



UNTIL
NEXT
TIME

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BY MEGAN MICHELSON
PHOTO BY FRANKLIN TOWERS

I'M ON THE PLANE HEADED HOME RIGHT NOW.

The melancholy is starting to sink in. It feels like a pair of sunglasses that make the world seem less sparkly. Or a heavy, wet towel around my neck that I can't get dry. I've just spent a few exhilarating days sleeping in a backcountry hut surrounded by toothy, snow-covered peaks near Whistler, British Columbia, alongside some of the most fun people I've ever known.

My face still hurts from laughing at ridiculous late-night jokes and summit dance parties in howling wind, my belly aches from too many skin track candy snacks, and my legs flag from repeated days of out-all-day ski touring. Those are good feelings, sensations that I don't want to fade away or forget.

I barely slept each night because, for one, the old dude on the bunk across from me snored loudly, and two, I was so excited for the alarm to go off early each morning, signaling that it was time to ski again. For days, I didn't care about anything except what the snow and weather were doing and how we'd prepare our après-ski cheese-and-salami-and-miso-soup spread.

I didn't worry about work deadlines, my kids,

or the news. It was that rare and perfect collision of the right people, fresh air, and stunning mountains as far as the eye could see. Total freedom at its finest.

I'm crashing from the high now, stuck here in seat 18B with a lousy bag of pretzels. The real world awaits me as soon as I hit baggage claim.

It's not depression. It's way milder than that. Call it the post-good-times blues. Ski mountaineer Hilaree Nelson and big-mountain snowboarder Jeremy Jones have called it "post-traumatic stoke disorder" after they've returned from big expeditions. It's that numbing sensation you feel when a big ski trip or a grand adventure in the mountains comes to an abrupt end and you suddenly find yourself staring aimlessly at your keyboard back at work. It's that vague boredom you get when you return to normalcy, to the 9-to-5, after a string of blower powder days. It's the feeling of saying goodbye to these kindred souls you've just trusted with your life in the backcountry.

I've felt the letdown many times over the years I've called myself a skier. It hit me hard after a weeklong ski touring trip in Iceland. And after a stellar weekend of camping, hot springs, and couloir

skiing in the eastern Sierra Nevada. And for sure after catching up with an old friend over a couple of days of skiing at Alta, Utah. I always joke that I need a reentry party—like the decompression gatherings people host after Burning Man—just to ease the return to reality after a particularly good ski trip.

The hardest part for me is that I'm never sure when—or if—I'll experience the high again. When will I get my next fix? How long do I have to wait? In the moment, the longing feels eternal.

But, at my core, I know the downer isn't permanent. The feeling washes over me, feels interminable and lonely, and then, as quickly as it came, it goes away. Normal life, if you're lucky, isn't so bad after all. And how cool is it that we, as skiers, get to experience this rush nearly every time we click into our bindings? That's a healthier addiction, I think. Besides, the next ski trip might be just around the corner.



Megan Michelson is a writer based in Tahoe City, California. This was written in the final days before the COVID-19 shutdown, coming off what turned out to be her last trip for a very long time.