

# SLEDS, SKINS AND SKIING

*Going backcountry Utah by fuel and foot.*

*Words by Rachael Oakes-Ash // Photos by Chris Hocking*

Charlie Sturgis has a reputation. As Utah's wild man on snow campus he has been schlepping the peaks of the Wasatch Range for nigh on thirty years.

Say "I'm going backcountry with Charlie" and watch the locals' faces change - a slight up turn of the lips, a raised eyebrow, an uncrossing of legs, a

folding of arms. It's clear Charlie polarizes people and I can't wait to meet him.

I'm not alone. Mt Buller's Anna Segal, global terrain rat wonder and US Freeskiing Gold medalist is chomping at the bit to get amongst it in Utah's legendary backcountry. It's Anna's first time; actually we're both virgins to skinning, on skis anyway.

It's not often I can trump an elite athlete, ok, it's never, but I'm feeling confident my one backcountry day experience in Japan will have me handing down tips to first time backcountry gal Miss Segal as we tackle the real outdoors. No rails, kickers and chairlifts out here. But alas, I get ahead of myself.

She's heard about the super low humidity of this desert state and the impact of the giant Salt Lake on keeping the snow-dumping super dry. She's dreamt about powder up to her thighs and cliffs with her name on them. I've just dreamt of avalanches, waking up sweating.

Where there's big terrain and lots of snow, there's avalanche danger. A man died inbound at The Canyons resort just before Christmas and seven people died in the Utah backcountry in 2005, not that I'm counting.

I am so obsessed by the white dragon that I have purchased an Ava Lung designed to keep me breathing longer under the snow. My fellow skiers laugh when I wear my snorkel like device on the outside of my gear, convinced I'm hiding vodka in the outside pouch. I just wish it was opium to calm me down.

You can split backcountry lovers into four. Those whose pockets are

big enough for a chopper; those who trade one day of chopper into two days of cat; those who trek half an hour with skis on their backs just outside of ski resort boundaries; and those who skin it all day with velvet strapped under their alpine touring skis.

Skinning is the cheap option. No lift passes and no fuel costs, just a pair of skis with a free heel on the way up and locked in on the way down. It has always attracted hardy mountain types who like their nuts served with raisins and chocolate drops and have no eye for fashion. Who needs it? The beauty of skinning to the backcountry is the solitude, no crowds, no lift queues, just the great outdoors and your trust in a guide or your own knowledge to get you up and down alive.

White Pine Touring was founded in 1972 as a winter touring company and was developed by Charlie and his wife in 1984 as a year round guiding service for skiing, biking, climbing and the like. Charlie's got himself a comfy little set up, selling the business

and staying on as a guiding consultant, picking and choosing which tours he takes out and when.

He's a fit looking man, tall, lean with that outdoor glow attributed to too much time in the sun and a love of wild herbs with wine. Alas his claim to be 56 has me asking for his surgeon (or his herbs).

Charlie tests people. He pushes the envelope with the blokes, flirts with the girls and does his research. With a focus on current avalanche conditions, weather patterns and snow history, he's already plotted our sojourn for the next day. We're heading for the South Wasatch Range to a place called Ants Knoll, I hope that's no reference to size because when it comes to skiing downhill I'd prefer it big.

Neil Young blares from Charlie's SUV at sunup the next morning as we haul arse and two snowmobiles on trailers out of Park City bound for the Swiss founded town of Midway. The ski community is a small one and while I'm trying to impress Miss Segal with my self-important beacon search knowledge she upstages me when the National Park vehicle bay fills with pro skiers and a cinematographer.

High fives all round as Alaskan pro skier Tim Durtschi saunters over our way. He's here with Idaho's Brandon Becker of Teddy Bear Crisis fame and the moviemaking powerhouse that is Kris Ostness to film some big backcountry kickers they've been building for days. It would appear Charlie is taking us to the right places; we just have to snow mobile ten miles into the South Wasatch Range first.

Barebacked Aspen glades are the quintessential Utah snow backdrop providing easy tree skiing but we're on our way up and take a zigzag approach through them to reduce the pitch and lessen the thigh burn. It takes an hour, with the last fifteen minutes being the worst but finally we make it to the top with views across to Heber town and even the back of Snowbird's top tower.

**"She's dreamt about powder up to her thighs and cliffs with her name on them."**





Anna Segal shows that going big outside the park is her thing too. Backcountry Utah.







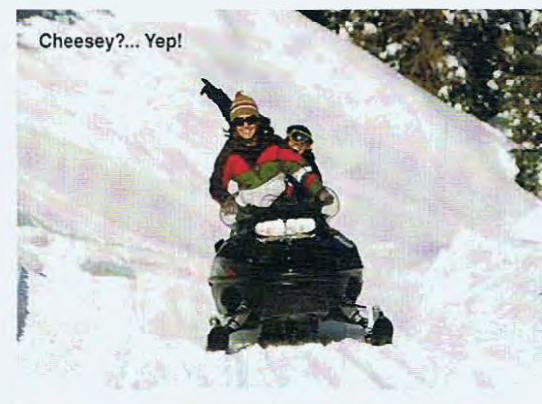
**“One sweet, sweet, sweet ride down and it’s back up again only now we’re stripping off...”**



After a hard earned skin you need some deep cold pow, and the best cold pow is Utah, U.S.A.



Skin to win.



Cheesy?... Yep!

Anna’s looking for cliffs to huck, I’m just looking for a way down. This is called earning your turns and while the open pitch of powder beckons like a two bit whore from under a red light, I know I’ll have to pay the price.

One sweet, sweet, sweet ride down and it’s back up again only now we’re stripping off clothes in the bluebird heat and by the time we get to the top we’ve munched our way through all the beef jerky and are fighting over the Hershey’s. We’ve found the cliff, it sits perched as the perfect drop into a sick chute of 40 plus degrees lined on either side by fur trees and opening out to a wide bowl.

Charlie cuts the first line across the entrance, for avalanche safety. I prefer to stand up top and watch Anna do her magic, psyching herself up for her first backcountry cliff huck. It’s tight, a good four metre drop with three by three metres in which to land or find herself slammed by a tree.

There’s no way she’s not going to make it and when she makes the leap and lands perfectly it’s clear she knows how to throw down. So much for my tips on the backcountry, this girl’s a natural and it’s I that starts taking notes before negotiating an easier ride down.

By the time we make it to the bottom of Snake Creek valley, most of the day is gone and we have one more climb to make it across an avalanche prone face, one at a time from safe spot to safe spot. We come out at the

same open face we started at, knowing we’ve saved the pristine far slope as our last run of the day.

Trouble is no one told the snowmobilers. Out here snowmobiling is akin to motocross riding. Call me a snob, hell I don’t care, these guys are serious bogans on bikes with sleighs and dressed accordingly. When they open their mouth a southern drawl escapes that chills my spine and gives me flashbacks of the movie Deliverance.

I have no intention of ‘squealing like a pig’ so I smile politely when they make carnage of our slope and meet us at the peak bursting with pride. They attempt to apologise saying they didn’t see the only three people on the mountain hiking their sorry tushes to the top to ski that very line. They can’t be that sorry because they speed off to do it all again and Charlie covers my mouth lest I say what I really think.

There’s something about skinning that puts you into a zone of peace. The pure focus it takes to get you make to the top, the need to set your own pace, to call on reserves within and the delayed gratification of finally making it to the top only to take a tenth of the time to ski back down. It’s stress reducing, humbling and uplifting.

Back in the pub where we shout Charlie a beer or five and I pick my melted muscles from the floor, Charlie looks as though he could do it all again carrying both Anna and I on his back. I want what he’s having.

## The how to...

**Where:** Park City, Utah

**Go to:** [www.parkcityinfo.com](http://www.parkcityinfo.com)

**What:** Guided backcountry days through the Utah Wasatch Ranges.

**Cost:** US\$320 – up to two people.

**Go to:** [www.whitepinetouring.com](http://www.whitepinetouring.com)

**Sleep over:** Swank it up with the rockstars at The Sky Lodge with private rooftop members bar and pornstar hot tub.

**Go to:** [www.skylodge.com](http://www.skylodge.com)

Or nab the master bedroom in your own celebrity house in quirky Old Town, a stumble from the bars on Main Street

**Go to:** [www.parkcitylodging.com](http://www.parkcitylodging.com)

**How to get there:** Air New Zealand fly direct from Australia’s east coast to San Francisco via Auckland with connecting flights to Salt Lake City.

**Go to:** [www.airnewzealand.com.au](http://www.airnewzealand.com.au) or 13 24 76