



» Skier: PNH guide Benjamin Mitchell

THE NOTEBOOK

LINE CLAIMING AND HELI-ASSISTED TOURING WITH ALASKA'S POINTS NORTH HELI-ADVENTURES. By Devon O'Neil

Ten miles inland from the small fishing

port of Cordova, Alaska, on a bench at 3,600 feet amid the craggy, bleached expanse that is the Chugach mountain range, Brennan Lagasse keeps a small white notebook next to his sleeping bag. The names contained within this notebook represent a historical record for Lagasse, one of two backcountry ski guides manning a camp on an exclusive nonmotorized permit area for Points North Heli-Adventures and the man charged with chronicling an endeavor unique to Alaska as well as the Chugach.

Consider it a skier's 21st-century version of exploration. Every so often over the past three winters, Lagasse has gone back to his tent on the side of the mountain and entered a new name in the notebook, a quirky title like Sluffhead, Tweezer, or Shakedown Street. The names refer to couloirs, ramps, peaks, and spines that had almost certainly never been skied before.

PNH has run heli-skiing trips out of Cordova for 15 years, but choppers are prohibited from landing inside the boundary of the U.S. Forest Service's motor-free zone. So a few years back, PNH owners Kevin and Jessica Quinn secured

a commercial permit encompassing hundreds of square miles that had previously been off-limits to skiing, practically speaking. The only way to reach the tenure would've involved multiple days of human-powered travel through a complex river drainage teeming with grizzly bears and deep-water crossings—just to reach the foot of the mountains worth skiing. Far better options exist within easy reach of Cordova, without any of the extra effort or risk.

But over the past two seasons, PNH has staged what Lagasse's guiding partner, Jeff Dostie, calls a "five-star winter camping" base above the Rude River. The camp sits at the edge of the motor-free zone, so helicopters can transport clients and supplies to within easy reach of its terrain. It's surrounded by cirques and spines, walls and glaciers—basically a backcountry skier's paradise, with no one else around. The Quinns hope to add more camps and allow guests to tour between them, in an American version of the Alps' Haute Route.

Having heard through the grapevine of the guided operation—the only one of its kind in the Chugach—I flew in on a Sunday last March

along with five other skiers and snowboarders prepared to earn their turns. We stashed our gear in Alaska-made Arctic Oven tents, which were erected over plywood floors and stocked with cots, propane heaters, and gasoline generators. Then we settled in for what became a highlight of every day: dinner. Halibut, pulled pork, or the like was prepared nightly by Dostie, who made his living as a chef at a high-end Lake Tahoe restaurant before he became a guide.

The next day, we lapped Chugach velvet until our legs ached. After our second run down to the Franklin Glacier, where we spotted fresh wolverine tracks, Lagasse and I ascended a puckeringly steep couloir to a shaded notch, topping out with both hands clinging to rock. Upon descending what we climbed, Lagasse asked me to name it. I picked Full Contact in honor of Kip Garre, a mutual friend and long-time PNH guide who perished in an avalanche in April 2011 and who used that phrase to refer to any worthy adventure. Lagasse added it to his notebook that night.

Unseasonably cold temperatures and brutal winds hampered our next two days, but on the

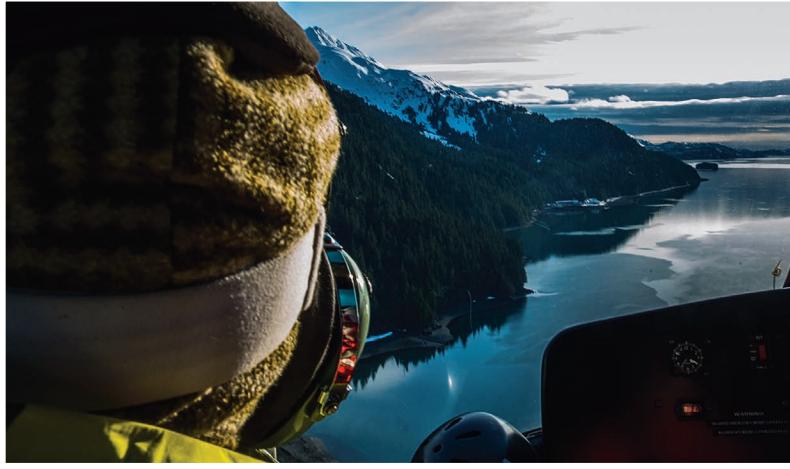
fourth day of the trip, our entire group skinned and crimped up a large peak five miles from camp for a bluebird descent of the run called Shakedown Street. On our way back, not wanting the day to end, four of us broke off for one final climb and descent of an unskied chute on the west face of a peak the guides named Sluffhead in 2011. The sun was orange and fading into Prince William Sound by the time Adam Heil—a Navy pilot who booked his trip at the last minute when a yearlong deployment to Bahrain fell through—pioneered the line. It was perhaps the only place in the entire range where the wind hadn't stripped the powder, and descending it sent a surge of adrenaline through my veins.

That night, after returning to camp from 11 hours of skiing and a magical first descent in soft powder, our faces glowed like the silvery moon overhead. We toasted the day with single-malt scotch in Dixie cups, chilled by the large chunk of glacial ice Dostie had sawed off on our way home from Shakedown and which I'd strapped to my pack for the final descent.

After thinking about it for a few hours, Heil announced his name for the run—his honor, since he'd been the first to descend it.

"Better than Bahrain," he declared, and we all raised our cups. The next morning, Lagasse wrote it in his notebook. ♦

» Ready for some "five-star winter camping" in the Chugach? Points North Heli-Adventures' choppers (right) transport guests and supplies to the edge of its special nonmotorized permit area. From there, all turns (opposite) are earned.



From top: Keoki Fflagg (2); David Stubbs



Lodge »

Arctic Oven tents.

Food »

Breakfasts are delights like French toast, bacon and eggs, or oatmeal. Lunch usually includes sandwiches and bars. Dinners are huge and gourmet, from halibut to shrimp alfredo pasta to beef stew, with plenty of salad and other veggies.

Elevation »

Expect to ski between

4,000

and 10,000 vertical feet per day, all under human power. The guides tailor each day's plan to the group's desires and snow conditions. And they break trail.

Price »

\$2,275

for seven days and six nights, not including your flight to Cordova. Trips run from mid-March to mid-April.

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