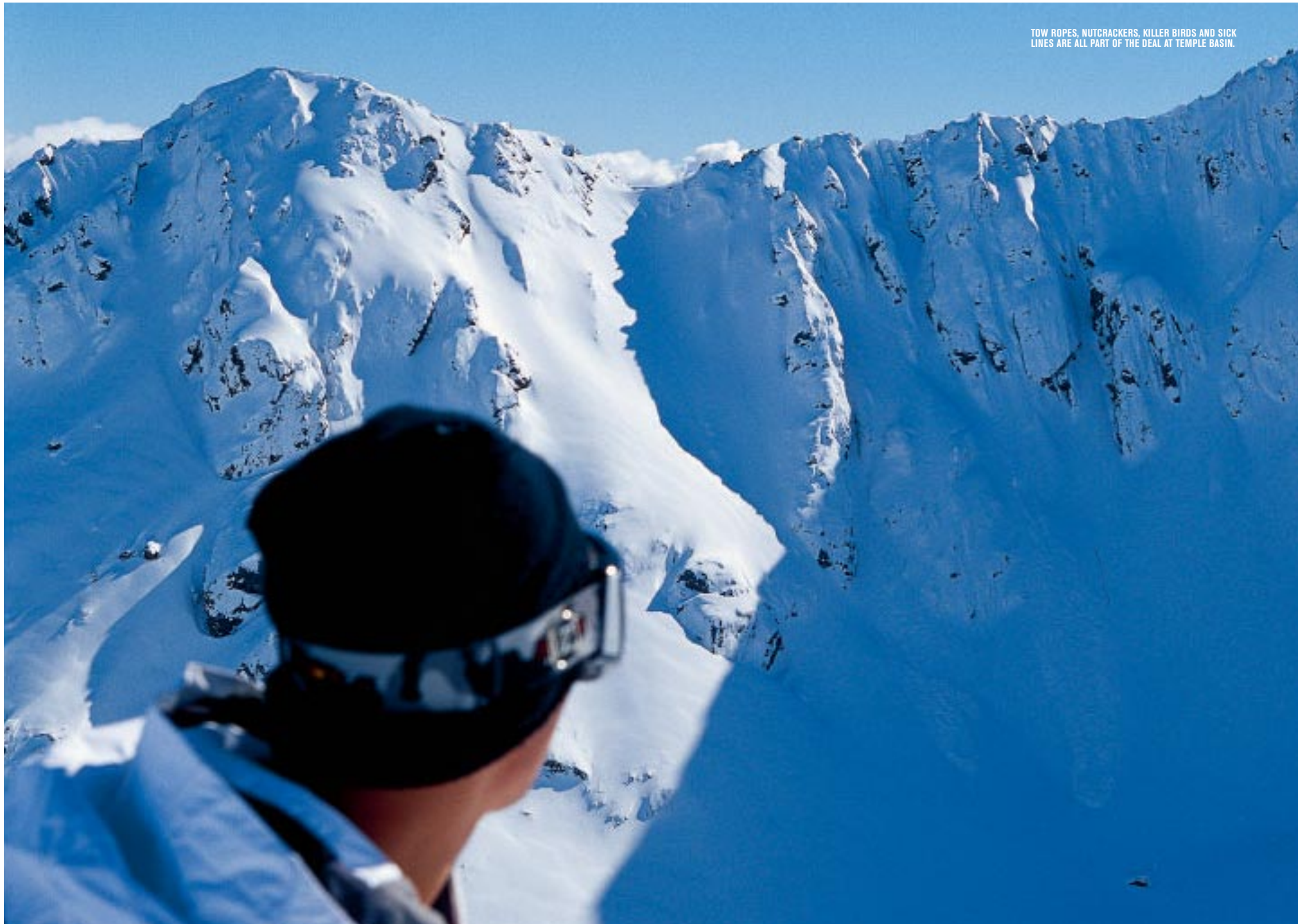




# THE SNOWY WHITE WASTES OF NEW MEXICO

A STRANGE PURSUIT IN NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTHERN ALPS

STORY BY PORTER FOX PHOTOS BY DAVID REDDICK



TOW ROPES, NUTCRACKERS, KILLER BIRDS AND SICK LINES ARE ALL PART OF THE DEAL AT TEMPLE BASIN.

**The Snowy White Wastes. We have to begin there.** And it must be capitalized, because we're not sure exactly what it is. It's some kind of place, I imagine. Or time. Maybe the time between two places. Which would make sense because Alex says they're in New Mexico. And that they go on forever. When I ask him how one accesses the "Wastes" from New Zealand's South Island, he answers, "It's about 30 minutes from the top of the tow rope."

Keep in mind we're on the other side of the world. Arthur's Pass National Park, specifically, high above the little asphalt ribbon of Highway 73 that leads two hours back to Christchurch. Car-eating Kea parrots prowl the mountains. (A postcard at a nearby gas station titled "Kea Attack" warns hikers: "Kea will peck at bright, shining objects, like eyes.") We're in a metaphoric Gap of Rohan here, the home of Sir Edmund Hillary, a bizarre realm of timeless in-between places. Which—bear with me for a moment, we are going somewhere with this—makes no sense. That is, until you wake up at 6 a.m. after three hours of sleep and 9,000 miles of travel, look out the window of the Temple Basin public ski field's lodge at the spray of vertical peaks and couloirs literally entombing the joint, and think: My God! These *are* Snowy White Wastes! And they *do* go on forever!

To understand the New Zealand public ski field phenomenon—there a dozen across the North and South Island, open from June to September—you have to understand this: New Zealanders have a penchant for knowing what's good, and knowing how to live the right way. In 2000, local governments spent \$300 million providing sports facilities and services for New Zealanders. So it's no wonder the Kiwis pioneered the ultimate egalitarian resort—one that puts skiing first and elitism last, inspiring other such skier-centric resorts as far away as Colorado's Silverton Mountain.

The guiding principle of the ski field is simple: provide food, shelter, kick-ass terrain and a rope tow at an affordable rate. And let the skiers take it from there. Breakfast is soft-boiled eggs with last night's spaghetti on top. The coffee is instant and the milk occasionally sour. Bunks are rock hard and the mini-van-sized rooms are cold. The sanitary state of things at the lodge, which holds 120, sits somewhere between a preschool and prison. The hike in is 45 minutes with a baggage lift to carry your gear. But the mountains are 6,000 feet and receive 33 feet of snow a year. Most slopes run 1,500-2,000 vertical feet at an average of 38 degrees. And for \$55 a day, you get it all: three meals, lodging, lifts, whacky staff—the works. For a frou-frou milquetoast skier, the experience borders on worst-case scenario, worthy of myriad complaint cards and possible evacuation. For any skier worth a damn, it's a frontier powder outpost with unlimited potential.

Alex speaks slowly, like the hippie teacher on *South Park*. His favorite adjective is "magical." Besides being our guide on the Snowy White Wastes of New Mexico (SWWNM) expedition of 2006, he's the director of Temple Basin's "snow school," as well as its only employee. By his account, he's the only real ski instructor in New Zealand, and perhaps the world, because no one understands the entire movement of skiing like he does. Every muscle, even your mind. His teaching technique: position students in the middle of their skis and push them down the hill.

There are 15 or so couloirs we want to ski, staring us down through the common room windows, but first we have to get up the hill. The "lift" is a fast-moving rubberized length of rope that will tear through your glove or hand, as I found out, in much the same way a Kea might circumscribe your eye. This is the only way up Temple and one of the reasons the ski fields can operate on the cheap. The tow has a reputation among first-timers as a fearful machine. In order to drag behind the "nutcracker"—a stainless steel clamp attached to your waist—you must clamp it around the rope and keep it there for the duration of the ride, thus letting your hand pass within inches of the unguarded 10-inch steel wheels the rope runs on. Your constant fear of losing a digit—and subsequent yard sales on the steep incline—being two of the few pleasures the staff regularly counts on.

But the ride is worth it. At the top of the Downhill tow—the middle of Temple's three lifts, Temple and Cassidy being the lower ones—we take in a series of three cirques. Alex ticks each off with a gloved finger. The peaks are dominated by 6,275-foot Temple Peak and 6,445-foot Phipps Peak. The scene is not unlike the Gap of Rohan after all, as dozens of sub peaks and interconnected ridges meander to the horizon. "It's like the top third of

**"THERE ARE 15 OR SO COULOIRS STARING US DOWN THROUGH THE COMMON ROOM WINDOWS."**





the Alps," says Hamish Acland, our local guide and sheep-farmer-gone-pro-skier.

The best terrain is so accessible that in a single day we manage to ski much of Temple's best inbound (a term used loosely here), climb Temple and Phipps, nearly drop into a dead-end couloir, climb out, ski down another, skin back to camp, eat three frighteningly dark hot dogs, ride the rope tow back to a little shelter beneath the Downhill lift and set up camp to watch Hamish and 4FRNT skis co-founder Matt Sterbenz ski a box couloir off Mount B'limit that could be Corbet's Couloir if Corbet's were steeper, had a two-stage entrance and ended in an off-camber power-slide wall.

Photographer Dave Reddick and I snoop around while we wait for the others to traverse to the entrance. The shelter was given by the Page family and contains first-aid gear, a potbelly stove, some old posters and an ancient auto engine that once powered one of the tows. Many of the buildings at Temple have names attached to them and many of those names refer to people who've long since departed this world—because almost all of the shenanigans we've been engaged in have been going on at Temple Basin for quite some time. The area was founded in 1929 as the stomping ground for New Zealand's first ski organization, the Christchurch Ski Club. It has since been renamed Temple Basin and is run by the club of that name as well as the Canterbury University snow sports club.

Which is both inspiring and sad in a way. Because while the water runs deep here at Temple, the place has fallen on hard times. Turns out, not every skier in New Zealand, or the world, thinks scraping mold off your toast in the morning and drinking quarts of scotch to stay warm at night is the next best thing to heaven. Just dying is how most weekend warriors would

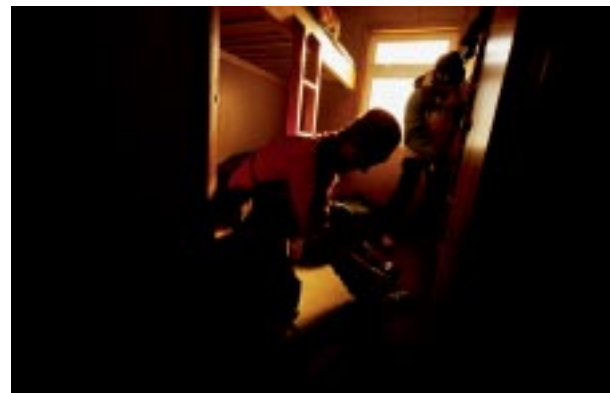
describe it—and as a result Temple has been left in the lurch. It almost didn't open this year.

The empty shelter would act as a good metaphor, but after cleaning two of the windows we're more interested in watching what Matt is doing in the multi-level entrance to the couloir. Mainly, turning sideways, now upside-down, backward, around again, then the first cartwheel, through the crux in a kind of half gainer and finally self-arresting 20 feet shy of a rock wall. The mood shifts. The clouds descend. The SWWNM seem incredibly far away. Matt fumbles for his radio and keys the transmit button. His first words: My left knee.

These moments—and days—are ones you would expect at an expert area like Temple. The mega-vertical, pristine slopes, the exploration, the crash, Matt toughing it out for the rest of the week with a strict icing regimen only someone in the armed forces or a maybe a jihadist could pull off. So we don't let it slow us down. For the next four days—while Alex has his hands full explaining to 100 high school students how magic and snow-sliding are essentially the same thing—Jeff McKitterick, the great Tahoe old-schooler, takes the lead on our hunt for the SWWNM, skiing Phelps, B'Limit, a skyline ridge in-between that could've been in France or Alaska, big, wide bowls off the summit, myriad chutes along the backside. Hamish follows and rips 2,000-foot lines down B'Limit and Temple while ex-POWDER intern John Stifter, who has been seasonally stationed in New Zealand, ogles practically every moving thing: the people, the skis, the snow, the parrots, the wind. We log 10,000-plus feet of vertical a day with the guys racing up a ridge in front of the lodge almost every afternoon for a sunset run, witnessed by two dozen 16-year-old girls in the common room in one giant, cackling gallery.

**MAGIC AND SNOW-SLIDING ARE BASICALLY THE SAME THING. AS ARE HALLUCINATIONS AND A GOOD SCOTCH BUZZ. SKIER: HAMISH ACLAND**

**“THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE OF THE SKI FIELD IS SIMPLE: PROVIDE FOOD, SHELTER, KICK-ASS TERRAIN, AND LET THE SKIERS TAKE IT FROM THERE.”**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JEFF MCKITTERICK LOGGING SOME VERT; LOOKING OUT ON B'LIMIT FROM THE KITCHEN WINDOW; BUNK ROOM; AND GETTING SNOWY WHITE WASTED.  
 RIGHT: HAMISH ACLAND IMPERSONATING A KEA. HE WOULD LATER EAT THE WINDSHIELD WIPERS OFF AN UNSUSPECTING TOYOTA.

At night, the scene is almost as intense: navigating the stinky rooms, the toxic drying room, all-you-can-eat meals, violent backgammon and Ping-Pong rivalries, Little Wobbly—who runs Temple Basin's rental shop and puts down sailor's portions of Famous Grouse scotch—staring blankly at the dregs in the bottom of her bottle, Alex dropping hints about the SWWNM then telling us all he ever wanted from life was a mullet. The closest analogy is college, maybe freshmen year, with everyone in attendance suddenly realizing and exercising a newfound sense of freedom.

But like any confined experience, things begin to wear and that wearing takes its toll on me the last day. I wake up in my bed that morning, slightly tense, maybe what it feels like to hang upside down all night. The SWWNM have eluded us. My MP3 player is missing. I can't find my water bladder. Without checking in with the others, I put my boots on and grab whatever water and food I can find and set out for the upper basin.

The bottom rope tow unraveled yesterday and the staff is sitting around discussing how to splice it. I put my skins on and walk to the top of the lift, then around to the Downhill tow and the foot of B'Limit. I follow the bootpack Matt and Hamish set. It's steeper than I thought, and I take my skis off my pack and whack them into the slope to get purchase. I come to the top of a pillow and follow a side hill to the summit ridge.

I can see a white tractor-trailer laboring over Arthur's Pass below. A Kea circles near the lodge. I can see little dots moving around the broken rope tow, but besides that there is nothing. No movement, no noise, no music or people. I click into my skis and slide to the top of a little couloir between the peak and a run the group skied yesterday. There are no tracks. The chute rolls to the right and merges with the main slope halfway down.

I push off and sink into 10 inches of blown-in powder. My edges slide then bite and I make a turn, then another. I straighten my back and let my tips rise a bit. The rock walls on either side close in, then open to the snowfield. To the right a cliff band drops into a wide couloir. To the left a hanging snowfield wraps around to Downhill Basin. Below is nothing but white.

Which is where I see them: The Snowy White Wastes. They're not unlike any other snowfield we'd skied that week, distinct only because of my mindset. That being one in which I desperately need to ski. And so the white is whiter and the cushion softer and the sound of wind through my goggles louder.

As for New Mexico, who knows where the SWWNM came from/transported me to/actually were. It looked like New Zealand. It could've been Idaho. Maybe Verbier. The fact of the matter is, on a run like that you're present in a situation that can't be pinpointed on a map. It's just a great moment. It could be anywhere. It's fun to think it's nowhere. And that one day, in another time and place, it'd be worth looking for again. ☺

