

Shasta: stairway to Heaven

Former World Cup and Olympic downhiller Konrad Bartelski makes a pilgrimage to one of California's most iconic mountains

It all started when Daron Rahlves, the US Ski team downhill racer posted a message on Facebook that caught my attention: "I've always heard of awesome Mt Shasta experiences and how it delivers incredible skiing in the summer months."

Rahlves was the dare-devil who attacked the Hausberg Kante - one of the last jumps on the Streif, the legendary downhill race course on Kitzbühel's Hahnenkamm, like no other racer. His shoulders squeezed right down on his knees as he skittered over the corrugated boiler-plate, relishing the insane 90mph plunge down into the finish.

Mount Shasta is a gloriously stand-alone peak which is part of the dramatic volcanic Cascade range in America's north-west. My search engine came up with "Shasta has a reputation of being one of the Seven Sacred Mountains of the World". This was followed by the mythology of the writings of the Mystic Temple inside

the mountain, said to be the home of the legendary Lemurians; tall, graceful and with large foreheads, who sounded like James Cameron's

Avatars.

More helpful though, was finding the Mt Shasta Guides website. Chris and Jennifer Carr have been running Shasta Mountain Guides for 10 years, and although most of their clients summit and return on foot, the great ski terrain is attracting more and

more ski touring. SMG offer what the National Geographic Magazine describes as one of North America's greatest adventures - "to ski a '14'er" (a mountain

over 14,000 ft) at a cost of \$600 for a three day guided experience, with training and acclimatization. This was to be a real voyage out of my comfort zone - a stark contrast to the heat and flat farmlands I drove through on the four-and-a-half-hour journey north from San Francisco.

The next morning, Chris Carr introduced me to Rich Meyer and Dane Brinkley, two of his senior guides, who took us through the equipment check and loaded up our already heavy rucksacks with the tents and additional supplies. When Rich told us to leave the shovel and transponder behind, that filled me with confidence - these guys know what they are doing. No point in taking any superfluous weight, and the guides knew what lay ahead. And soft, loose snow was not one of them.

After a 20-minute drive up to the Bunny Flats car park at 6,900 ft, there was a half-mile hike to the snow line. From here we skinned up to 'Hidden Valley' at 9,200ft, and

set up base camp, for my first ever night out up a mountain while still in my ski gear! And the beauty of the experience was not diminished by the drop in temperature to minus 6. The stunning sunrise was enhanced by Dane's tasty porridge and hot chocolate, which energised us for a

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morning of schooling in the use of crampons and emergency arrests with an ice axe. This was swiftly followed by an altitude acclimatizing tour up to 10,800 ft, which also enabled Rich to check everyone's skiing and snowboarding ability. No discrimination here - split-boards are welcomed, and are proving very popular in North America.

Late that afternoon we huddled around the rocks with a small gas fire to cook our dinner as Rich and Dane, with 170 summits between them, ran through the final plans for the assault on the peak that towered dauntingly above our heads. "Make sure you eat well" said Rich. "You'll need all the energy you can get". My stomach churned as I stared at the immense scale of the undertaking.

At 2am, a small trail of headlights pointed up the white slope as we slowly trundled our way up along the huge expanse of snow, heading up to the summit at 14,179 feet. For just over an hour, we

scratched along the icy spring snow, using our skins with ski-crampons fitted to get better purchase in the hard, wind-blown conditions. Then, in the cold windy night, we tied our skis to our rucksacks and continued on foot, heading up the couloir known as Misery Hill. The reason for the name was soon apparent: it kept on going up and up, and on and on.

As we broke through the 11,000 foot level, something unexpected happened to me. In spite of all the time I'd spent in the Alps during my racing career, the altitude

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was getting to me. Rich spotted it quickly. "I need to hook you up to my rope" he said calmly. "You're looking a bit unsteady on your feet." Dane continued climbing with the others. But my chest felt as though it was ready to burst. "I think the altitude is impacting on you" said Rich. "So let's keep a very steady pace". I was impressed that he'd noticed the subtleties that revealed to him how I was being challenged.

It was still dark and too cold to rest for long, so - ever so slowly - we continued to creep up the snowy face. Our reward was sunrise, which brought a faint cheer to my strained lungs. Yet even now it would be two

long hours before the rays swept over the ridge and brought real warmth to our extremities. At last we could stop and take stock of the incredible scale of rugged geography beneath us. With Dane and the rest of the group at least an hour ahead by now, I figured on climbing up far enough to get the best of the skiing down, but I knew I'd have to sacrifice making the summit. It was a very disheartening decision, yet being realistic and wise is critical in such an environment. "That's the toughest thing to do" said Rich. "Yet it's good

to preserve our strength. There's some great skiing to come!"

As we gazed down over the whole of Northern

California, the bright white tongues of snow were in stark contrast with the dark and angry formations of solidified lava and the deep green Wilton-esque carpet layering the valley thousands of feet below.

Finally on skis again, Rich and I quickly lost altitude - a welcome respite, yet the descent seemed to unravel incessantly. My parched throat was a stark reminder of the huge mileage back to base camp. "Wow! We seemed to have the whole mountain to ourselves!" I blurted out, as we freewheeled anywhere we cared to go. Back at Hidden Valley, it was time to pack up and wait for Dane and his group to ski down from

the summit to join us. There was still two hours of skiing back to the Bunny Flats car park.

As we collapsed the tents, it was close on 30 degrees at base camp - a stark contrast with the freezing temperatures of the night, which is what in many ways summarised the whole experience for me. The mythology and serenity of the mountain is what had caught my imagination, yet the experience of being stretched, both physically and mentally to such extremes, was rewarding beyond my expectations.

Driving back to San Francisco, more than 100 miles away, I could still see the majestic peak in my rear view mirrors. Imagine being on the M4 driving into London and still being able to see a mountain in Bristol? In the Alps, Mt Shasta would be the seventh highest mountain, and yet in Northern California Shasta is a solitary soul surrounded by some of the most beautiful, rolling wilderness landscape. It's a veritable Stairway to Heaven - a huge monument to the fact that there is so much more to this world than we ever realise. Sadly, however, on this occasion we were not greeted by the legendary Lemurians. ■

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