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from the January 20, 2005 edition



**DETERRENT FOR THE
DERRING-DO CROWD:**
Warning signs mark the boundary
of The Canyons ski resort in Park
City, Utah where an avalanche
caught five skiers last week.
DOUGLAS C. PIZAC/AP

RISKY RECIPE: BIG SNOW AND MORE THRILL SEEKERS

By David Frey | *Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor*

ASPEN, COLO. —

A foot of snow had fallen overnight on Aspen Mountain, and Billy Zuehlke heeded the call of fresh powder.

With three friends two weeks ago, he cruised to a steep pitch of untracked snow, out of bounds but legal, tucked alongside the mountain's double-black-diamond slopes. An Aspen ski instructor, Mr. Zuehlke knew fresh snow on steep pitches could mean avalanches. But this was familiar territory and he hoped early-season skiers had compacted the bottom layer. A quick duck into the glade and they'd be back in bounds.

Mr. Zuehlke traversed ahead alone when he spotted snow cracking below, then above him. In an instant, the ground gave way and he was swept 50 yards downhill and buried in heavy snow. For a moment, he believed he would suffocate. "Initially what went through my head was, 'Oh, my friends are going to kill me,'" he said. "The next thought was, 'Does this mean I can't ski in Jackson Hole tomorrow?'"

Zuehlke freed an arm and managed to dig himself out, escaping with just a strained tendon in his leg. "Things could have been a lot worse," he says.

Each year, more and more skiers and snowboarders head into the backcountry to quench a growing thirst for an adventurer's rush - deep powder, big solitude, and high adrenaline - that groomed ski areas can't deliver. The abundance of off-piste gear and even the proliferation of communication devices has encouraged the surge in confidence convincing thrill seekers to trudge off the trail. But sometimes that courage eschews precaution, and skiers can be careless about learning practical safety techniques to avert, or survive, avalanches.

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Indeed, avalanches have killed 16 people in the US this season. Last Sunday, searchers found the body of a snowboarder who triggered an avalanche outside The Canyons ski resort near Park City, Utah. The same day, a pair of snowboarders were killed in an avalanche in the mountains of northern Idaho.

Colorado has logged 896 avalanches this month, from slides triggered intentionally by ski patrollers firing Howitzers to natural slides on remote slopes. For every slide reported, 10 may go unseen. That prompted rare warnings last week, urging thrill seekers to stick to the resorts.

One reason for the danger is the battery of storms that hammered the West through early January, bringing avalanche risk so high some called it "apocalyptic."

Another factor is the growing lure of the backcountry. "I think extreme sports and the attitude of adventure and daring and risk-taking certainly motivate people," says Dale Atkins, an avalanche forecaster for the Colorado Avalanche Information Center in Boulder. "Add to that the gear. It's easier to use and that makes it easier for people to get out there."

Once the province of old-school experts, free-heeled ski gear has become heftier, making it easier for novices to master the tricky telemark turn. Alpine touring gear, meanwhile, lets skiers free their heels for walking up slopes and lock them down for rides through virgin powder.

Figures are hard to pin down, but most agree that the numbers of backcountry skiers and boarders are growing while ski areas struggle to increase visitors. Industry figures estimate that 3 to 6 percent of the nation's 11 million skiers venture out of bounds - some 300,000 to 500,000. Telemark gear sales leaped 75 percent from 2003 to 2004.

"There's just a natural human desire to test oneself and go to the next level, and backcountry offers the adventure you can't get anywhere else," says Craig Dostie, publisher and editor of Couloir magazine, devoted to off-piste skiing.

Recent events, however, have sobered the derring-do set even though many say the rush of adrenaline and the sights of untouched terrain are hard to resist. "[Backcountry skiing] makes you feel in touch with nature," says Zuehlke. "Whatever else is going on in town below you is a distant memory."

And Atkins hopes skiers, no matter how skilled or knowledgeable, use good sense. "When big avalanches are triggered naturally ... there are few places to hide."

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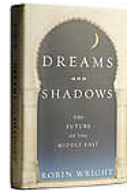
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