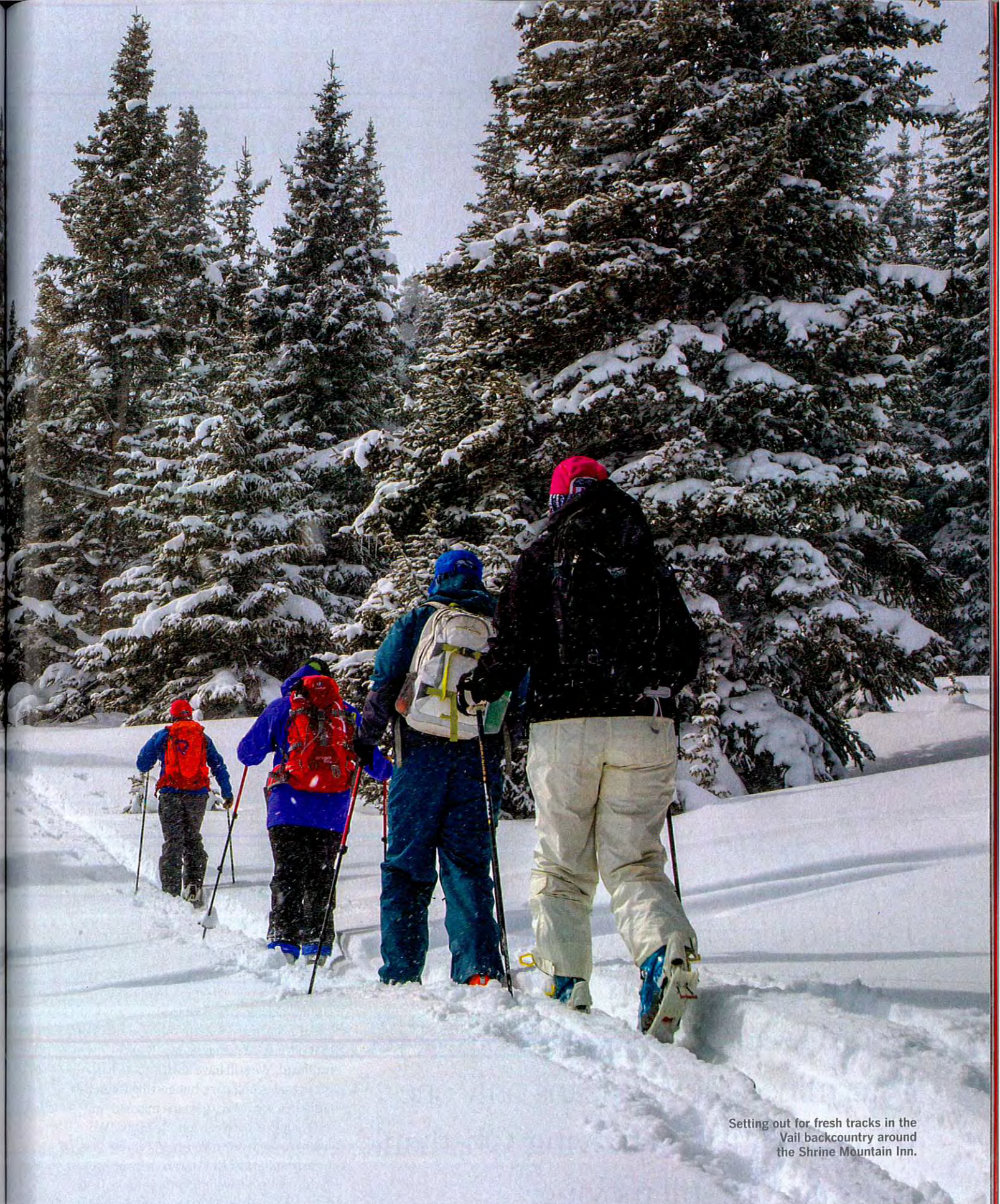


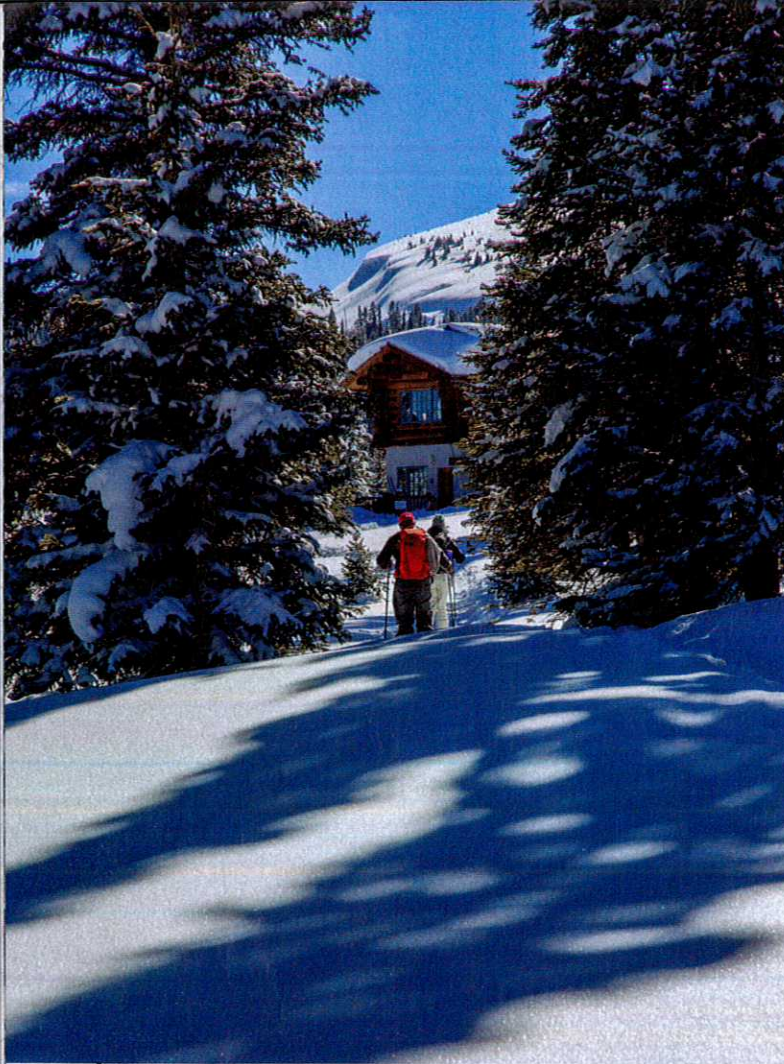
One skier's
ambitious plan
to take his
entire family,
including his
over-the-hill
parents, on
their very first
hut trip.

*by kevin luby
photos by kerri bascetta*

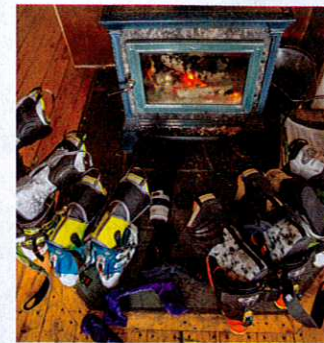
the great backcountry experiment



Setting out for fresh tracks in the
Vail backcountry around
the Shrine Mountain Inn.



Left: The author's parents spy Walter's Cabin for the first time—to their great relief. Below: Inside the cabin, slippers are the footwear of choice for cozying up with a cup of tea and relaxing by the wood stove before setting out for the day.



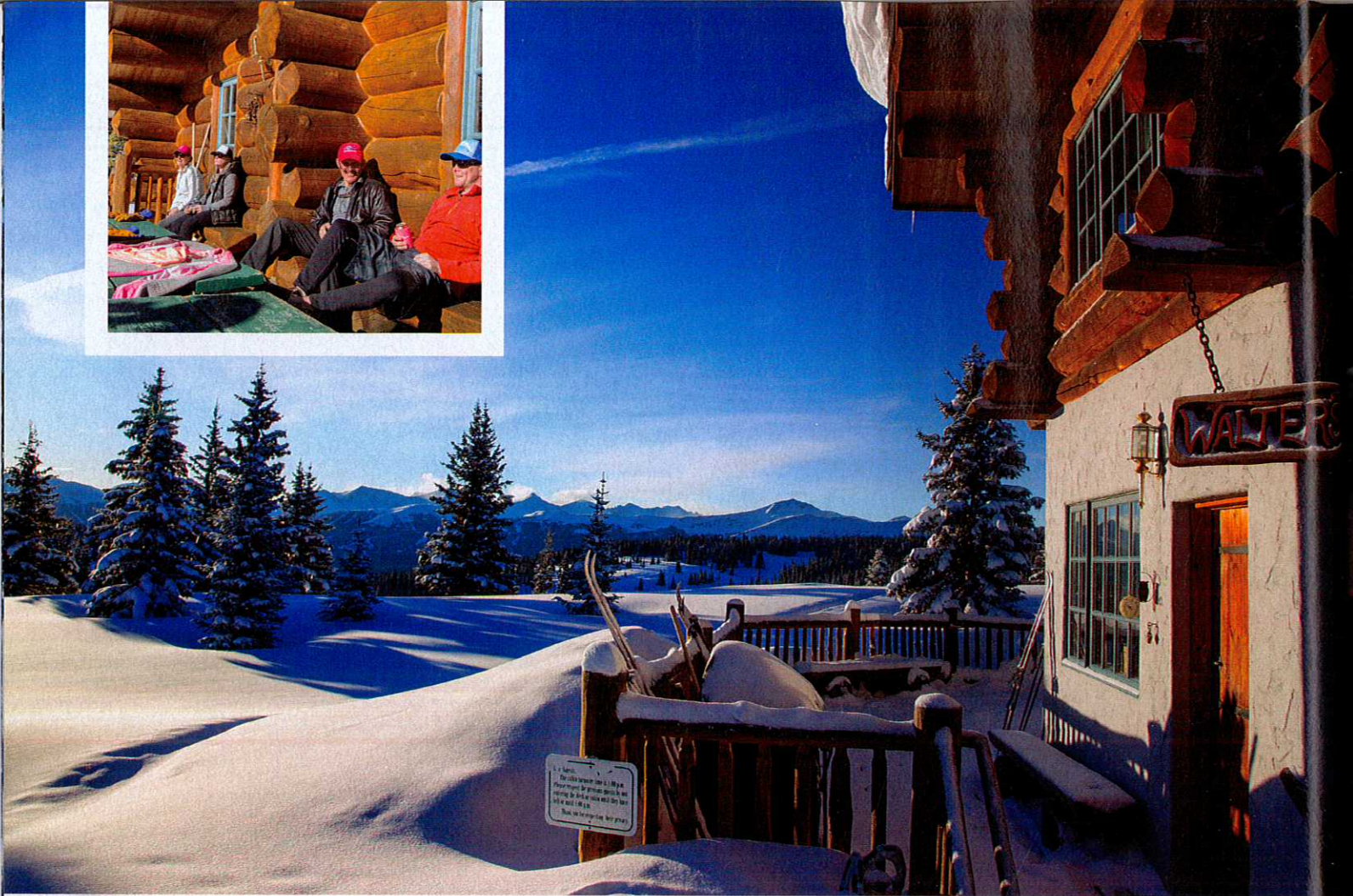
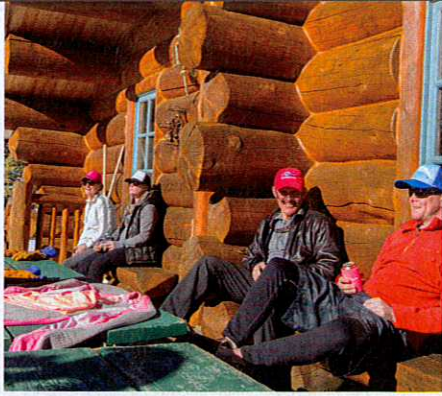
clack...clack... clack.

I hear their Marker touring bindings slapping through the pines well before I see them. Their plodding yet determined racket means only one thing: They're still moving. Oh, thank Jesus, they're still moving.

Neither the altitude, the heavy packs, the novelty of their first hut trip, nor that handful of extra beers Dad insisted on packing because "How else we s'posed to have fun at night?" have done them in yet. I am pretty impressed, actually. For a couple of old birds—my dad's knocking on 70's door and my mom is well into her 63rd year—they made pretty good time up the three and a half miles and 800 feet of elevation gain of the Shrine Pass Ski Trail on 10,550-foot Vail Pass. I'd put them solidly in the upper middle of the pack for their age group, especially considering their hefty gear. Hearing them shuffle up the trail does soothe a few of the trepidations about this family backcountry ski trip to Walter's Cabin and the Shrine Mountain Inn—trepidations that developed rather suddenly at the trailhead. We still have a ways to go before the actual skiing part, but getting them this far is a victory. "We're gonna make it!" my mom squeals between long breaths. "We just have to go our own pace." I throw her a warm smile as I slide by on the way back to the trailhead, welling with pride to hear them having fun on the tour into the hut.

Starry skies above Walter's, which offers great views of the Ten Mile and Gore mountain ranges.





To ease everyone's burden on the hike in, I've offered to take two trips to carry the extra supplies, but I regret the decision as soon as I lay eyes on the sun-drenched cabin. I arrive back at Walter's dripping sweat and a bit light-headed to find that everyone has assumed the position on the deck: my sister, Christy; her boyfriend, Dave; my parents, Bob and Susie; and my girlfriend, Keri. Between slices of salami and cheese, they take in their first hut-trip views of the towering Gore Range framed by deep blue high-country skies. "This is just great, Kev," Dad says between sips of beer with half-closed eyes and a look of complete satisfaction. He's spent, and so is everyone else. They all look like wilted plants trying to will the sun into reviving them. Despite how everyone in the group grew up around skiing, Keri is the only one with any backcountry experience. It's clear that the first climb at 12,000 feet has taken a toll. "No worries, the hard part's over," I reassure them while attempting to hide my exhaustion after 12 miles of shuttling gear. "Nothing to do but relax now," I say even though I'm far from relaxed myself.

Walter's Cabin sits farther up the ridge from the other two cabins that together compose the Shrine Mountain Inn. The two levels each sleep six, and the cabin's ample nooks and crannies are perfect for recharging.

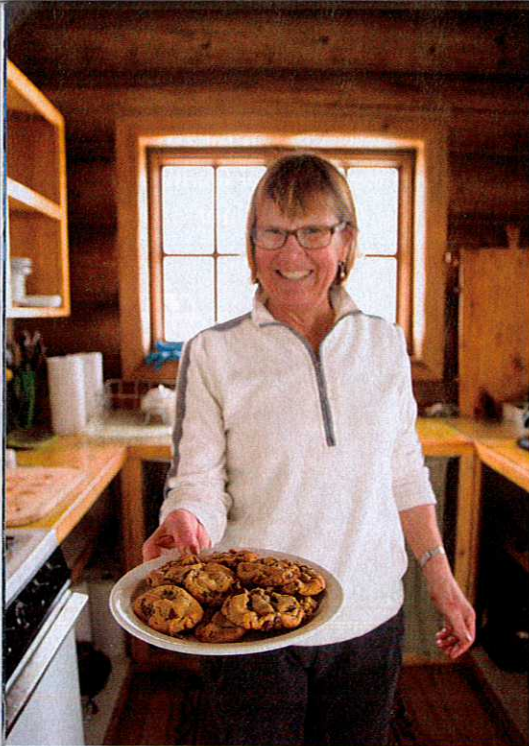
My second hike up Vail Pass brought my responsibility on this trip into sharper focus. I am guiding my loved ones on their first backcountry adventure. Much of my excitement leading up to the trip has turned into stress about avalanche safety, equipment familiarity, and fitness levels. Though most

of my backcountry experience has been relatively incident-free, those back-of-mind worries begin to surface. For a brief moment, I have a very real feeling that I might kill someone. Perhaps, though, I'm actually coming to terms with an even more difficult realization. My parents are getting old.

The idea for this unorthodox family adventure hatched months ago. We hadn't taken a family vacation in years, and with my father's 70th birthday on the near horizon and my parents' 30th wedding anniversary not far past that, a trip to Vail, where they'd met, spent their formative ski-bum years, had kids, and ultimately got hustled out of town as the cost of living took a turn for the exponential, seemed like the perfect way to come together. We'd spend most of the week enjoying on-mountain dining, perfect

My second hike up Vail Pass brought my responsibility into sharper focus. I'm guiding my loved ones on their first backcountry adventure.

groomers, and lifts from the comfort of an in-town condo. Two nights in a backcountry cabin was my little added piece of flair. "It'll be great!" I promised them. "The huts have cozy wood-stove warmth, comfy beds, picturesque beauty, and even running water. The hike in isn't too bad either," I said. "Oh,



but-tripping 101

- 1. Book early.** With the boom in backcountry skiing, good huts are in short supply. The 10th Mountain Division Huts in Colorado, the nation's largest system of backcountry dwellings, holds a lottery each spring for the following winter to manage reservations during peak season.
- 2. Start small.** A one-night trip at a hut with a short approach is the perfect way to get introduced to backcountry overnights. Mini adventures will help hone your gear sense and meal planning for bigger trips. You have to carry everything in, so it's good to get it right.
- 3. Get educated.** While many huts offer safe, avalanche-path-free approaches, it's important to have a working knowledge of snow safety, from avalanche burial scenarios to tree-well rescues. The backcountry demands respect.
- 4. Bring games.** While most huts have cards or other small diversions left over by previous groups, it's good to bring your own. Our favorites? Travel cribbage and Bananagrams.
- 5. Whiskey before beer.** Hard liquor packs in easiest. A decent bourbon poured in a glass over a clean snowball makes a tasty backcountry refreshment after a day of skiing.
- 6. Drink water.** Winter travel at high elevation is one of the speedier routes to dehydration. Keep a close eye on water intake. If someone is bonking, it's typically because he needs more water and maybe a small bite of food.
- 7. Don't forget the Tums.** Seriously.



Top: The author's father looking like a pro on his first backcountry powder run. Right: The crew takes a breather in the windy conditions.

Kev, that sounds like so...much...fun!" And with my mom's approval, the great family hut trip was on.

We awake the next morning to a completely different scene. Eight inches of fresh blankets yesterday's sun crust. Fat, white, cotton-candy flakes fall quietly from a milk sky. The entire crew has become quite fond of the creature comforts offered by the hut: coffee, whiskey, games, and home-cooked meals. We toy with the idea of skipping the skiing part altogether, but, as blue-blooded skiers, we find the promise of powder too enticing. We shuffle clumsily out of the cabin, and the lessons begin immediately. I go over applying skins, working pin bindings, and layering. We run beacon drills and talk through



avalanche rescue scenarios. The little squirt who learned to pizza and french-fry between his parents' legs is both terrified and excited to return the favor in backcountry terrain—on a powder day,

no less. The worry fades as I break trail and watch Dad throw tufts of whipped snow up with his pole, admiring the untrackedness of it all. "I remember this stuff," says my dad. "This is what ya call Colorado blower. You can't find this anywhere else."

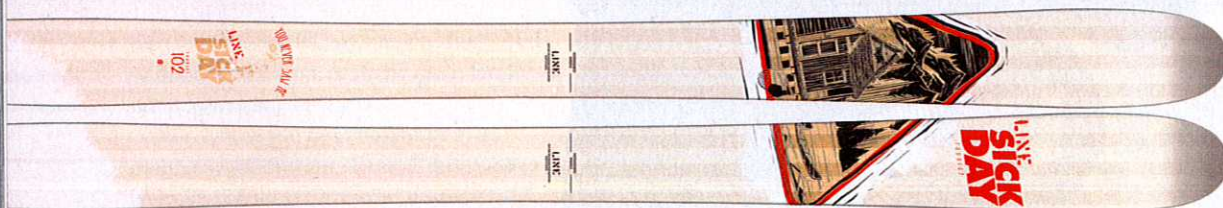
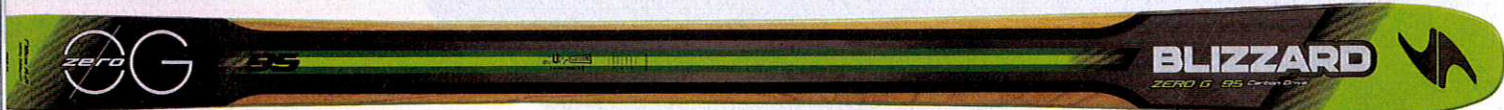
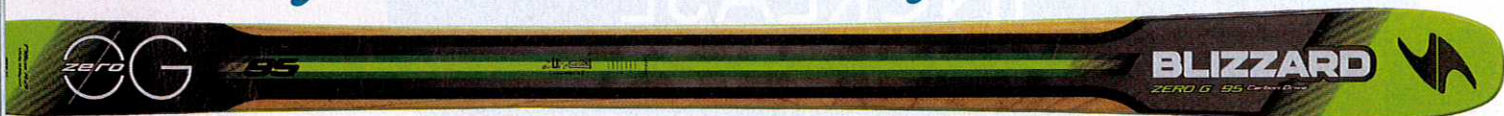
The buzzing glide of our climbing skins breaks the snowy quiet in the protected trees as we work toward the ridge of Shrine Mountain. At the steep section I try to cut a mellow skin track. Dave has picked up

"I remember this stuff," says my dad. "This is what ya call Colorado blower. You can't find this anywhere else."



Dave gets ready to sample the fresh powder that fell overnight—the same blower that’s causing Susie’s awesome permasmile.

what you need: backcountry toolkit



Blizzard Zero G 95

Some sort of carbon-construction voodoo makes this ski both incredibly light and incredibly fun to ski. Its 95-mm waist won't leave you wanting on deep days, but it's still versatile enough for less-friendly conditions. This is easily one of the best pure touring skis on the market. blizzardsportusa.com; \$840

Line Sick Day Tourist 102

Part of Line's popular Sick Day series, the Tourist combines a playful and surfy shape and an ultralight flax and carbon-laminated balsa-wood core with carbon laminates. The result is an energetic and surprisingly sturdy touring ski with plenty of pep for serious descents. lineskis.com; \$800



SCARPA Freedom RS

Full disclosure, I (the author) work at SCARPA. But I think the Freedom RS is one of the best cross-over alpine-AT boots out there. A generous, friction-free walk mode pairs with a legitimate 130 flex, making the RS adept both in- and out-of-bounds. scarpa.com; \$849



Pakems Classic High-Top

Cram these light, insulated camp booties into the bottom of your pack for maximum in-hut comfort. They're cozy without getting too warm in the cabin, and the rubberized sole is perfect for trips to the outhouse or bringing in wood. pakems.com; \$60

Bananagrams

Akin to Scrabble but with much more energy, Bananagrams is simple, fun, and challenging. It packs into a convenient little banana-shaped pouch and is a perfect nighttime distraction. bananagrams.com; \$15

Flylow Genius Jacket

Made from breathable Polartec NeoShell fabric, this sleek hardshell offers best-in-class weather protection while being very ski-tour friendly thanks to its feather weight, packability, and massive pit zips for dumping heat. flylowgear.com; \$400





Top: The author and his sister make tracks on a low-angle slope. Inset: Their parents, Bob and Susie Luby, celebrate both Bob's 70th birthday and their 30th wedding anniversary this year.

the skinning rhythm nicely. So has Christy, though she's got concerns about a nagging ankle injury. Dad flails a bit on a funky little incline. "Chest up. Put your weight on your heels for the most traction on your skins," I say. Dave offers to give him a little shove. He's huffing and puffing once he's past the impediment—"I just can't catch my wind." Yet he pushes on, determined, in his

favorable wind. Numb hands fumble with the transition from walk to ski as I try to show the easiest way to de-skin, layer up, and get ready to ski. Despite my protests, my family decides that I should drop first, and I pole away on the low-angle terrain trying desperately to find speed. As the ridge rolls over, I dive into my first turn meeting zero resistance. I'm breathless as flakes spill

Next up, Mom drops. I can hear her laughing. Her spoon turns look straight out of the Vail Back Bowls during the '80s.

69th year, to discover another facet of the sport that shaped him. One could trace a number of events that brought us together on a blustery Rocky Mountain ridgetop in February, but none is as significant as the chance encounter of two ski bums in the valley 6,000 feet below us over 30 years ago.

On top of Shrine Mountain, it's clear the larger tour I planned for the day is off the table. Instead we opt for a short pitch off the ridge fattened by fresh snow and a

over my shoulders and my skis just skim the supportive base under the new snow. It's marvelous—truly and utterly perfect—and over far too soon. At the bottom, I whip around to get a good angle on my family behind me, partly for avalanche safety—though I have no concerns given the low angle of the pitch—but mostly to watch everyone take in their first backcountry turns. First my sister goes, showing off technique honed by years of Sun Valley

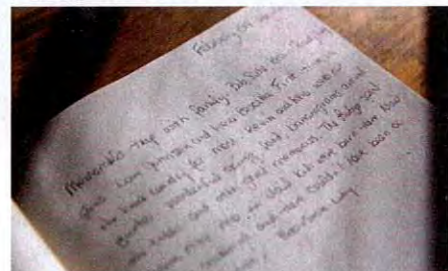


Town Series races, then Dave. For a couple from the carve mecca of Ketchum, Idaho, they paint purdy tracks down the fresh canvas. Next up, Mom drops. She looks young and fit linking turns like someone half her age, thanks in part to new rockered skis, in part to a race background that got her all the way to a bronze medal in the 1972 Olympic downhill, but mostly to that fitness class she's recently gotten into. I can hear her laughing. Her spoon turns look straight out of the Vail Back Bowls during the '80s. Truthfully, this little 200-vertical-foot pitch is the best chance she'll get to re-create that bygone time. Finally, Dad drops. Calculated at first, he picks up speed. Flakes climb up his chest. It's thrilling to watch. Back and forth, he bobs through the best snow he's skied in almost a decade. But unlike countless folks his age, he hasn't lacked opportunity. My parents still ski regularly, as do Christy and Dave. And it's not the length of the pitch or the steepness or even the snow, immaculate though it is, that has Dad—all of us—so stoked. It's the effort it took to get here: getting away from jobs, committing to a week together to ski and venture out into something beyond our

The whole group poses outside Walter's Cabin. Christmas card photo? We think yes.

comfort zone. It's the kind of hard work, in the chaos of six different lives going in six different directions, that our family doesn't do enough.

We pass around high fives, fist bumps, and excited glances at the bottom of the little hill. "Everyone's in for another lap, right?" I ask. First Christy and Dave nod, then Mom. It's easy to see they haven't had enough. Then to our surprise, the old guy chimes in, "Oh, shit. I'm sure I'll survive one more." We head up the skin track with much less difficulty this time. On top of the ridge, chests heave as flakes sputter from the sky, and the clouds break enough to show us Walter's Cabin glowing warm in the distance. If there's time for reflection on the quiet, the peacefulness, the pace, the company, and the touch of shared suffering in the backcountry, this is it, but like the true ski family we are, we just rip skins and shove off, everyone picking another velvety, unforgettable, worth-every-bit-of-effort line down the pitch. Yet again, the turns are glorious. ●



shrine mountain inn Backcountry Luxe

You'd be hard-pressed to find mention of the Shrine Mountain Inn, a three-hut property including Walter's Cabin, Chuck's Cabin, and Jay's Cabin, just 15 miles east of the world's most glamorous ski areas, in any of the Vail Valley's visitor's guides. Yet just three miles off the nearest winter road on Shrine Pass, it's one of the more beautiful backcountry facilities in the United States. Rough-hewn log exteriors give way to warm, inviting interiors and overstuffed furniture. Each hut has a bathroom, hot running water—a serious luxury in the backcountry—and a kitchen. You need only bring your food and a light sleeping bag. There's even a wood-fired sauna for max relaxation. Reserve your stay through the 10th Mountain Division Hut Association, which maintains more than 30 backcountry huts in Colorado. Rates run \$43 per person, per night during the winter. huts.org