

EXPLORER

Learning the Art of the Igloo in the Tetons



ABOVE Jess McMillan, left, and Chris Denny climbing below Cody Peak.
RIGHT Chris finishes the roof of the igloo where the group would sleep.

By PORTER FOX

THE view from my airplane window at Jackson Hole airport was one that most skiers would envy: snow cyclones purling down the runway, baggage attendants in ski goggles, drifts the size of camper vans framing the arrival gate. The Grand Tetons, which jut from the high prairie of western Wyoming like a serrated knife, were not even visible as the plane came to a stop. There was only white. And, as I descended the plane's stairs, cold. Which would have been sublime had I been headed to a slope-side condominium to schuss the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort for the week.

But the three ski buddies I was meeting had different plans. We'd been on various hut-to-hut ski tours in Europe in the last few years, specifically on the Haute Route and in the Ötztal Alps of Austria. I'd been spoiled by untracked backcountry powder, hand-hewn alpine shelters and the thrill of traversing an entire mountain range on skis.

Now my friends in Jackson — Chris Denny, Jess McMillan and Chris Figenshau, a photographer — were dead set on recreating a Euro-style enchainment on United States soil. So, instead of skiing down the Tetons, we were going to ski across them — to Idaho — fashioning our own lodging along the way.

Our trip last April was starting just as the ski season in Jackson was ending. The plan was to begin on the Wyoming side of the Tetons and, over three days,

ski and climb 20 miles west to Victor, Idaho. Somewhere in between, we would spend two chilly nights under the stars, resting our legs.

Unlike the Alps, where you can't go 10 miles without seeing a hut (and a friendly hut keeper ready to cook and clean for you), the Tetons have no permanent structures because the National Park Service forbids them. So we added a touch of "Nanook of the North" to our tour by building igloos in advance along the route. (Or the Jackson contingent had, while I bar-hopped in Brooklyn.)

The structures were spacious enough for four, would last an entire season, were significantly warmer than tents and would eventually melt, leaving no trace for nosy park rangers. After the group built them in January and cached food and supplies, we could complete the traverse like the cragsmen of the Alps, replacing tents and freeze-dried meals in our packs with fondue sets and bottles of Château Margaux.

Two days after we arrived, the snow finally stopped and I hauled my gear to the deserted Jackson Hole tram dock. Our plan had been to start at Teton Pass, 20 miles to the south. But because there was a chance that the new snow-fall (seven feet in seven days) had collapsed the igloos, we needed extra time in case we had to build new ones. We persuaded a friend who worked at the resort to fire up the tram and give us a head start.

When the doors opened, we leaned into a stiff northwest wind and stepped



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS FIGENSHAU FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

onto Rendezvous Peak.

We skied past the eerily empty summit hut and into Rendezvous Bowl. Just past the ridge where the resort's boundary gates usually sit, in the shadow of rock-ribbed Cody Peak, we entered another world — above a puffy white cloud layer covering Teton Valley.

Our route was due west from Cody: up the middle fork of Granite Canyon, along the Teton Crest Trail, then over Housetop Mountain and the Idaho state line to the Mud Lake trailhead. The

track was 20 miles south of the pass John Colter crossed in the winter of 1808, when he became the first explorer to discover what is now Yellowstone National Park. (All he had were snowshoes, a single blanket and a Winchester.) Before that, the range was the domain of the Blackfoot Indians and before them, the wizened tram operator whispered in a creepy tone, a culture so ancient even archaeologists don't know what to call it.

On the backside of Cody, we traversed

On a ski trip without huts, we made our own, from snow.

a wide-open bowl and skied fluffy, knee-deep powder to a stand of white-bark pine. Seeing a slot through the trees, I continued past the group and, in true ski-bum style, poached first tracks down a 20-foot wide powder-choked draw.

One by one, my crew shot out of the forest onto a wide snow-covered meadow at the bottom. There, we clicked our bindings into touring mode and attached the climbing skins (essentially morphing our boards into long, skinny snowshoes) and continued in single file toward the Teton Crest Trail. The big secret about modern alpine touring gear is that it makes going up almost as much fun as going down. Boulders, ditches, deadfall and streams are covered by 40 feet of snow. Everything is smooth and flat, and every step you get a few extra inches of glide — up — as the ski slides to a stop.

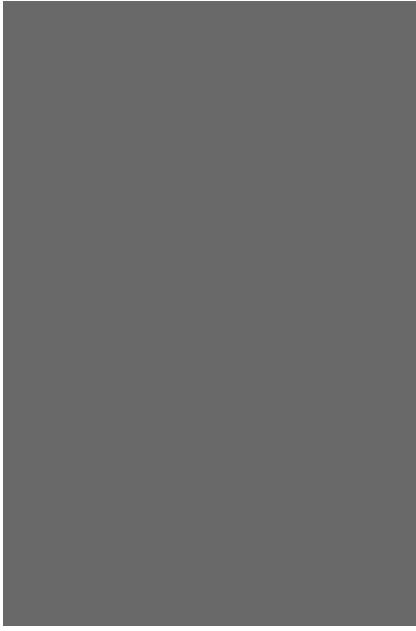
We made good time across the mouth of Granite Canyon and were on the first berm 45 minutes after we started. Tall stacks of cumulonimbus clouds passed before the sun and drew sharp shadow lines beneath the trees. Two and a half hours after stepping onto the tram, we entered a clearing where the first igloo was supposed to be.

We had put great faith in the legendary strength of the igloo. Its catenary arch is the same used in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral in London and was the inspiration for the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. In the Arctic tundra, the Central Inuit had built igloos for thousands of years that withstood months of wind and weather. Apparently, it takes practice to get it right. The weight of the new snow had crushed the roof of ours in just a few days.

We'd come prepared, though, with our ace in the hole: an igloo-making kit by Grand Shelters called the Icebox. In the DVD that came with the kit, the designer Igloo Ed — a giant, hairy man who could easily be mistaken for Jerry Garcia — says an igloo takes one to four hours to complete.

In reality, it took that long to read the 21-page manual and twice as long to actually build one. After two hours, we had the foundation and three vertical

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feet of the circular wall finished. The Icebox uses a rectangular form to mold blocks from snow, and a telescoping aluminum pole to measure the arch. We took turns packing the form and moving the pole for six hours. By the time the sun had dipped behind the trees (and the temperature had dropped to 20 degrees), we'd set the last block in the roof.

As if on cue, storm clouds rolled in and we spread sleeping bags and pads inside the icy dome. While one crew was building, the other had dug a 40-square-foot kitchen in the snow, complete with a center island, pantry shelves, seating and a 6-foot-deep trench leading from the kitchen to the igloo. After getting settled, we made our way outside for the payoff we'd been awaiting: 24 oysters from Rendezvous Bistro in Jackson, shucked and laid in the snow, with a chilled 2008 Malbec drawn from a leather wineskin.

After the main course of Malaysian lode, boiled in foil packets in a pot filled with melted snow on a portable stove, we retreated through the trench with a bottle of Wild Turkey. The igloo was so airtight, you couldn't hear the storm outside. We arranged the coup de grâce of our European weekend by candlelight: a chocolate fondue of melted Toblerone bars, Grand Marnier and sliced kiwi, mandarin orange, strawberries and angel food cake.

Half the group fell asleep while the other made a cursory effort to clean up. Sometime in the night I woke to the sound of two furry, football-size pikas licking chocolate out of the pot, and the glow from an iPod playing "Superbad" from a tiny viewing shelf carved into the wall.

In the morning, it was 40 degrees in-



CHRIS FIGENSHAU FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jess McMillan, left, and Chris Denny rest in their "kitchen," where the menu included oysters. Down the "hall" is the igloo the group built from a kit.

side the igloo and 20 degrees outside. The storm had dropped another four inches of snow, and pika and fox prints covered every surface we'd spilled food on. A four-foot avalanche fracture in the hanging snowfield above the camp was a reminder that we would have to step gingerly all day, so after a quick breakfast, we gathered our gear and got moving, leaving the greatest muskrat party pad in the history of the Tetons behind.

The route rose gradually around the edge of a giant bowl, then across another meadow toward Housetop Mountain. Solitary Engelmann spruce stood in the middle, edged by glacial moraines and frozen creek beds. At the foot of the ridge that rose to the summit of Housetop, we skinned up one by one, careful not to disturb the new layer of snow warming in the sun. Then we followed a

long line of precarious cornices to the summit.

To the south, 500-foot cliffs dropped straight down into Game Creek. A few miles to the north, the proving ground of America's first ski mountaineers loomed: the southeast flanks of the Grand Teton that Bill Briggs skied in 1971; the South and Middle Tetons where Doug Coombs, Hans Johnstone, Mark Newcomb and Stephen Koch had added other significant first descents. To the west was a completely different landscape — the long fingers of the western Tetons reaching down to the potato and barley fields of eastern Idaho.

It took four hours to ski and skin the ridge to Idaho. The uplift that formed the Tetons around 12 million years ago left the Jackson Hole side of the range

jagged and the Idaho side more mellow. Near the bottom, we skied across a large meadow and found a group staying in a tour company's yurts, circular Mongolian-style tents that sleep eight. They gave us directions to Mud Pond, and we made the final push to the second igloo.

Seven hours after we began, we found the food cache intact in a backpack in the snow (Jack Daniels, smoked salmon, canned turkey, stuffing) but, sadly, no sign of the igloo. There's a learning curve to building the world's oldest arch; we were only just then starting to get the hang of it. Since there wasn't enough daylight left to rebuild, we ate a late lunch, made a dent in the Jack Daniels, and pushed toward the trailhead.

The runout was an iced snowmobile track, more like a luge course than a ski

slope. We rocketed down the trough, then sideslipped a three-foot snowdrift on the edge of a muddy trail for the last two miles. It was frightening but fast; the sun was still up when we reached the truck we'd ferried two days before.

That night we slept in a house that a member of the group had recently bought. The bed was soft and the furnace hummed all night as the temperature outside dropped to zero. The next morning it took 20 minutes to drive over the range we'd spent two days slogging across. It wasn't long before the comforts of civilization made the trip seem like a dream. Until that afternoon when, just after takeoff, I spotted a thin shaded track through the airplane window, winding up Housetop Mountain and disappearing over the other side. ■

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