

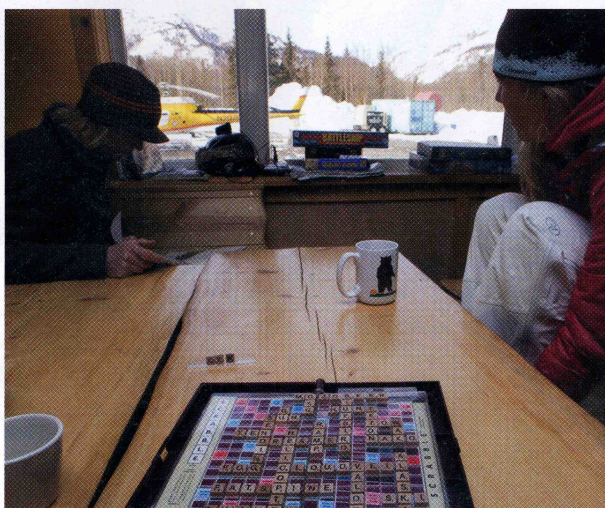
"THE GREY AIR HUNG THICK AND DAMP LIKE A WET TOWEL, AND VISIBILITY WAS SO POOR EVEN A SKI TOUR SEEMED PRECARIOUS. SO WE DRANK. I HAD NEVER HELI-SKIED BEFORE..."

Reid to the Rescue

I went to Alaska to drink beer. Well, technically, I went there to ski, but I did more drinking than skiing. There wasn't much else to do while waiting for the heavy, black clouds to lift so the helicopters could fly. I was crammed into an RV with four dudes, a giant tub of cream cheese and a few cases of Alaskan Amber. We were camped in the parking lot at Valdez Heli Guides on Thompson Pass, the heli-skiing outfitter Doug Coombs built in 1993. The grey air hung thick and damp like a wet towel, and visibility was so poor even a ski tour seemed precarious. So we drank. I had never heli-skied before. I'd heard stories about days so deep you'd forget how much money you'd siphoned from your savings account. The kind of snow where it felt like a giant marshmallow engulfed you in every turn. Truth is, that's why I came to Alaska. I wanted one of those days.

After spending nearly a week in the RV drowning our sorrows in cream cheese and beer, the clouds still hadn't budged. I had to catch a flight home, and I hung my head with self-pity as I packed my ski bag, realizing I'd come all this way for a few lousy card games in a smelly RV. The rest of the guys were staying longer, so I set out to hitchhike to the airport in nearby Valdez.

Reid picked me up on the side of the road in a rental SUV, his skis and luggage forcefully wedged in the back. He'd flown all the way from Vermont that morning, but missed his connecting flight to Valdez and ended up diverting to Anchorage, renting a car, and driving the remaining five hours. He could have flown to New Zealand in the 20 hours it took him to get to Alaska. But he didn't care. He was meeting his dad and brother for a three-day, once-in-a-lifetime heli-ski trip—a college graduation gift from his father. The look on his face was a mix of thrill and childish



glee—like he was about to descend a drop on a high-speed rollercoaster. "This is epic," he said, speeding down the icy road. "I can't believe I finally made it here." I couldn't bear to tell him about the gloomy weather or the fact that he'd likely spend a few more days waiting. He just looked too damn happy. And his enthusiasm radiated from him, seeping into me. I knew Reid for barely 20 minutes, but for the duration of that short drive, I understood him like we were identical twins. Like me, he dreamed about experiencing one of those days. And that was all that really mattered.

He dropped me at the airport and I wished him luck. As my tiny plane took off wobbling into the clouds, I thought of Reid and the clown-like grin plastered on his face. Then, suddenly, out my miniature airplane window, I spotted a ray of sunlight and a sky like a patchwork quilt that began to turn a distinct shade of cobalt blue.

- Megan Michelson

Megan Michelson is an editor at *Skiing* magazine. She lives in Boulder, Colorado. Someday, she hopes to heli-ski in Alaska.