

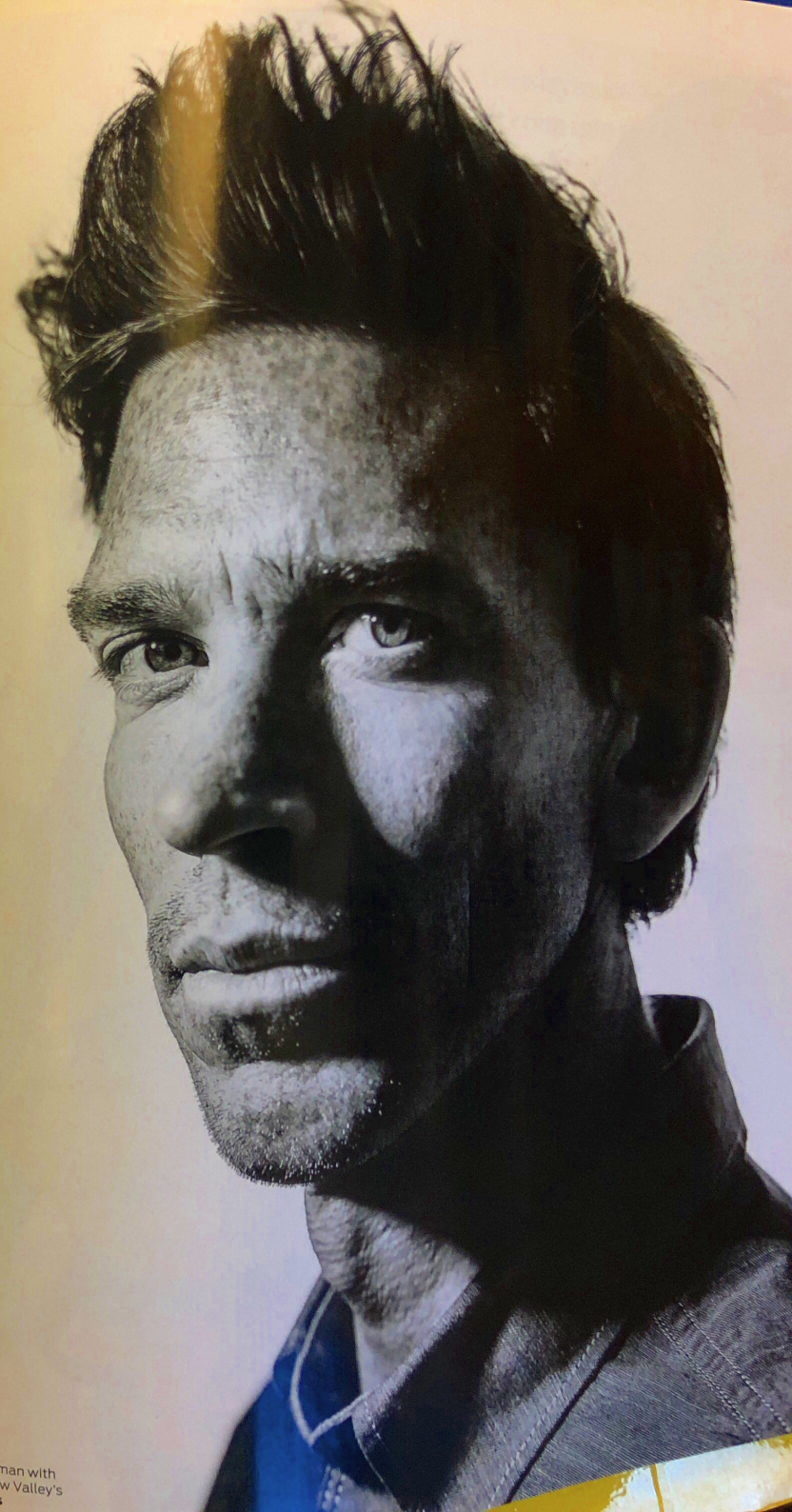


The Gatekeeper

— by Megan Michelson —

Nearly two decades after ski areas like Jackson Hole, Wyo. and Snowbird, Utah began opening their boundaries, California's Squaw Valley remains one of the last mega resorts with closed backcountry gates for public access to the surrounding terrain. But internationally renowned mountain guide Adrian Ballinger is working to change things at his home mountain.

Adrian Ballinger, the man with the key to open Squaw Valley's gates. **Cory Richards**



On a Tuesday morning in early March, skiers cram into Squaw Valley, Calif.'s KT-22 liftline shoulder to Gore-Tex-clad shoulder, antsy and hyped up on coffee.

This morning's is the first blue sky Tahoe's seen in days, with 48 inches of snowfall in the last week and seven overnight.

I'm waiting for the lift to start spinning alongside mountain guide Adrian Ballinger, owner of Squaw-based Alpenglow Expeditions, a guiding company that leads trips all over the world. We're planning to ski into the backcountry bordering Squaw, but we're first going to lap KT with the masses while we wait for the upper mountain to open, allowing us to get out of bounds from higher up.

When the lift finally starts spinning and skiers, one after another, begin to drop the Fingers, rocky cliffs in plain view of the liftline, everyone erupts into boisterous cheers. At the top of the lift, Ballinger doesn't hesitate, dropping into chopped-up steeps while a small group of clients, myself included, hustle to keep up.

Soon, the rest of the mountain opens, and we're off: Funitel to Big Blue Express to a short bootpack toward Broken Arrow to a traverse across the ridge directly beneath the tram. Then, finally, a foreboding sign reading, "Terrain beyond this boundary is closed to the public. Access beyond this boundary is for the exclusive use of professionally guided backcountry tours. Violators will lose pass and are subject to arrest."

After years of work, Ballinger's Alpenglow Expeditions has become the only professional guiding company in the world with legal access to this zone. And after a quick safety check we skirt the rope quickly and quietly so nobody follows.

Beyond the resort craze, everything feels peaceful. The north-facing expanse below, called Tram Ridge, is completely untracked. The tram occasionally floats overhead, but there's otherwise not a soul in sight.

This zone lies on U.S. Forest Service land, and Squaw and the Forest Service had long prohibited access from the resort. Those wishing to ski National Geographic Bowl, a 1,500-vertical-foot spread on the backside of Squaw's Granite Peak, have needed to tour up from the bottom, an eight-mile skin that takes hours. But beginning in December 2016, if you're with Ballinger's guides, it's a couple chairlift rides and a 15-minute bootpack.

While the trend of wide-open boundaries swept through places like Jackson Hole and Snowbird starting in the early 2000s, Squaw Valley has seemed resolute in its walled border and had remained one of the U.S.'s last remaining big resorts to keep its boundary lines on lockdown. "The forbidden fruit of Squaw has always been just outside the boundary," pro skier Cody Townsend recently told me.

That all changed in 2016, when the resort announced they'd open their gates—but only to Ballinger's clients, who pay hundreds of dollars for a day of guided skiing. I'm here to find out how in the world Ballinger earned the nod to enter, after others have tried and failed for years.

But, first, there's powder to ski. We drop in, one after the other, arcing clean, fast turns through shin-deep snow. The quiet and stillness from before is broken—everyone's hollering with glee.



Ballinger leads the charge in opening Squaw's boundaries. **Ryan Salm**



Adrian Ballinger lives in an apartment with his girlfriend, pro climber Emily Harrington, across the street from Squaw's village. From there, he can ride a cruiser bike with a custom-built ski rack to his closest ski-touring spot. But he isn't used to guiding in his own backyard. The 41-year-old has spent most of his adult life living eight months of the year in a yellow expedition tent at high elevations, guiding clients up big mountains everywhere from Chile to the Himalaya.

Ballinger is tall and wiry—six-foot-one, 141 pounds—with a faint British accent. His parents, both Brits, moved his family to Massachusetts when he was six because his dad, a software engineer, received a two-year contract in the U.S. with IBM. They ended up staying for good. Ballinger grew up within walking distance of Wachusett Mountain, a thousand-vertical-foot ski area an hour west of Boston, and began skiing during his first winter in the States. A friend's dad introduced him to rock climbing when he was 12.

By age 15, Ballinger was trad climbing in New Hampshire's White Mountains and nearly getting himself killed on the northeast's tallest summit, Mt. Washington, in mid-winter. He moved to Washington, D.C. to study at Georgetown University and, during an outdoor leadership program his freshman year, met the program's director, Chris Warner, founder and CEO of a climbing gym and guiding company called Earth Treks. Ballinger started interning with Warner to teach rock climbing and when a client canceled four days before a trip to climb 20,000-foot volcanoes in Ecuador, Warner asked Ballinger, then 17, if he wanted to join.

"I was always meant to be a doctor—that's the plan my parents had for me," Ballinger says. "But I told them, 'You've got to let me do this. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.'" He spent every spring and summer break after that guiding trips to far-flung locales, and when he got into medical school, he deferred for a year to get climbing out of his system.

A year later, he had to choose: med school or mountain guiding? He went backpacking by himself in West Virginia for four days to sort it out. "I was feeling so challenged," he says. "I had this safe, stable path set out for me, but I just loved being in the mountains. How could I stop?"

He bailed on med school and worked full-time for Earth Treks for seven years, until 2004, when he moved to Aspen and started his own company, which he called Alpenglow Expeditions. In 2008, he relocated the business to Tahoe.

Nowadays, Ballinger's company operates around 30 guided, international trips a year across six continents, from introductory mountaineering on peaks like Tanzania's Mt. Kilimanjaro and Russia's Mt. Elbrus to highly technical climbs in the Himalaya like Ama Dablam and Everest.

He's known for offering rapid ascents—top-dollar, fast-paced climbs of high-elevation peaks, where he cuts off 30 to 50 percent of acclimatization time by using hypoxic tents, whisking clients closer to base camps via helicopters, employing high-tech weather forecasting tools and keeping group sizes small.

"Whatever they're doing is working," says Vince Anderson, co-owner of Colorado's Skyward Mountaineering, another so-called boutique mountain-guiding operation. "With all of these preparatory methods, people are getting up these mountains faster than ever."

[Above] Ballinger and girlfriend Emily Harrington bike to the "office" in California's Olympic Valley.
[Left] Exclusive tracks under the Squaw Valley Tram. **Ryan Salm, both photos**

In 2016, Ballinger and Harrington speed climbed and skied 26,906-foot Cho Oyu, on the border of Nepal and China, in just nine days, a trip that usually takes six or seven weeks. They did it by scrutinizing weather forecasts to narrow in a summit window before they even left Tahoe, buying plane tickets at the last minute. In 2011, Ballinger became the first person to ski Manaslu, the world's eighth-tallest peak and, that year, also summited Lhotse, the world's fourth-tallest peak, and Everest twice in just three weeks.

He and *National Geographic* photographer Cory Richards made TV morning shows after documenting, via Snapchat, their 2016 attempt to climb Everest without supplemental oxygen (See: #EverestNoFilter). Ballinger failed to summit that year, turning around at 3 a.m. on the summit day after spending five hours shivering uncontrollably and losing feeling in his hands. He's spent a year trying to figure out what went wrong, working with sports scientists, coaches and nutritionists, who prescribed a high-intensity training plan and a new high-fat, carb-restricted diet—he now skis with meat bars and hard-boiled eggs in his pack. Last April, he returned to Everest, where he successfully summited without oxygen, his seventh time standing on top of the world.

But lately he wants to spend more time at home in the Sierra. "For almost two decades, I've guided all over the world. I want to create a life here in Tahoe," he says. "I have a great community here, and local guiding hopefully will help me sustain that." Which is why it became especially important for Ballinger to figure out a way to guide from his home in Squaw Valley. First, however, he had to figure out how to pry the resort's locked gates wide open.

Getting Squaw to open their gates wasn't an overnight fix. Ballinger and his team at Alpenglow Expeditions spent nine years writing letters to the U.S. Forest Service, asking for permits to guide in the area. Every year, they were denied and told to ask again the next year.

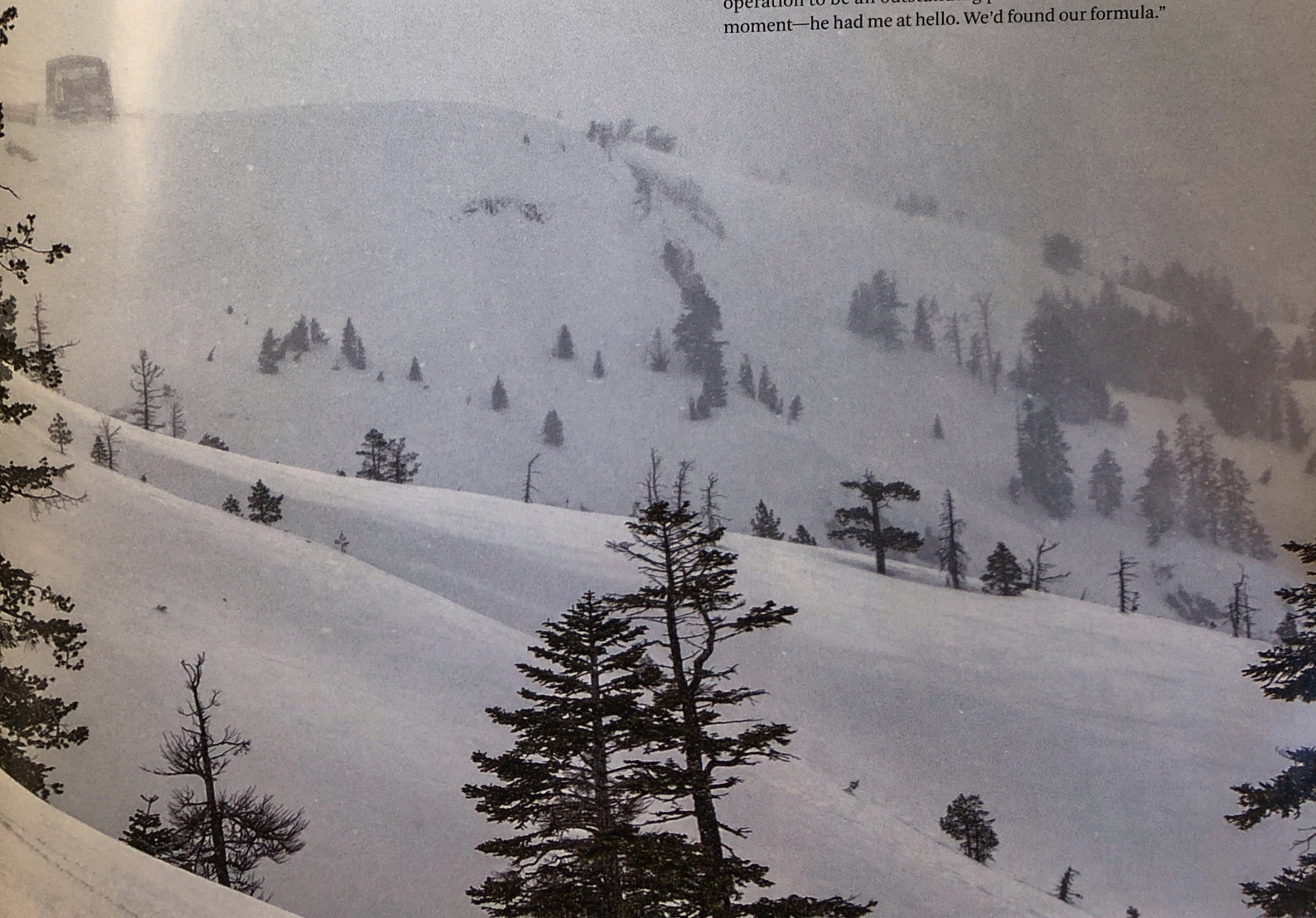
About five years ago, Squaw-based pro snowboarder Jeremy Jones, along with skiers JT Holmes and Cody Townsend, met with Squaw Valley CEO Andy Wirth to discuss opening the resort's gates for public access. They spoke with the mountain operations team and the Forest Service, and they were close to working out a deal. "We left the meeting thinking, 'Cool, this is actually happening,'" Townsend remembers. Then, a neighboring property owner, concerned about lost skiers trespassing on their land, shut it down.

"This is not the story of a ski area being convinced to do this," Wirth told me in his office last winter. "Quite the opposite. We were the proponents pushing for it and ironically got thwarted by a neighbor. Then the Forest Service said, 'We're not going to touch that.'"

Finally, in 2016, the Forest Service said yes to Alpenglow's request after Ballinger's team received approval to guide in open-space areas managed by the Truckee Donner Land Trust. "Once we got one permit, other areas that had told us no for years starting saying yes," Ballinger says. "It was fast and exciting."

Squaw saw the potential of Alpenglow's service: Offering resort guests paid access to guided, lift-served backcountry in a safe and controlled manner became a logical first step to opening the gates. Even still, Ballinger had to work with Squaw's legal team, management and ski patrol to sort out logistics, including search and rescue protocol for leaving from the resort. Wirth and Ballinger met one on one, too.

"Our primary interest is, of course, the safety of our guests who choose to recreate in the mountains," Wirth says. "We saw Adrian's operation to be an outstanding partner for us. It was a Jerry Maguire moment—he had me at hello. We'd found our formula."





When Squaw announced the news to the public, reactions were mainly positive—it seemed like step one toward opening the gates for all. Alpenglow offered community days last season, granting free guided tours for those who were interested.

“The majority of people were supportive,” Ballinger says. “And for those who weren’t, I wished they’d asked questions instead of just writing hate on the Internet. Some people have been poaching Nat Geo Bowl and Tram Ridge for years, and there was some concern that that would become harder. Others argued that this is public land, and anyone can access it. And you can still. You just have to walk there. We spent nearly a decade negotiating to be able to access it from the lift.”

Ballinger says he personally reached out to everyone who expressed frustration online about the operation, and he was mostly met with positivity. He also tried to remind people that this could be good for everyone, eventually.

“This is all part of the big picture. I would one day love to see public gates at Squaw, so the public can go out to Tram Ridge and Nat Geo bowl, which is truly some of the best terrain in Tahoe,” he says. “Hopefully this is a stepping stone to opening the gates. I really believe that. That’s so important to me. I’m a skier and climber in this community first and the owner of a business here second.”

Wirth, for his part, is on the same page. He sent a team to Jackson Hole to meet with their operations team to see how they’ve managed their open-boundary policy. “We’re starting to get a better line of sight as to how it would look to fully open the gates,” Wirth told me. “The boundary system at Jackson Hole took them 10 or 15 years to get right. We’re at year one, so bear with us.”

Back at Squaw on that bluebird Tuesday, after setting first tracks through the rolling swathes off Tram Ridge, we spin another lap through the resort. A couple of high-speed lifts later, we seamlessly, from a designated spot, slip under the ropes. It feels like a magic portal into another land, one that only we’re enlightened enough to see. It’s like Narnia, if that fairytale land were covered in fresh snow. Out here, beyond the resort’s buzz, time slows down.

After two laps, Ballinger gives us a choice: We can head back inbounds and access a different part of Tram Ridge with help from the lifts, or we can skin up from the bottom for another run. We all agree a tour sounds more appealing, so we slap skins to our skis and follow Ballinger up the undulating curves of the mountain.

Out of nowhere, three snowboarders come zipping down from above us, riding en masse and not wearing backpacks. They pause for a moment, and Ballinger says, in as polite a tone as he can muster, “Just so you know, this area is closed, and it’s actually illegal to ski back here from the resort.”

“Yeah, we know, but we’re pretending we don’t know,” the guy in front shoots back. Then he asks if we’re taking some kind of course.

“It’s a guided group,” Ballinger responds.

“Well, learn a lot,” the boarder shouts as he disappears over the next ridge.

And just like that, our magic bubble is popped. ■