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Nordic skiers whirled to back-country

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BIG SKY — Upon first mention, helicopter nordic skiing sounds like a contradiction in terms, a violation of the non-mechanized essence of the sport.

But the idea of cross country skiers riding an aerial shuttle to back-country powder (and, sometimes, less-than-ideal snow with a troublesome crust formed by wind and sun) is taking off in southwestern Montana.

Lone Mountain Guest Ranch, in conjunction with Bozeman-based Omniflight Helicopters, is offering day-long guided trips through terrain often considered inaccessible to the average skier.

A 20-minute helicopter flight, however, covers the same distance it might take several days to ski, especially when the going is uphill through deep snow. Skiers thus are able to save their energy for the return trip over mostly-downhill terrain. Yet the 2300-foot elevation drop is gradual enough that the skiers can gracefully arc through telemark turns, advancing alternate skis while keeping knees bent to take advantage of their loose-heel bindings.

It doesn't take an expert skier to enjoy the trip. "I would anticipate that a person who has strong intermediate skills could do the trip fine," says Bob Schaap, who with his wife Vivian owns and operates Lone Mountain.

"We would discourage a person from going who had inadequate skiing skills or didn't have the stamina to do it," adds Schaap, who frequently skis as a guide with guests who come to Lone Mountain from all over the U.S. plus several foreign countries.

Someone with ample experience in the new mode of skiing is Lone Mountain guide Brick Root, who has been on "five or six" trips since helicopter service began in January.

"We designed it as a ski tour that our guests could do, something that was a little bit more difficult and a little bit more exciting" than guided backcountry trips the ranch already offers, Root says.

"We stressed the idea that the helicopter is a means of transportation that gets us to a place we could not ordinarily get to in a day trip. It gives people a chance to ski terrain they would not ordinarily be able to ski in a day's time."

Still possible, of course, is the classic method of reaching untracked backcountry glades and bowls. It requires skiers to travel expedition style, carrying packs with 30-35 pounds of gear and food sufficient for several days of winter camping.

"We offer multiple-day trips but have relatively few takers. A lot of people think about it, but when it comes right down to it, there are not a lot of people doing it," Root says.

Among the doers are Root and his wife Margi, also a guide and instructor at Lone Mountain. A trip they took last year illustrates the increased mobility of helicopter skiing.

"Every spring, we like to get out and do multiple day trips. Last spring, we took a five-day trip that started at Big Sky (downhill area), went around Cedar Mountain and took us to Buck Ridge," Brick Root recalls. Buck Ridge, below 10,876-foot Sphinx Mountain, is the starting point for skiers ferried in by helicopter.

"When we skied through that spot," he continues, "we were two nights and three days into our trip. We still had two nights and three days of skiing to get back."

Skiing the same route proved less arduous for an 11-person group which last month completed the eight-hour trip after being flown to the starting point in two groups by Omniflight pilot Mitch Thompson. Besides Bob Schaap and Brick Root, the group included skiers from Washington and Oregon staying for a week or longer at the ranch.

The trip started on a saddle between the west end of Buck Ridge and Sphinx Mountain. A short climb took skiers to the top of Buck Ridge and the 9,500-foot high point.

From there, skiers alternately toured across large meadows and swooped down staircase-like hills, their skis carving wide-radius turns in the velvety snow. The group crossed the drainages of Third and Second Yellow Mule Creeks, stopping for lunch in the shelter provided by an evergreen grove.

The skiers then dipped into the First Yellow Mule Creek drainage. A moderate climb took them to clear-cut areas owned by Burlington Northern, with which Lone Mountain has made arrangements for its guests to ski.

The ever-changing backcountry served up a surprise in the afternoon. Instead of finding a firm wind-and-sun-packed base beneath two feet of powder, as had been the case in the morning, skiers encountered a layer of so-called "sugar snow" or depth hoar.

The result of several weeks of cold temperatures and little or no new snow, depth hoar causes skis to submerge unexpectedly. As a result, even the most accomplished skiers occasionally took a tumble on the tricky surface.

After mastering that challenge, the group skied into the South Fork valley and onto a snow-covered road

which they followed across the stream. The trip finished near Ouzel Falls campground, where a ranch employee with a four-wheel drive vehicle was waiting. He drove the group the final two or three miles to the ranch, and skiers capped their day with saunas and a gourmet dinner.

Ordinarily, skiers get a picturesque view of Sphinx Mountain and the Taylor range to the south, but overcast conditions and blowing snow diminished the panorama on the trip. On other more sunny days, Root says, "everybody commented on the spectacular vistas, one range right after another in every direction, from the helicopter flight in right through the end of the day."

Skiers frequently comment that the trip is "the most exciting thing they've done in their life — and the best skiing day they've had," he adds.

One of the skiers on the trip said curiosity triggered his participation. This is the fourth winter that Duff McDaniel and his wife Linda, of Samish Island, Wash., have come to Lone

Mountain. And, he says, he had sampled other guided trips and wanted to try something new.

"For me, it was two things. I had never been on a helicopter, so it was a good opportunity to combine two interests. If I didn't like the helicopter ride, I could always enjoy the skiing.

"The other thing was the ability on a short vacation to be in that remote a country in that time frame. There we were, 14 miles from the nearest road. It's a special kind of feeling. To be able to do that quickly in such beautiful country was what I liked most about it."

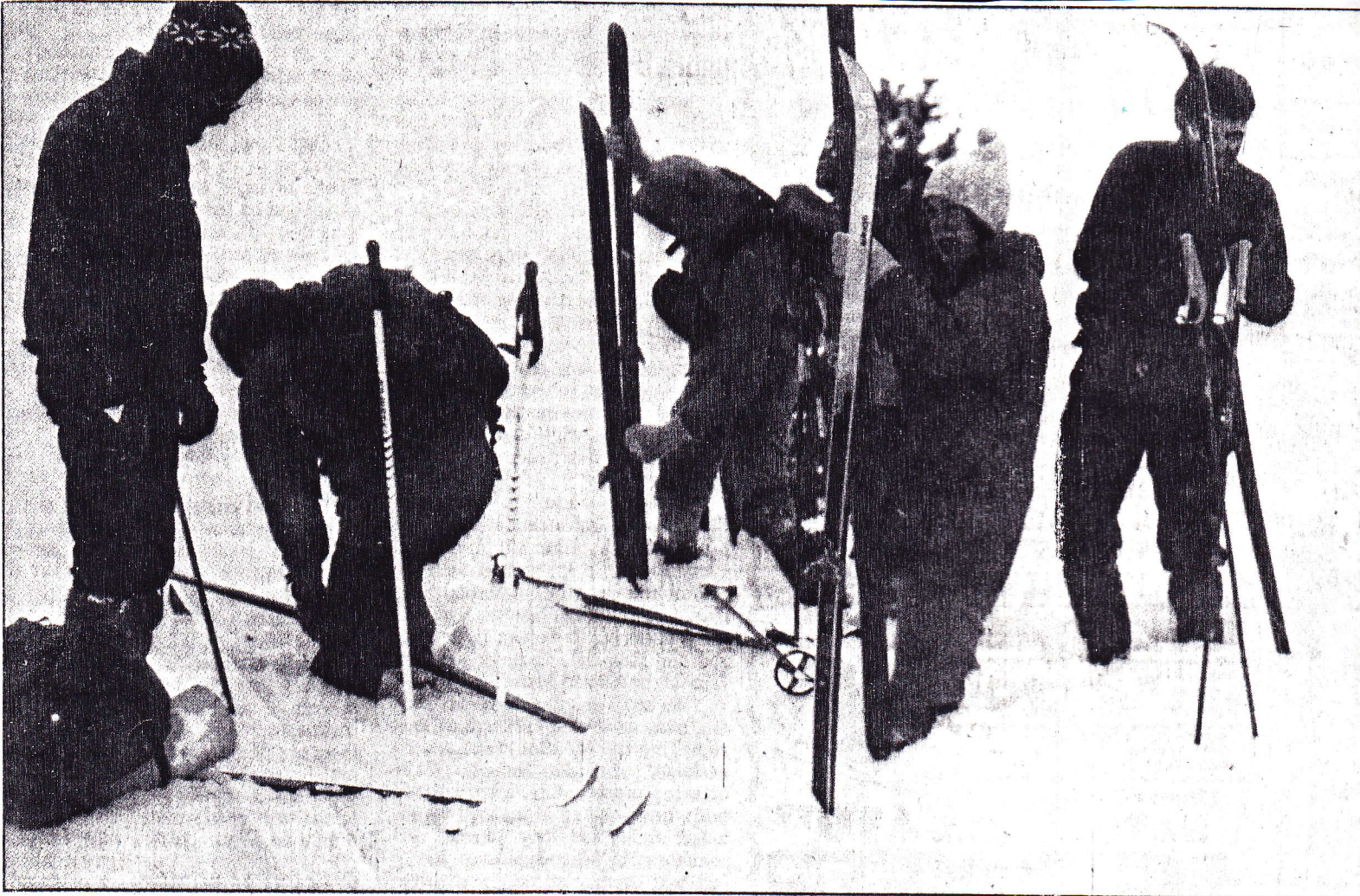
Even though the weather could have been more cooperative, McDaniel says the trip delighted him.

"It's a wilderness experience and you have to be willing to take whatever is dished out in that country. From a photographic viewpoint, it could have been a beautiful, sunny day. From a personal viewpoint, it was a very satisfying day of skiing. It met my expectations."



Lone Mountain Ranch photo

Skiers board helicopter at Lone Mountain, before being whisked to starting point for backcountry trek.



Once at Buck Ridge, skiers apply wax for the return trip as guide Brick Root (left) oversees operations.



Gazette photos by Dennis Gaub

Rob Scheep telemarks through knee-deep snow.