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# EVEN EXPERTS CAN GET BETTER

The craggy Tetons in northwestern Wyoming loom intimidatingly above Jackson Hole, but for adventurous skiers, the range's summits, faces and couloirs are a worthy challenge ... if they've got the requisite skills. One of the country's oldest guide services—based in Jackson Hole—wants to teach you. **BY DINA MISHEV**



JACKSON HOLE, WY

**R**eaching the summit of Buck Mountain, the hard work should be over. Over two days, you've climbed up 6,000 feet from the valley floor. Last night you camped—in a tent, in a snowfield—near one of the highest lakes in Grand Teton National Park, Timber-

line Lake. You watched the Teton Range throw its profile—a shadow of it—down on Jackson Hole. This morning, you tackled the final 1,000-some feet to Buck's summit, negotiating a knife-edge ridge that, to the north, fell away thousands of feet. It was as exhilarating as it was

CREDIT: TKT/K



terrifying. Now standing on your school bus-sized aerie with the dozen other members of your group, the South, Middle, and Grand Tetons loom to the north. East, on the far side of the valley, mountain range after mountain range stretches into the distance. Winding through the valley floor, the Snake River lives up to its name.

Of course you want to take photos. Using a trick learned two days prior, on another, less exposed but equally beautiful summit elsewhere in the range, you carefully take off your backpack and secure it to the slope using webbing and a carabiner. It's important your backpack doesn't go over an edge. You don't want to lose the snacks in it. More importantly, you don't want to lose your skis, which are tightly lashed to its exterior. You didn't climb 11,939-foot Buck just to climb it. You've climbed Buck to ski its East Face.

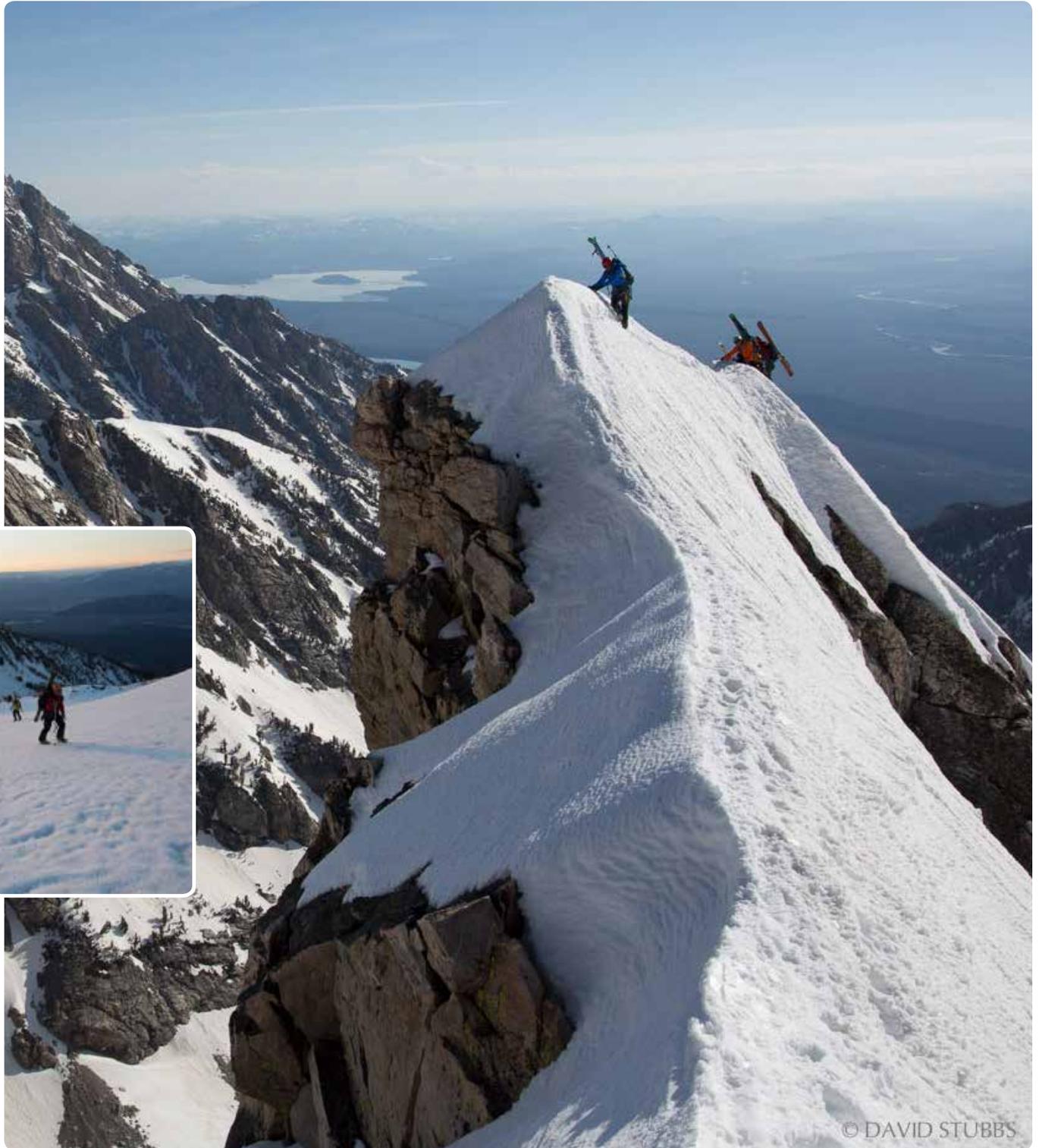
One of a handful of skiers in Exum Mountain Guides' annual four-day Live to Ski Camp, you're already an amazingly proficient skier, tackling anything at the nearby Jackson Hole Mountain Resort

and hitting the backcountry as often as possible, maybe having a couple of heli-ski trips under your belt, and understanding the basics of avalanche safety. You've applied—all applicants have to submit a skiing resume; Exum guide and camp found Zahan Billimoria says less than half are accepted—to this camp because there's even more out there—high alpine peaks not accessible by lifts or helicopters—you want to explore. Skiing these peaks requires climbing and skiing skills no one else in the country teaches.

"There's a huge gap between being a proficient backcountry skier who hunts for powder all winter long and developing the skills to go ski steep, high-consequence terrain that might involve a rappel or some belaying," says Billimoria. "That's what this camp was designed for—to help backcountry skiers bridge that gap to becoming solid ski mountaineers."

Ski mountaineering combines skiing and mountaineering. General backcountry skiing involves skiers skiing up (also known as skinning) a mountain before skiing down. Ski mountaineers do the same,

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but often use climbing skills and gear such as ropes, harnesses, crampons and ice axes. Ascending a route, ski mountaineers might transition from skinning to carrying skis on their back so that they can climb up an ice waterfall. (For the final 1,000 feet up Buck, you had your skis on your back; not because you had to ice climb, but because it was too steep to skin.) Skiing down, ski mountaineers might rappel a section that is unskiable (such as a cliff band or ice waterfall). General backcountry skiing has little objective danger aside from the current avalanche hazard and obstacles such as trees. Ski mountaineering is often in high-consequence and steep terrain where a slip or fall, on the ascent or descent, may result in serious injury or death. A ski mountaineer might ski on belay, with a rope attached to her climbing harness while a partner above

works the other end to prevent significant sliding after a fall. Glory Bowl, above Teton Pass at the southern end of the Tetons (and a place Exum does single-day guided trips) is backcountry skiing. The North Face of Spalding Peak, which you skied on day 1, Skywalk above Avalanche Canyon (day 2) and the East Face of Buck, your final exam for the camp, are all ski mountaineering.

“The reason we’re so stringent about participants’ experience and skill level is that we’re really committed to delivering an A+ experience for the people who are ready,” says Billimoria, who grew up in Switzerland and has been rock and ski guiding for Exum for ten years. “There are lots of learning and skill building opportunities for intermediates, but really none for high level people who want to take it to the next level and eventually tackle alpine style objectives

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like Denali, Shuksan, or the Grand Teton.” The applicants who made the cut for the camp range in age from early 20s to early 60s. The majority are in their 40s. In my camp, I was one of two women.

While Buck involved a night of camping, the first two days focused on instruction and skill development like constructing anchors or skiing on belay. Each of these days we were back in Jackson in time for dinner. We could have learned about anchors to belay off or rappel from in a conference room, but that’s not how this camp goes. Instead, guides found a giant boulder in the middle of the Meadows, a flattish area at nearly 10,000 feet up Garnet Canyon and beneath the Middle Teton, and actually had everyone practice building anchors. First though, we climbed 12,240-foot Spalding Peak and skied its 1,500-foot North Face, practicing skiing on belay at its very top, where the pitch approached fifty degrees. Skiing on belay, one end of a rope tied into my harness and the other end in the hands of an Exum guide and co-owner Nat Patridge above, wasn’t as burdensome as you expected. Patridge asked that you count out loud to three. “Turn every time you get to ‘three,’” he said. (Turning at consistent intervals sets up the belayer to smoothly feed out the rope, rather than getting hung up and having the rope pull you backwards.)

The next day we learned more about skiing on belay—and got to belay some of our fellow campers—while skiing runs off the north face of Albright Peak. Each day, camp guides challenged us to think more and more for ourselves, a skill necessary in the mountains. “There’s no one correct way to do this stuff,” Billimoria, and the four other instructors repeated over and over. “We want to show you several different ways and then you can make the choice which

is the way that works for you.”

Stepping into your skis on the summit of Buck, you know the hard part is not over. Also, you’ve decided that skiing the top part of the face on belay works best for you. Considered one of the classic ski mountaineering routes in the Tetons, the top of the 1,200-foot East Face nears fifty-degrees in pitch. About two-thirds of the way down, the face is bisected by a two-hundred-foot tall cliff band. To the left of the cliff band, there is a break in the rocks you can ski through, but a fall high on the face, when you’re still above the cliffs, is disastrous. There’s little likelihood of being able to self-arrest before flying off the cliff. You’re fairly certain you’ve got the skills to ski the top without falling, but, since falling has such high consequences, why take the risk? “A rope isn’t a weakness, but a really valuable tool,” Billimoria says.

Making your first turns off Buck’s summit, you’re smiling. Actually, no. Smiling doesn’t do it justice. You’re beaming. A goofy grin owns your face. You’re still concentrating and focused and don’t want to fall—being on belay saves you from the cliffs below but not from the ribbing of fellow campers—but missing is the steely taste of fear you’ve had before at the top of intimidating lines. You’re going to enjoy this. Four turns in you let loose a yelp. The Haute Route was great and so is heading out of bounds from the top of Jackson Hole Mountain Resort’s tram, but carving turns through the corn snow—spring conditions, when avalanches are less likely, are the best for ski mountaineering—on a ginormous mountain face that, from the valley floor looks vertiginous, is something else entirely. You wonder if you’ll ever be truly happy skiing “usual” runs and routes again. You want to ski climb and ski every peak and line in the Tetons.

## RATHER GO GUIDED?

If you love the idea of climbing and skiing a hulking, challenging Teton peak but aren’t at the level to learn—or interested in learning—the skills to do it on your own, Exum has a four-day camp on 12,605-foot Mt. Moran. Moran is on the western shore of Jackson Lake in the northern part of Grand Teton National Park. The camp is guided—one guide per two skiers—rather than instructional and is March 12-16. “Moran is arguably the greatest ski mountain in one of the greatest ski mountaineering ranges,” Billimoria says. “The Grand [Teton] is the most iconic peak in the range, but in terms of pure skiing fun, you can’t beat Moran. There are 6,000-foot lines that go from the summit down to the lakeshore.” The Moran camp doesn’t require a resume like the Live to Ski camp does, but it still requires that skiers be expert and also supremely fit. “This camp isn’t training people to be ski alpinists; we just want to show strong skiers the best time of their lives.” Also, the tented base camp will be “pretty plush. There aren’t too many places in the Tetons where you’ve got the luxury of a flat approach. But Moran has that, so we haul all sorts of amenities over,” Billimoria says.



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And that's the stoke Exum is hoping this camp brings you. "Every big mountain skier wants to ski the Tetons. They are kind of without comparison. They're certainly the greatest of all the accessible ranges in the U.S.," Billimoria says. "Pair that level of terrain with the history of Exum Guides and also with skiers who have the desire and curiosity to learn how to safely explore serious mountains and you've got something unlike anything else offered anywhere."

Ski mountaineering has no single inventor or father, but, in the U.S., Bill Briggs, who first moved to Jackson Hole in the late 1950s, is pretty close. In the 1960s and early 1970s, he did first ski descents of the Middle Teton, South Teton, Mount Moran, and Mount Owen. But it was his 1971 ski descent of the Grand Teton that really showed what was possible with the sport. In 2008, Briggs, who still lives in Jackson, was inducted into the U.S. National Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame.

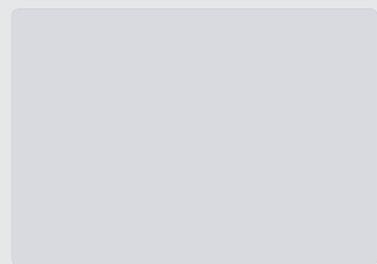
Closer to the present, few people have done more to promote and celebrate ski mountaineering in the Tetons than Steve Romeo, who, before his death in March 2012 at age 42 in an avalanche in Grand Teton National Park, blogged about ski mountaineering adventures big and small in the range on TetonAT.com. (Although no new "trip reports" are being added to the site, Romeo's family and friends maintains its archives.) "He helped put the Tetons on the map for our generation as the premier destination in North America to test your skills as a ski mountaineer," says Billimoria, who was a former ski partner of Romeo's. This camp took its name exactly from Romeo's motto, "Live to Ski." "We wanted to be part of Steve's legacy," Billimoria says.

Back on Buck, you're past the section where a fall would take you over cliffs and about to enter the couloir that lets you ski through them. You feel like you're doing nothing so much as living to ski. Pointing your skis into the fifteen-foot-wide swath of snow, you vaguely remember responsibilities and to-dos and meetings and annoyances, but those intrusions last a mere millisecond. You've still got nearly 5,000 feet of turns before you're back in the real world ... if you can ever fully be in it again after having had your eyes opened to what you're capable of.

*In 2015, the Live to Ski Camp is May 2-5 and May 7-10. Exum recommends you submit an application (307-733-2297, [www.exumguides.com](http://www.exumguides.com)) as early as possible.*

*Dina Mishev is Inspirato's assigning editor and, after graduating from the Live to Ski camp traveled to the China/Pakistan border to climb and ski 24,757-foot Mustaghata. Her writing has appeared in Outside, National Geographic Traveler, The Washington Post, and Sunset, among others.*

## INSPIRATO RECOMMENDS



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Members can reserve the spectacular Château Esperance, a former 17th-century presbytery and chapel, recently updated and furnished to become a modern villa complete

with four bedrooms, four bathrooms and 4,000 square feet of living space.

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Set in the heart of the Périgord Noir overlooking the Dordogne River, the château is a short and pleasant walk to the charming hamlet of St. Julien de Lampon.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INSPIRATO'S SIGNATURE RESIDENCE IN DORDOGNE, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 121.



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*Tkktk's picks*

Inspirato  
Personal  
Vacation Advisor

**EAT:** The family-run **Hostellerie de Bequignolles** is a local favorite serving classic French country fare.

For an unparalleled and authentic dining experience, walk to **L'Auberge du Cantou**.

The setting, food and wines at the Michelin-rated **Le Pont L'Ouysserind** are worth the 45-minute drive.

Another popular option: a private **French cooking class** at your villa.

**DAY TRIPS:** Within walking distance is **Château de Fenelon**, a 15th-century castle. Other castles in the area worth a trip include **Château Castelnau** with its vast collection of medieval arms and armor, and **Les Château Milandes**, once owned by the dancer Josephine Baker.

Stock up for the day's adventures with fresh local delicacies at the **morning market in Sarlat**, considered one of Europe's most beautiful cities.

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