

PHOTO: NATHANAEL ASARO

Why ski (or snowboard) at night in the backcountry, where you have to climb, because there are no lifts, and you are on your own? The simple answer often is: it is the desire to escape the frantic pace of life (and the experience of skiing with the masses).





Skiing by Headlamp

Backcountry enthusiasts like Anton Kelsey ski the trees...at night.

IT'S A COLD WINTER EVENING, AND YOU BUR-
row into your quilted comforter as you recline in front
of your favorite show. Orange flames lap the panes
of your woodstove as you gaze through the
window at the dark outlines of Vermont moun-
tains under a starlit sky. Inside, all is calm and
warm. Outside, nothing stirs.

You are mistaken.

On those silent, dark, and daunting moun-
tains, there is more human activity than you
would ever imagine. In those woods, increas-
ing numbers of skiers ascend trails and skin
tracks to ski lines through the trees that most
wouldn't even consider skiing in daylight;
they're ungroomed, unpatrolled, unmonitored
—and they are far from the nearest lift. So
the next time you hunker down by the wood-
stove with popcorn, hot tea, and a good book,
know that legions of backcountry enthusiasts
are layering up and affixing climbing skins—
that is, adhesive nylon or mohair strips that
allow a ski to slide forward but not backward
in the snow—to the bases of skis and ascend-
ing mountains and ridgelines. Once at the top,
they remove the skins and schuss back down
by headlamp in the dead of night.

Escaping the Race

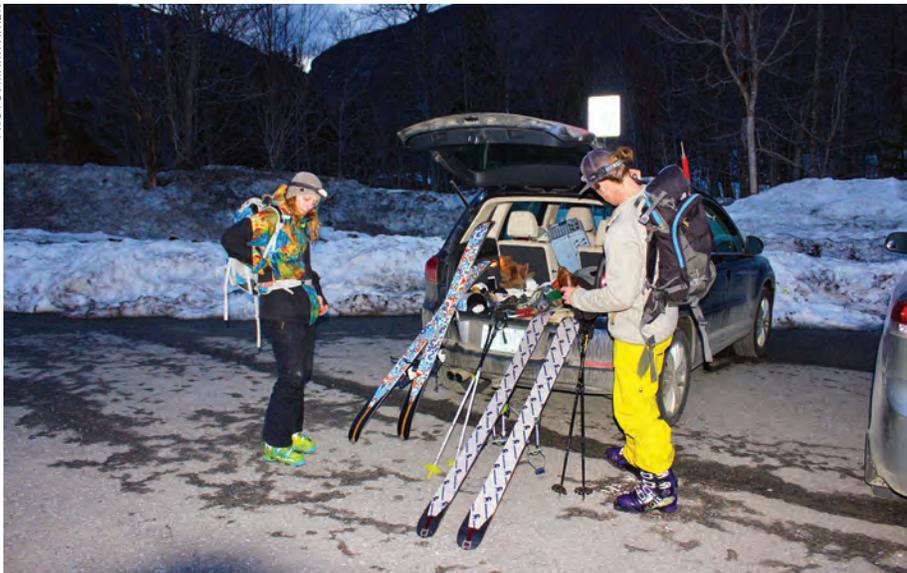
Who gets the idea that skiing in the woods in
darkness is a good idea? Such an idea doesn't
come all at once; it evolves over time. "I've
always been on a quest," says Anton Kelsey,

self-described powder skier. "I'm constantly searching for
one more powder turn, one more place where nobody has
been."



PHOTO: MARK AIKEN

Anton Kelsey discovered the skiing experience he was after—the peace and
solitude—once he ventured into the backcountry and skied a line where there
were no tracks. But skiing at night was a must because of a daytime workload.



Most night backcountry skiers don't purposely ski at night; many squeeze their skiing in at sunrise, or just after work (and a commute) as darkness falls.



Backcountry tourers (from left to right are Abi Lucia, Josh Lanney, Kagen Dewey, Alec Blossom, and Katie Dolbec) line up for a photograph before heading into the woods. There is a certain meaning in breaking trail at dusk.



For Anton, before he really considered skiing at night, he first had to discover the backcountry. While Vermont ski areas get plenty of powder snow, there are only so many acres of lift-accessed terrain. A passionate skier's *raison d'être* is to ski untracked powder. On mornings after storms, queues form at lifts prior to opening. The rush to every inch of untracked snow becomes a stampede. Secret stashes are kept like fishermen's secrets. The joke is that there are no friends on a powder day. The truth is, it's not really a joke.

"When you're in bounds," says Anton, "you are racing." And that's what first brought Anton to the backcountry: the desire to escape from the frantic pace. "Out of bounds, you don't have to race," he says. "You can take your time. There's room for everyone." Once Anton ventured beyond the boundary lines of established ski resorts, he discovered that the experience he was after (perhaps without originally realizing what he was searching for) wasn't about thrill seeking; rather, it was peace and solitude. The soothing sound of skis shushing through powder snow—sometimes weeks after the last dump—can be a spiritual experience.

Why doesn't everyone ski the backcountry? "There are hurdles," says Josh Fairfax of Burlington, another night tourer. No lifts; you have to climb. No help if something happens. And there's inherent risk—risk of getting lost, hurt, or both.

"The exploration piece is a big part of it," Anton says. "I can find a new cool place to ski every year...without leaving my town." (It doesn't hurt that his town, Underhill, is nestled on the side of some of Vermont's highest peaks and within miles of many classic Vermont backcountry lines.) There is a certain meaning and purpose in pulling over on a back road, donning one's equipment, breaking trail on the



Innovations in super-bright, ultra-functional headlamps (some are even brighter than auto headlights) have opened up the sport of alpine touring. "The fastest-growing segment of the snowsports industry," says Aaron, to nighttime skiing (and snowboarding).





“People are out there for fitness,” says Aaron, “and there is a sense of being part of a spiritual voyage.”

way to a peak or ridgeline, and skiing a line where there are no other tracks.

The Work Problem

The backcountry experience can be more rewarding, more gratifying, and more stimulating than riding a lift and skiing with the masses. But, says Anton, there is still a problem. “It’s called ‘Work,’” he says.

Like many, Anton—sigh—has to work. And for most people, work takes place during the day. Anton is a high school science teacher. And therein lies his problem: he loves to ski, but he has to work. “It became a choice,” he says. “Ski under the lights at Bolton, or make turns by headlamp.”

By “Bolton,” Anton refers to Bolton Valley Resort, Vermont’s largest lift-served, night-skiing operation. Bolton Valley lights up 10 trails 5 nights per week, and schoolchildren arrive in busloads amid a race league, snowboard contests, and telemark events. Again, not exactly the peaceful solitude Anton is after. He has therefore never night skied at Bolton. Instead, he takes the headlamp approach.

At first, most night backcountry skiers don’t purposely ski at night. They go on dawn patrols, that is, rise at ungodly hours of the morning, skin up by headlamp, and ski at sunrise or daybreak. Or they squeeze in a run after work as darkness falls. “Now I’m deliberately leaving the house at 6 or 7 p.m.,” Anton continues.

Why the shift? “Equipment,” answers Aaron August, nighttime tourer and ski technician at Outdoor Gear Exchange, one of Vermont’s preeminent outdoor gear outfitters. “It has improved immensely in recent years.”

The meteoric technological advancements in the functionality and weight of touring skis, boots, and bindings—the essential equipment for uphill and downhill travel day or night—are well documented. Less at-



Night tourers carry first-aid packs, and extra batteries and lights for backup. Observing safety protocol is paramount in the backcountry: “You have to be hyperaware and hypersensitive to safety and not leaving anyone behind,” says Anton.

tention and fanfare has been given to innovations in nighttime illumination tools, that is, lights. “Super-bright and ultra-functional lights have gotten better and cheaper,” says Aaron, who bought his first headlamp—a 100-lumen Petzl Tikka—for \$80. “Now 300-lumen lights are \$100,” he says, and there are affordable 1,000-lumen lights on the market. (The typical auto headlight is 700 lumens.)

What are lumens, you ask? “It’s a measure of output,” Aaron explains. “How far, how wide, and how bright is your beam?” And what drove the improvements? Bicycling. If you’re surprised that skiers are hitting the woods at night, then hold on to your hat: so are mountain bikers in the summertime! And everyone has seen bright lights on the handlebars of bicycles on roadsides. Skiers are tapping into the same technology; for example, Aaron uses the 800-lumen Imjin by Light & Motion—a 230-gram, two-inch-by-one-inch light with a wide and powerful beam. Designed for a bicycle handlebar, Aaron’s Imjin connects to his ski helmet with a GoPro mount.

Other advancements include cords to a battery pack that can stay warm in a pocket or backpack, a variety of settings (low, medium, high) that promote longer battery life, and a rubberized sticky surface on the inside of a headlamp’s head harness that is unlikely to slip off a ski helmet. “We

are talking about alpine touring,” says Aaron. “It is the fastest growing segment of the snowsports industry.”

Keeping It Safe

Whether the metric is resort visits, new skiers and riders, or equipment sales, the business of skiing and snowboarding has long been flat. “The exception is with backcountry,” says Aaron. Alpine touring is the fastest—and only—growing sector of the industry. Most resorts, who have legitimate concerns about the public skinning and skiing on trails outside of regular business hours (and while grooming and snowmaking operations are in progress), post policies and updates about where and when is the best and safest time and place to skin. “You can’t skin up at a resort and not see at least a handful of people,” says Anton, who will tour resorts in the early season before the natural snowfall covers fallen logs, rocks, and other hazards in the backcountry.

“People are out there for fitness,” says Aaron. “And there is a sense of being part of a spiritual voyage.” Here’s where nighttime backcountry touring defies logic: most fads, trends, and crazes in skiing are youth-driven (such as when snowboarding reinvigorated the otherwise stagnant ski business in the 1980s). “When I encounter people in the backcountry, they’re not kids,” says high school teacher



Burlington resident Josh Fairfax (at right, pictured with Anton) is another skier who finds the benefits of nighttime skiing outweigh the risks to manage that are inherent in being in the backcountry.



Pete Davis commutes to and from work on skis. Mark Aiken photographed him on his way to work one morning; the return trip is often made after dark—by starlight or moonlight.

Josh Fairfax. Backcountry enthusiasts—particularly those skiing at night—are members of the workforce. They often have children, and post-bedtime is the only time they can get out. “The younger generation usually dictates what’s new,” says Josh. “In this case, the 40- and 50-year-olds are pushing the new boundaries.”

Maybe this is partly because of the need to exercise caution, control, and conservatism at night. Self-sufficiency, strong decision-making, and safety *must* be paramount. “You have to follow all backcountry etiquette and safety protocols...and then some,” says Anton. Nighttime isn’t a time to try new things, take risks, explore new areas, or ski alone. GPS and map-reading skills aren’t enough. “You need a strong familiarity of where you’re going,” says Josh. “You need to know that where you’re skiing spills onto a road or a ‘can’t miss’ trail.”

“Everything looks different at night,” he adds, noting that this makes it interesting. “You can ski the same line a hundred times. Ski it at night—seeing only what’s in the beam of your light... It’s like seeing it for the first time.”

Night tourers carry the usual first aid packs, and they also—like spelunkers—carry extra batteries and lights. They emphasize communication and counting the members of a party. “You have to be hyperaware and hypersensitive to safety and not leaving someone behind,” says Anton. And while, for some, managing risks and the need to be so attentive to safety is not the definition of fun, for Anton and his friends, the safety piece is another attraction to this pastime. “Attention to safety and great communication only adds to the camaraderie and the community,” he says. “There’s an intention and an energy. We’re careful. We care. And we love skiing.”

Mark Aiken is a freelance writer, ski instructor, and backcountry enthusiast. Now that his 2-year-old is on skis, Mark gets to enjoy “family ski days” for the first time.

Moonlighting

Pete Davis is another tourer with similar but different motivation. Pete commutes through Smugglers’ Notch to get to his job at Stowe Mountain Resort. “Later in the winter, it gets lighter,” he says. “But most nights I’m coming home in the dark.” Pete has an interesting take on headlamps: he finds the beam limiting, and, if possible, he tries not to use one. “I can see much better by starlight or by the moon,” he says, although he does recognize that, when traveling downhill at speed, the light is necessary. By January this past year, Pete already had more than 50 trips through the Notch.