

Guides? We Don't Need No Stinkin' Guides

You might not need them, but they sure come in handy

By T. Hamish Tear

... **A** *GUIDE MUST: Never show fear. He should be courteous to all and always give special attention to the weakest member of the party. He should be witty and be able to make up a white lie on short notice, and tell it in a convincing manner. He should know when and how to show authority, and when the situation demands it, should be able to give a good scolding to whomsoever needs it.*—Conrad Kain, one of the original Alpine Club of Canada mountain guides, 1935.

The descent from the hut was steep and direct. We worked our way down carefully, passing a couple of skiers on the uphill grind. Later we came across a forlorn figure in iced-up army fatigues, struggling to make his flimsy, fish-scale golf-course skis provide a modicum of grip. Plastic grocery bags adorned his ankles in place of gaiters against the cold new snow. The rental shop had assured him that this equipment was adequate for the intended route.

He was about to remove his skis and walk when I offered to lend him my spare skins, asking simply that he return them to my office near Vail. (Turning around wasn't an option for him, as the car keys were now getting warm at the hut with the other two guys we'd passed.)

"You guys are guides?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Geez," he muttered as he turned back to his travails. "I wish we'd used guides."

While common sense, some research, and a reasonable rental clerk would have gone a long way to alleviate this extreme-but-true situation, employing a guiding service would have been a sound financial investment for our troubled wanderer and his "friends."

Guiding services clearly benefit the inexperienced, but they also come into their own when seasoned backcountry skiers desire a no-nonsense, hassle-free, get-as-much-skiing-as-you-can mountain experience. "Our clients tend to be either novices, who come for an introduction to the sport and specific instruction, or experi-

enced skiers who need the efficiency a guiding service lends to what can often be a fairly complex undertaking," said Roger Averbeck of Wing Ridge Ski Tours.

Granted, a guide isn't cheap: In 1996, a three-day Tenth Mountain Hut System tour cost \$580 with Vail's Paragon Guides; a six-day tour with Aspen Alpine Guides was \$875 (Braun System Huts), while 23 days with Colorado Outward Bound went for nearly two Gs.

So what do you get for your money?

Ability level will determine much of what you need and get from your guide service, but for starters you'll get a clue as to what route is best for your allotted time and experience. The guide company also takes care of pain-in-the-butt logistics and administrations such as pre- and post-trip accom-

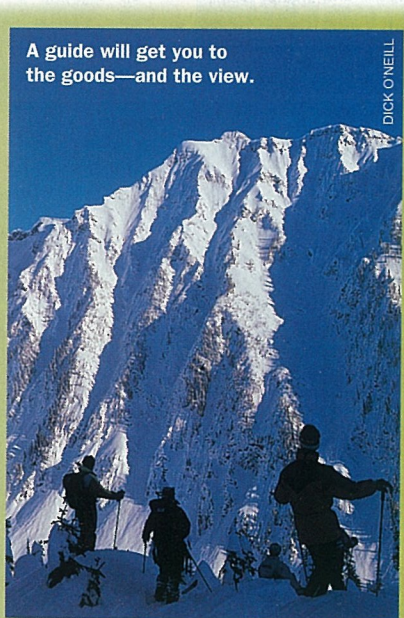
modations, liability forms, hut bookings, shuttles to and from trailheads, food, rentals if necessary, and the elimination of vacation-ruining blunders: "I thought *you* had the hut padlock combination!" Many skiers have secondary agendas while on a tour—photography, fresh tracks, a summit, relaxing and reading in the huts—and having others "manage" the trip allows one the leisure and a less-cluttered mind to pursue these objectives in a more secure environment.

These are the support functions of a guiding service, but when you're on the trail, the nitty-gritty of the guide's job is leadership and decision-making. For instance, getting on the trail early in mid-winter is important. The guide doesn't have to worry about being popular—he'll have you out the door on time. Should skiers become cold and tired on the trail, an undisputed leader is invaluable. From the comfort decisions such as where to stop (for view) or how often (for a group's performance), to where these A types might ski given the overall conditions, someone has to call the shots.

Consider a guide's local knowledge and familiarity. "Weather and snowpack are constantly monitored and experienced by guides who work the same area for the entire winter," says Scott Messina of Aspen Alpine Guides. "They discuss the changing conditions both as a matter of personal interest and professionalism." Alternative routes to those in a guide book can also be a great boon for skiers looking for an off-the-beaten-track experience. "The Braun System has many unmarked route alternatives," adds Messina. "Guides know which to take in any given condition." Many guides work the same terrain in the summer months—it's handy to know what lies under the snowpack.

There can also be a valuable learning component to engaging a guide. Want to improve your navigation, waxing techniques, knowledge of flora and fauna, avalanche awareness, emergency shelter, or use of specific equipment? Trail miles can be greatly enhanced by your guide's adroitness.

Emergency knowledge and training are also tucked into a guide's quiver.



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