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the HENRYs

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he Colorado Plateau is a region of sculpted slot canyons, wind-swept sand dunes, and red rock deserts — hardly what one might think is ski country.

Text and photo by Tyler Williams

However, the Plateau is sprinkled with a half-dozen ranges that soar above the desert floor, milking snow out of the infrequent winter storms. These snow-capped peaks don't provide great skiing by any stretch, but on occasion, skiers can have absolutely sublime days here. There's nothing like floating through powder with a scorching desert sunset looming beneath your ski tips.

One of the best opportunities to chase that desert sunset comes in the Henry Mountains of south central Utah. The Henrys are smack in the middle of one of the most remote portions of the United States, surrounded on all sides by an uninhabited expanse.

To the east of the Henrys is the surreal and vast Canyonlands, a region observed most poignantly by legendary spokesman for the Plateau — Edward Abbey. He described it as “The least inhabited, least inhibited, least developed, least improved, least civilized ... most arid, most hostile, most lonesome, most grim bleak barren desolate and savage quarter of the state of Utah — the best part by far.” In a

state that is home to the Wasatch Range, skiers might argue with Abbey, but there is no doubt about this area's savage landscape.

To the south of the Henrys, the modest Escalante River cuts a meandering course through miles of petrified sand dunes on its way to Lake Powell. West of the mountains lie the colorful towers of Capitol Reef National Park, and to the north is the harsh San Rafael Desert.

In the middle of all this sand and rock are the incongruous snow-capped peaks of the Henrys. John Wesley Powell observed the jagged blue monolith in 1869 when he and his crew drifted past it on the Colorado River. Powell's battles with whitewater and starvation prevented further exploration at the time, but he did return to name the mountains after physicist Joseph Henry. He also named different peaks within the range: Mt. Pennell for Joseph Pennell, Powell's illustrator; and Mt. Ellen, the highest point in the range at 11,615 feet, after his sister.

Mt. Ellen has a ridgeline running

southward from its summit that supports several unnamed knobs that poke above treeline. Most of these peaks hold appealing skiing lines so, naturally, they were where Brian Cass, Bill Hatcher and I set our sights during a high-pressure spell in late February.

The first challenge of our trip was simply reaching the mountains. After making an impromptu camp to allow the mud-bog covered road to freeze into a hard surface overnight, we drove to within a mile of the mountains before snowdrifts stopped us. The dry desert snow squeaked under the weight of our skis as we began our plod toward a base camp, from which we were to make our runs.

The slow, gradual climb — I was able to make the ascent with only wax — into the Henrys is as pleasurable as the ski down. Those in search of easily accessed steep and deep better stick to the Wasatch.

The Henrys are reserved for adventure seekers who enjoy a beautiful walk as much as a good turn. With every step up the flanks of the Henrys, a surreal world of bewildering geology unfolds below. A sea of red rock buttes and mesas rolls to the horizon, each monument made inaccessible from the next by a maze of dark, bottomless canyons. The fact that we slide across snow amidst this sun-baked land seems ridiculous. Yet there it is, pure, frozen snow draping the mountain in a blanket of white.

It doesn't pile deep here. The 11,000-foot Aquarius Plateau and Thousand Lakes Mountain to the west get first dibs on the storms. Still, the relatively meager two-foot snowpack has its advantages. On that trip it allowed us to dig down to the warmer ground,



where we constructed our tent/igloo base camp.

Our objective for skiing was an unnamed peak of 11,416 feet that punched out of the forest as a classic, white A-frame. The ascent led up a broad ridge alternating between open parks, aspen glades and spruce thickets. As we climbed through one of the north-facing spruce thickets, we made a disheartening discovery — depth hoar.

The sugary snow grew like fungus in the lower layers of the snowpack, creating a ball-bearing unit that could not support our weight. Every time we stopped on the normally solid snowpack, the depth hoar beneath us crumbled into nothingness, leaving us wallowing hip-deep in the sugar snow. Our pace slowed to a crawl, and we headed for open slopes where the sunshine had heated the snowpack into a more consolidated unit.

As we crested the summit, views from both sides of the mountain stretched beyond state lines. The San Juan Mountains of Colorado were visible vaguely in the east, and the dome of Navajo Mountain marked the Arizona border to the south. Political boundaries seemed insignificant here, though. We were on top of a seemingly deserted planet bound by snowy plateaus and filled with naked, rocky, raw earth.

The avalanche danger the depth hoar created prevented us from skiing the steep slopes we had hoped to, so our consolation prize was a low-angle glade that looked relatively sheltered from the winds. The first few turns were a pleasant surprise of sparkling powder. The next few were a firm but skiable wind pack. The next few turns ... well, the turning stopped altogether when we encountered the next surface — breakable crust.

The wind crust sent us on a traverse that began a convoluted descent in search of good snow. Our search paid off when we found an aspen glade ripe with preserved powder. Using the stately white aspen trunks as slalom gates, we bounced through the soft snow with yelps of delight. And just as we began to get absorbed in our wintry aspen grove, an orange glow appeared over the tree tops. It was the reflection of the Canyonlands at sunset, reminding us that we were not just making turns — we were skiing the desert. **bc**

Resources

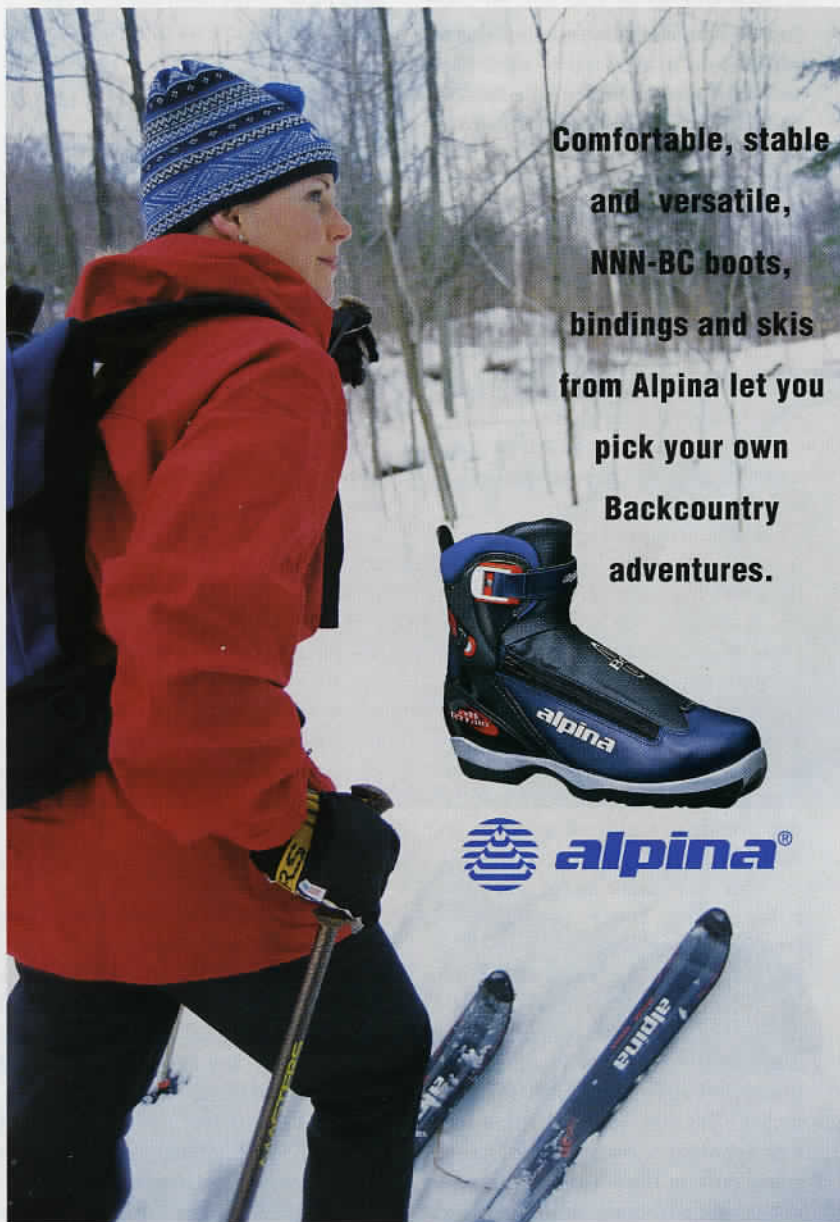
How to get there: From Hanksville, Utah, drive south on state highway 95 to Bull Mountain Road and head west toward the mountains, following signs to Bromide Basin. There is also access via Lonesome Beaver Campground on the north side of the range.

Best time to go: February through April.

Guidebooks: *Hiking and Exploring Utah's Henry Mountains and Robbers Roost* by Michael Kelsey

Info: Bureau of Land Management
Henry Mountains Field Station
P.O. Box 99
Hanksville, UT 84734
435-542-3461

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