



DESTINATION: FREESKI OR DIE: MOUNT WASHINGTON, NH TUCKERMAN RAVINE IS THE BIRTHPLACE OF FREERIDE AND THE EAST'S BEST SKI SCENE

Words: Brian Irwin

Pasta sauce bubbles on the old stovetop, occasionally building to an audible pop that flings red flecks onto the mint green tiles that line the cabin's kitchen. Like everything else on Mount Washington, the ski patrol and snow ranger's weekly pasta night is a tradition. I chew quietly as Tuckerman, Brad's German Shepard, plops his tired head onto my lap. Brad retired from 35 years as head snow ranger, only to turn around and join the ski patrol.

Three hours later, I'm in the patrol cabin lying in my bunk. A propane-burning ash mantle throws dim light onto the rough pages of my book from across the room. I blink and shake my head, realizing I've not read a word in five minutes. Coarse snoring from the top bunk is overridden by the brutal gusts of wind bludgeoning the pine paneling that separates my head from the harsh winter night. I turn off the lantern and crawl into my musky sleeping bag. As the fragile ash dome fades, I screw in my earplugs and listen as the slow crunching of expanding foam drowns out the wind. As I'm enveloped in silence, the wind continues to load snow onto yesterday's sun crust. I think to myself, "Tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

"Patient's packaged and ready to lower."

"Lower."

"Lowering," Chris replies.

His hands steadily loosen as they feed ice-encrusted rope through two carabiners attached to a complex snow anchor. The litter scratches its way across an icy slope, slowly dropping three hundred feet to the next anchor, where the painstaking task of lowering a battered skier down "The Fan" in Mount Washington's Huntington Ravine will continue.

Three hours later, I'm in the back of the US Forest

Service's 1998 LMC snowcat with the fallen skier as we noisily bounce our way down to Pinkham Notch, where an ambulance awaits. The spinning tracks kick up snow onto our laps as I relentlessly quiz the patient in an attempt to evaluate his mental status. Chris Joosen — the head USFS Snow Ranger on Mount Washington — is driving. Sitting in the passenger seat is Cutler, who is not only Chris' best friend but also the avalanche dog for the Mount Washington Avalanche Center.

Lovingly known to locals as "the rock pile,"

Mount Washington is stunning to the eye, with broad shoulders, steep, tempting couloirs and giant snowfields that draw skiers from all over the country. This area is appropriately popular, but has notoriously awful weather. The combination presents unique challenges for Joosen and his crew compared to western avalanche centers.

"Our ravines are relatively small areas, but are used for recreation by a large number of people. Mount Washington's high winds (the mountain holds the record for the highest ground wind speed ever recorded on earth at 231 mph) and heavy snow-loading are daily occurrences," Joosen says. "Upslope flow can turn two inches of snow into a two-foot slab in little time. This, plus our high concentration of visitors, means that if any instability exists, someone is likely to find it."

Tuckerman Ravine is an easy 2.9-mile hike from the parking lot. Ease of access, some of the steepest terrain in the country and a reputation for the spring's best outdoor party scene are all reasons the ravine is packed on most warm spring weekends. Drunken debacles, like riding inner tubes naked over the headwall, conspire against the snow rangers and volunteer ski patrol who try to maintain safety, not order.

Photo: Nick Lambert

Photo: New England Ski Museum

On any given spring day, 2,000 people may pack the ravine and carry varying experience levels, equipment and common sense. In 2006, ten injuries, many serious, occurred in a single hour. In the last 12 years, five people have required rescue after falling into "the hole," a deep (sometimes 100-foot) crevasse that forms in the center of the bowl each year as a result of undermined snowpack from meltwater. In 1994, a 22-year-old woman died after skiing into a crevasse. Incidents like these require patrollers to not only be proficient in first aid, but also in ski mountaineering and alpine climbing.

The increase in accidents on Mount Washington over the last 20 years is in part due to ease of access. Back in the early 1920s, when Tuckerman first became popular, it was very difficult to even reach. To access it required a long trip up a dozen-mile stretch of steep, unplowed road to Pinkham Notch camp (where today's Tuckerman Ravine Trail starts) followed by a three-mile thrash up the Cutler River. But by the mid 1930s, so-called "ski trains" were running regular shuttles between Boston and New Hampshire, bringing thousands of skiers to Mount Washington every spring.

Tuckerman, and to a degree the neighboring ravines, had become booming celebrations of skiing, the country's newest aristocratic sport.

First descents of the more prominent couloirs fell to pioneers such as Dick Durrance and Warren Chivers during the early and mid 1930s. Durrance, Chivers and many other members of the Dartmouth Outing Club used Tuckerman Ravine as a training ground for their university's ski team. Skiers from Harvard did the same and within a short time, Tuckerman's unique walls were used for a multitude of downhill and giant slalom races (Tuckerman is touted as the birthplace of GS), including university competitions, Olympic trials and the famous Inferno Races.

The first Inferno was run in 1933. It was an exhausting descent from the summit to Pinkham Notch and was won by Hollis Phillips in just over 14 minutes. The third Inferno (1939), however, was the race that put Mount Washington on the international ski map.

Toni Matt — an instructor who worked under legendary Hannes Schneider — won in six minutes, 29 seconds, shattering the previous best time. Herbert Schneider, Hannes' son, was

in Tuckerman on the day of the Inferno and recollects the famous run:

"I was just a kid and wasn't skiing in the race, so Toni asked me to hold his lunch. He told me, 'I'm going to ski right over the lip (a rollover that leads to a 50-degree slope), all the way to the bottom and turn only three times.' He skied off the summit cone, soared over the lip, landed and in a blink, he was gone. Later, at Pinkham, he was asked, 'What happened to your three turns?' Toni said, 'I used them all up at the top!' Then he gave me half his sandwich."

Any plums left to be picked on Mount Washington were snatched by Brooks Dodge, who spent a decade pioneering a dozen scary descents, many of which are more popular today as technical climbing routes than ski lines. Fifty years later, his son, Brooks Dodge III, still lives in the area and can often be seen gracefully repeating his father's tracks down Dodge's Drop or The Dutchess.

Opposite page: Lunch Rocks. This pile of boulders is home to the spring's most wild party scene on a warm day. While some ski naked and others drink beer and play the guitar in hoola skirts, this area is still in an alpine zone and is subject to icefall and falling skiers, something that makes it thrilling, but dangerous. **This page:** The first Giant Slalom Race, held between the Dartmouth and Harvard Ski Teams in Tuckerman Ravine, April, 1937. Tucks is revered as the birthplace of GS, a form of race that was invented in response to the high number of accidents that occurred during Downhill events.

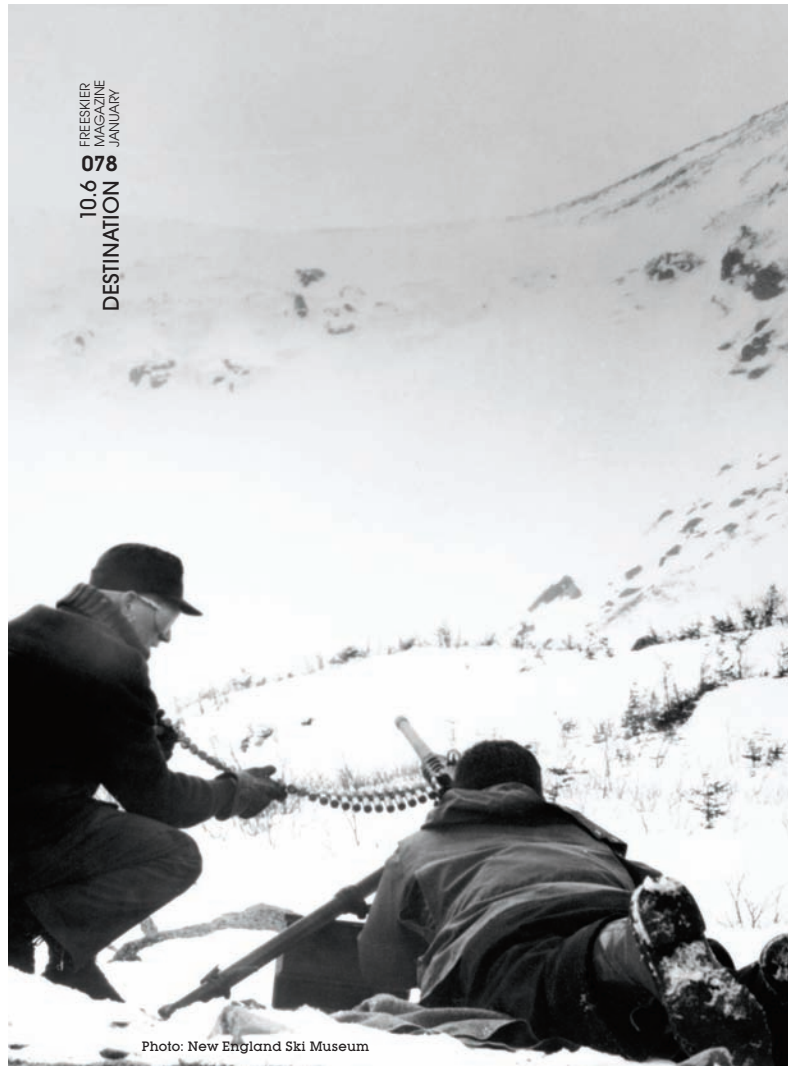


Photo: New England Ski Museum

There aren't too many first descents left to be had on Mt. Washington, but in today's skiing world you can't make history on a mountain where history was made. Instead, enjoy what does exist: broad faces and snowfields, countless 50- to 60-degree couloirs, potential for over 4,000 feet of vertical from summit to pavement and a party scene that would make Whistler jealous. To ski Tuckerman, you can park at the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center on NH route 16. Schlep yourself a couple of miles up the fire road used by the USFS (also named the Tuckerman Ravine Trail) and you'll hit Hermit Lake Shelters. These lean-tos are the only camping around Tuckerman, and there's no hut. But this trip is easily done in a day, so an overnight stay is not necessary. However, for many people, camping is part of the experience.

Lunch Rocks, the giant pile of boulders on the edge of Tuckerman, is the party headquarters on a sunny day. But when the sun goes down, the party continues at Hermit Lake. Music can be heard coming from the shelters and people stumble around with a bottle

in one hand and a burrito in the other, looking for the privy.

From Hermit Lake, follow the crowds up to Tuckerman, or head South on well-marked trails to Hillman's Highway or some of the other 1,500-foot couloirs that drip down from the Boot Spur Ridge.

At the day's end you can ski the entire way back to your car, conditions depending. Although the fire road used to approach Hermit Lake is closed to skiing, you can descend the Sherburne Ski Trail, which parallels the Tuckerman Ravine Trail, a worthwhile destination in itself, comparable to an intermediate to expert level on-resort trail.

Keep in mind that just because this alpine playground is only a short approach from the car and is less than three hours from Boston, it is not any less serious than any other big mountain. Tuckerman and its neighboring ravines are notorious for avalanche activity (about 100 avalanches occur each year), and although the wind here tends to pulverize fragile hoarfrost that would be a late-season weak layer in Colorado, slides still occur. Wear a beacon and know how to use it.

This page: Former Snow Ranger, Brad Ray, feeds a belt of bullets into a .50 caliber machine gun in an attempt to knock down icefall in Tuckerman. Snow Rangers have used Avalaunchers and have even tried dynamite to avoid ice falling on the ravine's visitors. Today, Rangers follow a policy of visitor education and no longer use artillery. **Opposite page:** Cutler the avalanche dog. Cutler trains year-round with his best bud and owner, Head Snow Ranger Chris Joosen. Cutler is legacy to Tuckerman, the USFS aptly named previous avy-trained German Shepherd. Cutler helps respond to roughly 25 search and rescue incidents that occur on Mt. Washington each year.



EX model shown. © 2007 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.



THE SCENE: MT. WASHINGTON

tuckerman.org

Vertical drop (summit to Pinkham Notch): 4,250 feet

Base elevation (Pinkham Notch): 2,030 feet

Base of Tuckerman elevation: 5,300 feet

Summit elevation: 6,288 feet

Average annual snowfall at Summit: 252 inches

Average midwinter snowpack depth: 660 inches

ACCOMMODATIONS:

Joe Dodge Lodge (at Pinkham Notch)

outdoors.org 603-466-2727

This is the only non-camping option around Tuckerman. Expect lodge-style accommodations with bunks, shared bathrooms and a central mess hall.

Multiple inexpensive motels and campgrounds are available in North Conway, just a 20 minute drive south on Route 16.

DRINKING AND DINING:

The Moat

A renovated 1800s farmhouse, this microbrewery is the local's choice for suds and spuds. It specializes in smoked BBQ and wood-fired pizzas. There isn't live music, but the eats can't be beat.

Red Parka Pub

Located in Glen, NH, at the junction of Route 16 and 302, this is the place for tunes. It's mobbed on weekends, but there's a connected dining room in case you're interested in a more civil experience. If not, go downstairs to the bar and tear up the dance floor with all the other partiers.

Author Brian Irwin is a physician in the Mt. Washington Valley and is a member of the Mt. Washington Volunteer Ski Patrol. He started visiting the White Mountains a decade ago and now calls it home. His black lab, Marcy, has been dating Cutler for a few years. No ring yet.



Photo: Joe Klemintovich

