

The Penalty Box

📍 BIG SKY, MT



BY MEGAN MICHELSON

THE SKI PATROLLERS AT BIG SKY call the tiny, 180-square-foot shack atop 11,166-foot Lone Peak the penalty box because it's the least desirable shift when you're working patrol. You're stuck inside. You're not skiing. And you have to deal with people. Lots and lots of people.

To ski Big Sky's classic rowdy line, the Big Couloir, a 1,400-vertical-foot chute that tops out at about 50 degrees, or the steep, menacing shots off the North Summit Snowfield into Moonlight Basin, you need to be wearing a beacon, have a partner, and sign in with patrol to get a time slot. Although ski patrol controls both zones for avalanches, the idea is to keep the number of skiers in those lines at any one time to a minimum.

This brings us back to the penalty box. Early and eager tram loaders will run to the patrol shack like kids flocking to an ice cream truck. They'll barge their way through the door and cram together in a space no bigger than a large closet. They will then pepper patrol with questions or demands and protest when early time slots aren't available.

So, a few pointers if you're planning to ski those big lines off Lone Peak. Start by being really nice to patrol when you head into the shack. Say hello. Ask how they're doing. Wait politely until it's your turn. Do not run into the shack. Stroll in your ski boots like a civilized person who is excited to ski a rad line, but is not a fanatic. Then, politely, pull out your beacon, wave it in front of the handy test gadget, and sign up for a time slot. You're good to go.

Patrol is happy to answer questions for you, within reason. "We have maps, we can give you a description of the current conditions and hazards," says Gavin Cooper, a ski patroller at Big Sky for the past 15 years. "We're not there to tell people if they're good enough skiers to go somewhere, though. That's up to you."

There are no bathrooms in the shack. Don't come looking for one. Although, as an April Fools' prank years ago, when Big Sky and Moonlight Basin were separate ski areas, the Big Sky patrollers bolted a toilet into the Moonlight Basin shack and put up a sign that said "Restrooms."

But seriously, enter this small shed on top of a peak—a sticker-plastered gateway to the gnar—as the kind of skier we all hope to be: patient, observant, and ready to rip.

UPON ARRIVAL:

- ✕ Groups of two can ski the Big Couloir every 15 minutes; groups of two to four can ski the North Summit Snowfield every 10 minutes.
- ✕ No partner? Hang around at the shack and join another solo skier or group. If you're lucky, a patroller will be released from the penalty box and drop into the Big with you.
- ✕ These lines are no-fall zones. They are elevator-shaft steep. If you're not comfortable with that, you shouldn't be there.
- ✕ The tram opens at 9:30 a.m. and shuts down at 2:30 p.m., or 3 p.m. in the spring. Go first thing in the morning to secure your time slot for the day. Earlier the better.
- ✕ If you're a dedicated skier, you must ski these lines at some point in your life—they are that good.

