

» The author finds that spring descents in the Sangres don't come easy.



# THE VORTEX

CHASING SHAMANS, COULOIRS, AND EMPTINESS IN COLORADO'S SANGRE DE CRISTO MOUNTAINS. **WORDS BY DEVON O'NEIL. PHOTOS BY LIAM DORAN.**

The upslope wind swirled like a hurricane through a tunnel as we reached the top of the couloir. A wash of ice pellets pummeled my face, and I dug my crampons in like talons to the tiny snow platform at 13,700 feet. For two hours, we had scrambled up steep rock and ice-crusting snow to reach this point, a 10-foot-wide saddle at the middle of a mile-long knife-edge spine. The Kit Carson massif in Colorado's Sangre de Cristo range is considered by the valley's community of spiritual settlers to be one of the world's great "energy vortexes," but the only energy I'd felt up to now was dread. If we had to ski down what we'd just climbed up, it was going to be ugly.

I immediately understood why the Sangres may be the emptiest mountains in Colorado during winter despite being only four hours south of Denver. Jutting from an ocean of

prairie, they run north-south like an iguana spine with 96 peaks taller than 13,000 feet and 10 fourteeners. Savage winds plague the range, and snowfall is spotty. Aside from a ghost ski area, Conquistador, near the ranching town of Westcliffe, the Sangres have little connection to skiing. Which, of course, is why we made the trip last May.

I peered over the opposite side of the tiny saddle and prayed for a better option. "Whoa. Get a look at this," I said to Chuck Roth, one of two friends who joined me on the trip. He glanced over the edge and lit up. Somehow we'd stumbled upon a steep-walled chute that ran all the way to the valley floor—and it appeared to be filled in with powder. "We should probably ski it," Chuck deadpanned, and without another word, we dropped to our stomachs and hacked into the overhanging cornice with axes.

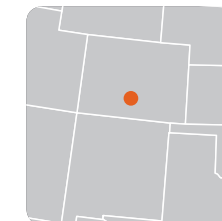
A bathtub-size block ripped free and rumbled down the throat like a wrecking ball, leaving six-inch dents in its path. We grinned at each other. The couloir was good to go.

The third member of our team, photographer Liam Doran, had torn an oblique on the hike in, so he reluctantly shot from above as Chuck and I dropped in and arced fast, wall-to-wall turns to the bottom through snow of a windblown quality we didn't expect to find.

**When we arrived the day before in the** tiny town of Crestone—our access point at the base of 14,165-foot Kit Carson Peak—dreadlocked locals and a throwback aura greeted us. On one side of the main drag, a cowboy galloped by on horseback. On the other, a bearded motorcyclist in ski goggles buzzed past a barefoot couple out for a stroll. But the rootsy vibe only



» O'Neil digs into a healthy plate of Sangre mashed potatoes.



» Where my whiskey at!?



» In the shadow of giants. Chuck Roth (left) and O'Neil below 14,294-foot Crestone Peak.

Max rise of the Sangres above the San Luis Valley floor (feet):

**7,000**

Average pack weight (pounds):

**70**

Population of Crestone, Colorado:

**127**

Years it took Devon O'Neil to plan a trip to the Sangres:

**5**

Liam Doran is a Breckenridge, Colorado-based photographer. When he's not slogging into remote mountain ranges for *Skiing*, he shoots action sports for several outdoor publications.





**Above »** “Thank Babaji for steep, smooth, late-spring corn.”

**Left »** White men can jump. The author gracefully executes a creek crossing.

tells half of Crestone’s story.

In the late ’70s, millionaire Canadian diplomat Maurice Strong and his wife, Hanne, acquired a large tract of land south of town in what’s known as the Baca Grande. The land had once been owned by the King of Spain and was later pitched as retirement plots to U.S. troops serving in Guam. Shortly after the Stronges settled in, a local shaman in his 80s appeared at their door. “I’ve been waiting for you to arrive,” he told Hanne. He then spent the next four days convincing her that she would

turn Crestone into a spiritual sanctuary unlike any in the world. Sure enough, she and Maurice began granting land at the base of the “Blood of Christ” peaks to divergent religious groups from Europe to the Himalayas. “The main purpose of the place,” Hanne told me, “was to bring forth a new civilization that lives in peace and harmony instead of greed and waste and exploitation.”

Today at the foot of the Sangres, more than two dozen temples, stupas, and churches line a dirt road locals call Spiritual Row. Though their

beliefs about the peaks vary, leaders from the various religious groups have confirmed the presence of a rare and extraordinary energy—the vortex—that draws people to the area. Perhaps even skiers like us.

The two spiritual centers that control access to Spanish Creek—which we’d heard offered the best skiing and camping—had happily granted us permission to cross their land, but I still didn’t know what to expect when we drove up to the Haidakhandi Universal Ashram, a Hindu shrine where devotees worship a being named Haidakhan Babaji. Babaji, the story goes, was discovered meditating in a cave in northern India in 1970. Considered a manifestation of God not born of woman, he quickly gained a worldwide following.

We asked a woman at the ashram where the trail began. “Jonathan can tell you,” she said. “He’s in the Earthship.” When we found Jonathan in a sunken, adobe-looking greenhouse, he asked why we were headed up Spanish Creek. Our answer surprised him. “I’ve never heard of anyone skiing up there,” he said. “Not in the 15 years I’ve lived here.”

He warned us of mountain lions—a local hunter once shot a 200-pounder just outside town, he said—but otherwise wished us well





**Top »** The sun sets on the Tashi Gomang Stupa.  
**Bottom »** The route into the unknown.  
**Right »** The shrine for Haidakhan Babaji.



and pointed us a few hundred yards down Spiritual Row to the Crestone Mountain Zen Center, a home for one of five different Buddhist lineages in Crestone. A young German woman with a shaved head greeted us and echoed Jonathan's warning. "Be careful," she said. "We've had a lion hanging around campus this week, pooping everywhere."

Fifteen minutes later, she and the rest of the monks watched us march into the woods with 70-pound packs. "You nutty skiers," a man whispered as we passed.

**During the course of our stay, we certainly skied some runs that were scoured and frozen. At times, the hop turns were downright scary. We lumbered through deadfall, got raked and bloodied by thorns, and lost our way in a desert canyon teeming with mountain lions. Yet as we inhaled logs of hickory sausage in camp, no one seemed to regret any of it. We were too enamored with the place itself and the**

rarity of our experience. The fact that we were skiing here at all, alone in Shangri-la, ended up making the conditions inconsequential.

On our third day up high, we started on the back side of 14,294-foot Crestone Peak and

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gradually worked our way down the drainage back to camp by skiing five shorter, north-facing lines. Each shaded slot brought a new sense of exploration, each descent a unique rush. I can't recall a day when I've had more fun backcountry skiing. At lunch, we spread out on a sunny rock and craned our necks to inspect our tracks. It struck me as a pity that

so many enlightened people live at the foot of these mountains yet never venture into them with skis.

Going into the trip, I'd hoped to experience the energy vortex for myself. When two-time U.S. extreme-skiing champion Rex Wehrman visited Spanish Creek in 1994, he spent two sleepless nights haunted by noises emanating from the water—an odd mix of country music, a raging party, and foreign jibberish. (No drugs; I asked.) I wanted some kind of strange, inexplicable memento of my own. I never got one. But each night around the fire when I watched stars streak across the black sky, I seriously wondered if there was anyone else in the entire range. I suppose it was the next best thing. ♦

**Devon O'Neil** is a frequent *Skiing* contributor and freelance journalist living in Breckenridge, Colorado. He grew up in the U.S. Virgin Islands but now prefers long approaches and steep descents in mountains around the world.