I love powder even more, the steeper and deeper the better. I've skinned for hours into the backcountry for a mere three minutes of nirvana down a cirque of virgin snow. Could Montana have something so close to heaven?

The sum total of my experience in the state consisted of two visits to Bozeman's Bridger Bowl in the 1980s, three visits to Big Sky over the last 30 years, and a handful of days at Red Lodge Mountain, most of them spent coaching my sweetheart, Jack Ballard, on the nuances of a carved turn. I figured I'd remedy the problem during three separate trips from the East Coast, with a few ground rules.

The resorts would be public, which excluded the private Yellowstone Club and Spanish Peaks. They also had to have a Montana address, which ruled out Lookout Pass Ski and Recreation area, based in Mullan, Idaho. I had a day or less to sample each area, so I'd rely on locals to show me the signature slopes and their favorite powder stashes. My search would be unabashedly subjective, influenced by weather and the company. Mostly, I wanted rad rides and big mountain skiing on the blackest of diamonds, but I found much more.

Teton Pass, Jan. 1

The mercury barely crested minus 18 degrees en route to the Teton Pass resort near Choteau, my destination after Showdown. Despite the arctic conditions, this renaissance mountain warmed my skier's heart when I saw the magnificent untracked cirque towering above the





The author skiing Turner Mountain,



Montana Snowbowl,



and Whitefish Mountain.

parking lot. Unfortunately, it was at least a year away from getting lift access, so it was out-of-bounds for my smackdown.

I found Teton's owner, a Kiwi named Nick Wood, in the ticket booth. Struggling financially, the ski area closed after the 2009 season. Wood found it for sale on the Internet. He bought it for \$279,000 in July 2010, then poured more than a million bucks and a mammoth amount of sweat equity into reopening it.

In four short months Wood added a new surface lift, cut several black diamond runs through an old burn area, renovated the buildings, and installed a women's bathroom with designer sinks.

Wood recruited Doug Benson, the newly hired Snow Sports School director, to find me some fresh snow. Benson didn't mind our leisurely noon start. On a big

postmaster and head of the volunteer ski patrol. By the time I met him at the start of the long access road to the mountain, a blizzard raged. Martin was going to open the ski area just for me—if we could get there.

A handful of other ski patrollers joined our convoy as we headed deeper into the hills. We eventually caught the plow, whose single blade barely cut a passable swath through the two feet of snow on the road. After a tense 19-mile controlled skid, our determined group slid into the parking lot.

"Bear Paw is Montana's best-kept secret. We don't want anyone stealing our powder," chuckled Martin, as one of the other patrollers emptied a pail of cat litter by the spinning tires of my car.

Martin waded through the snow to the bottom of the ski area's only chairlift. After surveying the situation, he refused to turn



Teton Pass,

day, Teton Pass might have 300 skiers, but this was New Year's at noon, and obscenely cold. The 20 other skiers at the mountain lounged comfortably inside the day lodge, sipping hot cocoa and debating the lunch menu.

"There's no rush," Benson said. "It hasn't snowed in three days, so it may be a little wind-blown, but there's still powder."

He was right. After leaving foot-deep tracks down the burn, we headed to the trails on the left side of the Big Bear lift. I only paused once to catch my breath before plunging down Firewater, a steep fall-line run below the cirque—but not because I was winded. The view into the Bob Marshall Wilderness was in-your-face incredible. Firewater was the cream on this icy day, but it was too early to know if it was the *crème de la crème*.

Bear Paw Ski Bowl, Jan. 2

David Martin, the default general manager of Bear Paw on the Rocky Boy reservation in Havre, is a jovial local

it on because he couldn't see the top. But I had to ski: The odds of making it back to Bear Paw were too low.

I zipped my collar against the tumultuous weather and started post-holing up the 900-foot mountain. An hour later, I made it to mid-station and declared it far enough, but when I tried to ski down, the snow was too heavy to make turns. I had to propel myself with my ski poles down my quickly filling boot prints.

Joining the others inside the warming hut, I marveled at the passion and persistence these skiers have for their sport at this modest, remote mountain. One stoked the woodstove. Another fixed a light. A third shoveled the roof. Bear Paw—like many of Montana's other ski areas, I would come to find out—exists through the love and dedication of its skiers.

Ski Discovery, Feb. 15

In February I made a simultaneously fantastic and fatiguing loop around western

Montana, a blur of fog, fat skis and fall lines that started with Ski Discovery in Philipsburg.

Discovery's trail stats are deceiving. The brochure says it has 694 acres, but those are only the cut trails. If you count the entire skiable terrain on the front and back of Rumsey Mountain, there are about 2,400 acres.

"When I came here in 1984, it was in bad shape," said Peter Pitcher, a transplanted Aspen-ite who acquired the mountain out of receivership in 1984. "We keep improving, opening new terrain."

I had high hopes that one run called Russell, the only triple black diamond I had ever seen, would be a strong candidate for The Best. I smiled as my skis cut through the choppy snow, feeling gravity's strong pull as I drove my knees and hips against the impressive pitch. It was steep enough to love and, like all passions, seemed to end too soon. I had to connect three trails to eke out a 2,000-vertical-foot run. I watched other skiers having a blast on the wide variety of runs. Even more awesome, I got to watch Dustin Schwarz, the assistant ski shop manager and a competitive mogul skier, huck off Pale Face, a 40-foot granite cliff. For big air lovers, this place had chops.

Montana Snowbowl, Blacktail Mountain, Feb. 16

Another powder day! That was the good news and the bad. The upper mountain at Missoula's Snowbowl, including the East Bowls and Angel Face, were closed due to avalanche danger, but I thought Grizzly, the broad, steep run down the middle of the lower mountain, had potential. Billy Kidd once described Grizzly as one of the most difficult ski runs in the United States. Bumps perennially cover this relentless plunge, but today, light snow had filled in the troughs, at least on the top half of the mountain.



Though we were on the lift within five minutes of opening, we were too late for first tracks. I watched as the two earliest risers cut perfect 8's through waist-deep powder. Snowbowl is well named, a huge bowl of snow that keeps the crowd happy with its untamed terrain.

Unfortunately, the snow got heavier with every foot I dropped, nearing the consistency of week-old stew near the bottom. I watched three uninformed snowboarders face-plant off Stupid Rock, so named for its flat landing; I took a run on gladed West Ridge for a taste of the closed terrain; and then I made a mad dash to Blacktail Mountain, 106 miles away.

"Where are you?" Steve Spencer's voice crackled on my cell phone. Spencer was one of the four partners who developed Blacktail, the ski area near Lakeside. "We've had a foot of powder!" he said.

Thanks to the dumping snow and the distance up the mountain, it was almost 2 p.m. by the time I pulled into the parking lot at Blacktail, an inverted ski area with a day lodge on its summit. In the waning afternoon, I gained an appreciation of the mountain's well-designed fall line trails and broad glades. It's a comfortable place

for making pleasurable turns. I had fun gliding through the loose trees and jumping off a small snowy boulder. But I had to keep searching for my jaw-dropping jewel.

Whitefish Mountain Resort, Feb. 17

Poised on the edge of Glacier National Park in the town of Whitefish, Whitefish Mountain is a full-service destination resort—the first I visited on my odyssey. The place has everything from night skiing to a day spa, with slope-side condos, an attractive village, a big menu of snow sports (dog-sledding included) and, best of all for me, high-speed lifts and lots of territory. I looked forward to seeing if any of the mountain's 3,000 skiable acres could get my heart pumping.

I hopped on the Big Mountain Express to the summit. Snow piled onto my parka on the short seven-minute ride. More powder!

I slipped past the resort's eerie snow ghosts and dropped into Schmidt's Chute and Elephant's Graveyard, two of the resort's most precious black diamonds. I skied the nose of East Rim and finally



tested my nerve on Bighorn, rumored to be the steepest run on Big Mountain. It was steep. I felt the snow slough under my skis with my first two turns, but had to grin as I rode my mini-avalanche to the bottom of the pitch, snow spraying over my knees and hips with each aggressive pole plant.

There was a drawback: The fog was so thick I could barely see my ski tips. Big Mountain is beloved; skiers flock here for the spectacular scenery and for trails like Bighorn. But I knew I had to keep schussing.

Turner Mountain, Feb. 18

Turner, a volunteer-run ski area in Libby, was recovering from a wedding the day before. Anyone can rent the mountain for \$2,500.

"You picked a good day," declared Jeff Zwang, a prospective law student whose father, Bruce, was president of Turner's board of directors. "Lots of fresh snow."

"How was the wedding?" I asked, imagining skiers flowing down the broad slope above the lodge in tuxedos and gowns.

"Forty Canadians, mostly beginners," he replied. "They only skied on the groomers."

Zwang took me to Gidley's Glade. About halfway down, a grouse flushed in



glades. Wild West wasn't all that wild, but it was lovely carving through the firs and six inches of new snow. As I slalomed down Whoop It Up, I could see why families love this place. The terrain is not intimidating and there are endless ways to carve through the trees.

After lunch, I headed to the Big Open. The result of a clear cut—locals harvested lumber here rather than ski turns—the Big Open proved to be an expansive, sapling-speckled trail with an equally big view and decent powder, even late in the day. While I enjoyed the mountain immensely for its

bucking bronco of Montana ski areas. I headed to Widow Maker—a wide steep slope named for broken tree branches, not because the trail could kill you. It got my attention, but not enough.

At Lost Trail I found another glade-lover's playground. Monica Thomas, a local ski patroller and a helluva strong skier, took me to Sacjac Woods, a newer cut on the north side of the mountain. After perching for a moment on a pinnacle with a nice view of Saddle Mountain, we made tracks down an old burn area. Not many skiers venture this far from the mainstream part of the mountain. The snow was untracked and feather-light: yes! But my heart wasn't pounding.

Then Thomas showed me her private powder stash, code named Oreo, and we matched arcs through thigh-deep snow before dropping off a perfect rock pillow. Lost Trail was yet another Montana ski area with freshies at 2:30 p.m.! The decision was getting tougher. Gidley's had been darn good, but Thomas's secret slope was also superlative.

Bridger Bowl, March 29

Montana's mountains are notorious for their late-season snowstorms. Mother Nature made good, dumping 24 inches on Bridger Bowl just before my arrival. Bridger's 2,000 steep, rugged acres proved

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as one of the other ski patrollers

emptied a pail of cat litter by the spinning tires of my car.

front of my ski tips, then another and another. I giggled with delight and started looking for their heads poking above the powder in hopes of making more fly. With over 2,000 vertical feet, champagne powder, nicely spaced trees and entertaining grouse, could Gidley's be *the one*? Maybe, but I still had seven more ski areas to go.

Great Divide, Feb. 19

A sizeable family-run area in Marysville, near Helena, Great Divide impressed me with its glades of old-growth Douglas fir. We hopped on the Mount Belmont lift (the original name of the ski area) and headed to Wild West where I hoped to find my nirvana among several hundred acres of expert-rated

welcoming atmosphere and uncrowded slopes, the parks were more adrenaline-inducing than the trails. Gidley's at Turner remained at the top of my list.

Maverick Mountain, Lost Trail Powder Mountain, Feb. 20

The last day of this road trip was another double-header: Maverick in Polaris and Lost Trail in Conner. Maverick was memorable for its base lodge décor: a wall-to-ceiling mish-mash of carpet remnants with circa 1960s folding theater seats for chairs. I warmed up on Enchanted Forest, a treed trail transformed by the four inches of fresh fluff into a magical woodland ride. I cleared the trees and continued to float down The Belly to the lodge. So far, Maverick was more the wise mare than the

a free-ride playground. But its culture felt clique-y, reminiscent of Alta, Utah. The fact that I wasn't local was immediately apparent by my girlie Spyder garb and rockerless low-fat skis, which got dismissive looks in the lift line. After I made a few turns the glances were more approving.

I spent the morning on the south side of the mountain dropping into Slushman's Ravine and Mundy's Bowl. There were so many tantalizing lines I had a hard time choosing. After lunch I found the first trail in Montana to truly test my nerve: Hidden Gully, a narrow, 45-degree chute on the north side of the ski area. After traversing the knife-edge to the top of it, I gathered myself before jumping in, survival instincts on full alert.

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Powder

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"Hop. Side-slip. Don't lean in!" my brain yelled as I leaped off the ledgy entrance into the gully. "Hop. Slide a little more. Phew!"

When I reached the Apron below the gully, my pulse slowed to normal. Now we're talkin'! Hidden Gully was my new Montana high, but I kept my emotions in check. Like an Olympic figure skating judge, I had to reserve a window of opportunity for the remaining contestants.

Moonlight Basin, Big Sky Ski Resort, March 30 and 31

Greg Pack, general manager of Moonlight Basin in the town of Big Sky, met me at the base of the mountain. "It's open, but we gotta go now. It could close any moment," Pack said, referring to the weather-sensitive tram to the top of Lone Mountain. Moonlight Basin shares its summit with Big Sky, allowing skiers to buy a combined ticket to both resorts for "The Biggest Skiing in America," as the promos put it.

When I exited the tram for the North Summit Snowfield, our destination, I could hardly see in the whipping wind and near whiteout conditions. I followed Pack's orange jacket, consumed by the moment. I couldn't see the terrain, but I could feel it. My skis sliced easily through the wind-

blown snow down a seriously steep headwall. We paused to pick a line through a rock band then ripped down Rips into Old Faithful, gaining visibility among the trees. From there we descended to Grizzly Meadows, an oddly named gully bounded by tall timber, which finally spit us onto Trembler, a gonzo groomer. When we regrouped after 4,140 vertical feet of gravity-induced gladness, Pack's radio crackled, "North Summit is now closed."

It didn't matter. I had found it, the best ski run in Montana!

Big Sky might have matched it the next day—it's been one of my favorite places to ski since I first tried it in the early 1980s. But the tram was closed. I'd have to wait for another chance to test myself on the dramatic terrain at the summit; to check out the wicked line that threads through the rocks of Big Couloir; to bomb down The Gullies, the steep chutes under the tram; and to make an encore run down Liberty Bowl, with its luscious corn snow.

For today, I could only take a bite of the bigness: I leaped off the small cornice into Rice Bowl and found a few steep hits around Big Rock Tongue while the wind whipped the clouds over Lone Mountain.

Red Lodge Mountain, April 2

Foiled again. The weather rudely put an end to any thoughts I had of letting my schuss loose at Red Lodge, in the same-named town. I headed to the Cole Creek lift where many of the area's signature steeps, including Hellroaring,

Sluice Box and True Grit, spread like elongated fingers up one side of a heavily treed bowl. A gust of wind threatened to blow me off the chairlift, however, so I decided to sample Big Bear Gulch, a skinny double black diamond, protected by tall firs. The snow was just coming up as I negotiated a gully that felt like a natural half-pipe. By the time I reached the bottom the Cole Creek lift was also closed. I would have to wait for another time to raise hell on Hellroaring or slice turns on Sluice. And that, I finally realized, was the best thing about skiing in Montana—there's so much tantalizing terrain, I could do my test again every winter. I'd come up with a different "best" each time. ❧

SNAP JUDGMENTS ON THE SLOPES WE LOVE

BEST PARTY

Showdown Montana

BEST VIEW

Teton Pass

MOST COMMITTED SKIERS; WORST ACCESS ROAD

Bear Paw

BEST BANG FOR YOUR BUCK

Discovery

BEST BUMPS

Snowbowl

BEST SKI AREA LAYOUT; WORST PLACE TO MISS THE LAST CHAIR

Blacktail

BEST YEAR-ROUND RESORT

Whitefish

BEST WILDLIFE ENCOUNTER; WORST PLACE TO FORGET TIRE CHAINS

Turner

BEST TERRAIN PARKS

Great Divide

BEST SECRET STASHES

Lost Trail

BEST OLD-GROWTH GLADES; WORST USE OF CARPETING

Maverick

BEST INBOUNDS HIKE-TO TERRAIN

Bridger Bowl

BEST SKI RUN IN MONTANA; WORST PLACE TO SKI ALONE ON YOUR FIRST VISIT

Big Sky/Moonlight Basin

MOST DRAMATIC SUMMIT; WORST PLACE TO FORGET YOUR AVY PACK

Big Sky

