

FIRST CHAIR? WHATEVER. WITH SNOWKITING, THE WIND IS THE LIFT.
YOUR NEXT RUN? JUST ABOUT ANYWHERE YOU'D LIKE TO SKI.
BETTER YET, YOU CAN PICK IT UP IN A DAY.
HOW DOES A **FOUR-HOUR POWDER RUN** SOUND?



SCREW THE LIFTS

Words by Michael Behar | Photographs by Richard Hallman



Enjoy making small talk with gapers on a slow triple? Head to a resort. Tyler Brown prefers wind and deep snow at Strawberry Reservoir, Utah.



“Ten minutes later I’m blasting past them, racing around, tracking the shit out of everything, and then I pack up my kite and wait for them at the top.”

A ferocious blizzard put me in a foul mood yesterday, as I navigated snowy roads and dodged flatland drivers crawling through Utah’s Wasatch Mountains toward Park City. But when I wake up this morning and see the aftermath—29 inches in 24 hours—I know I’m in store for a *very* good day. The late-February sun is already signaling its bluebird intentions through clearing skies. Three world-class mountains beckon within a short drive.

Sure, it’s god-awful President’s Day weekend, and hordes of dawdling boobies will track up the hill before lunchtime. Even so, with more than two feet of fluff, there should be ample to poach if you know where to look. And I do. Yet after receiving a wake-up text from a friend (“the wind is on”), I can’t help pondering the blasphemous alternative: forsaking a powder day for a new sport I am only just beginning to grasp proficiently.

“With snowkiting, there are no lift lines, you don’t need a ticket, and it’s always untracked powder,” Trisha Smith tells me at breakfast. “It’s your dream day of skiing all day, every day.” Her pitch is irresistible. Smith, 31, is a professional snowkiter and a director of operations for the North American Snowkite Tour (NAST). The four-stage event, now

in its third year, is the first formal snowkite circuit held in the U.S., with elimination-type heats that include racing and freestyle. Smith is also among two dozen snowkiters who’ve come to Utah to lay fresh tracks through a treeless expanse of lesser peaks and broad valleys in the Wasatch range. She has invited me to tag along.

Today’s starting point is 40 miles southeast of Park City at the Strawberry Reservoir, where I arrive just as a breeze begins to quicken. Apparently I’m late, as several riders are already rigging gear in a snowbound meadow across the highway. They’ve come from throughout the U.S. (I meet two guys who drove 50 hours to get here from Florida) and from around the world—Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Russia, Norway, Canada, and Aruba—to partake in the Best Superfly Open, the third stop on the NAST tour.

It’s an impassioned group that exudes a near-religious devotion to the sport. Competing is integral, but more than anything else the event is an excuse for this burgeoning community to get its stoke on, pairing sessions in the Utah backcountry with après-kite pub crawls. “I’ve been a downhill skier and tele skier my whole life and a backcountry skier for more than 20 years,” says 53-year-old Ken Lucas, a snowkite pioneer who got interested in the sport in 1998 after demonstrating it to an astonished group of K2 staff at Mt. Hood Meadows in Oregon. “What I like to tell people who love powder is that your typical resort powder run is only a minute. But with snowkiting, it can be an hour or more.”

Snowkiting and kiteboarding are fraternal twins, born in the late 1990s on the North Shore of Maui. Wave-riding kiteboarders immediately realized they could adapt the concept for snow. The gear is straightforward: a set of four high-tensile nylon lines, 70 feet long, link the kite to a control bar coupled to a harness around your waist. By leaning back, you can control the kite’s power with your body weight. This virtually eliminates any strain on your arms or shoulders and makes steering effortless even in high wind. Gusts aren’t a problem either. Just shove the control bar



away from you and the kite will rapidly decelerate. Today's kites make the switch from water to snow seamlessly. The only difference is what's underfoot: Snowkiters use skis (or snowboards) instead of twin-tip kiteboards or surfboards. And snowkiting is infinitely easier and safer to learn. Drowning is not an issue. Rogue waves won't pulverize your kite. You don't have to worry about drifting miles downwind. And if the breeze shuts off, you aren't shark bait marooned a half mile offshore.

"Combining kiting with skiing is an easy transition," says Smith, who grew up skiing Crystal Mountain, Washington. "If you already know how to ski, you can pick it up in a day." For this reason, the popularity of snowkiting has soared in recent years. Resorts are increasingly partnering with snowkite schools, which are popping up across America's snowbelt, to offer skiers an alternative to lift-locked skiing or backcountry hiking. Keystone, Colorado, permits inbounds snowkiting on its cat-accessed bowls (far from lifts and high above treeline). So does Utah's Powder Mountain. Some devout backcountry skiers are even forsaking skins for kites. Heli-ski operators are starting to see a few clients bringing kites along. Park-and-pipe riders have discovered that kites generate vertical lift, adding massive air to their moves. The paragliding crowd is

on board, too. "You don't need to take a truck to the top," says Alex Peterson, a veteran paraglider. "With a kite I can entertain myself for hours by kiting up the side of a mountain, flying down over the tops of the trees, and then kiting right back up again. It's a closed loop."

Peterson, a native Minnesotan, is among the sport's extremists. He builds his own rigging and wears a modified climbing harness so he can launch his kite from ridgelines and soar several hundred feet above the ground (check out his YouTube videos). If he spots a tempting bowl, he'll just set himself down to link a few powder turns, then go airborne again—an extraordinary feat I witness firsthand in Strawberry.

"For me, it's always been about flying," Peterson says. But the majority of snowkiters are more risk-averse. Typically they're seasoned skiers who have discovered that a kite is a good way to reach the virgin powder stashes we all covet. "A kite changes everything," says legendary ski mountaineer and explorer Andrew McLean, 50, who lives in Park City and has led several polar expeditions, using kites to haul himself swiftly across thousands of miles of forbidding ice and snow. The best part, he says: "In a huge field of powder, you get one endless face shot."

Above: Event organizers update athletes on race-day conditions for the 2011 Snowkite Superfly Slalom.

Opposite: Tyler Brown (left) gets high at the 2011 Best Superfly Open. We're guessing pro kiter Trisha Smith (right) is usually happier than you are.

GO FLY A KITE

STRONG SKIERS WILL PICK UP SNOWKITING QUICKLY. BEEN KITEBOARDING? IT WILL HELP.

> Gear The first question (as always) is about size. Most newbies start with a small trainer kite, which will allow you to get a feel for the wind without constantly getting yarded. See if you can borrow or rent a trainer, as you'll quickly want to move off training wheels and purchase your first kite. (Consider used equipment to save a few bucks.) Two additional words on gear: rock skis. You'll learn away from groomed slopes and manicured fall lines. There will be core shots.

> Where Find an open, flat, snow-covered meadow or field. Stay far away from streets, railroad tracks, ski lifts, utility towers, people, and horned livestock. You don't want to hit anything or have anything snag your kite.

> Conditions A kite's energy increases exponentially, so if wind speed doubles, lift quadruples. That can mean instant trouble in gusting conditions. Start mellow. Winds under 10 knots or so should be plenty.

> Best Advice Set your pride aside and take a lesson from a pro. Really.

> More Intel There are a growing number of snowkiting schools and websites, many of which are connected with kiteboarding operations. Snowkiting.com is a good place to start, as is the schools tab at kiteboardingmag.com.

Prior to coming to the four-day NAST event at Strawberry, I had only snowkited on iced-over lakes, where the wind is steadier. But at 8,000 feet, encircled by mountains, weather is fickle. The wind can gust up in seconds and then vanish just as quickly. A lot of snowkiters carry skins in case a lull strands them. Thankfully, it doesn't happen often, primarily because kites can generate thrust in even a gentle breeze. Unlike on water, where you need a fairly stiff wind to overcome friction, on snow you encounter little resistance (remember, it's ice).

Nobody demonstrates this concept better than Jacob Buzianis, 35, a pro rider who lives in Salt Lake City and was an early exploiter of the region's huge snowkiting potential, naming several of the backcountry routes. Buzianis runs a local snowkite school and was instrumental in bringing NAST to Strawberry, where, at the moment, a heavy, wet snow is falling hard amid seemingly dead-calm air.

Most of us have already packed it in, but Buzianis somehow gets his kite airborne and vanishes into a suffocating white-out for more than three hours. With his wife in tears and organizers getting worried, three searchers on snowmobiles set out to look for him. An hour later, Buzianis reappears, smiling and still riding in a waft that couldn't extinguish a birthday candle. The snowfall has intensified, so I'm relieved to see him. Shortly before departing, he had told me, "You can ride way back, maybe 50 miles, from one ridge to another, all the way to the Uinta Mountains."

In good weather, logging marathon distances with a kite isn't unusual—or that difficult. Lorne Glick, a helicopter pilot who lives in Silverton, Colorado, is famed for his epic peak-to-peak tours. "When I first started kiting, I was an avid backcountry skier,

skinning up and skiing down," he says. "But now, whenever it's windy, I'm thinking about what I can do with my kite."

Lorne recalls a daylong, 40-mile Colorado expedition he made last year kiting around the flanks of 13,274-foot Kendall Mountain. And there was the memorable solo overnighter when he slept in a snow cave near the Continental Divide before kiting nearly to the summit of 13,383-foot Baldy Cinco. "There are days when I'll go backcountry skiing with friends who aren't kiters. I pull out my kite, and they ask what I'm doing. 'I'll catch up in a second,' I tell them. Ten minutes later I'm blasting past them, racing around, tracking the shit out of everything, and then I pack up my kite and wait for them at the top."



Damien Leroy updates the daffy after the 2011 Snowkite Soldiers comp in Fairfield, Idaho. Neon one-piece not included.



Trisha Smith packs it in after a punishing powder day at Utah's Strawberry Reservoir.

“I’d been hiking the bootpack to Teton Pass for 20 years. And then with a kite I could go up it in two or three minutes, passing 30 hikers, before skiing down. Then I’d do it again, as many times as I wanted.”

“People will soon have a beacon, probe, shovel, and a kite,” says Tyler Brown, 30, a NAST competitor who lives in Truckee, California. “We have a stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail that goes 19 miles, from Sugar Bowl to Squaw Valley. I can do it in an hour and a half, kiting the ridgelines.”

The revelation that you can carry a chairlift in your backpack is undeniably attractive. Wayne Phillips, a 37-year-old whitewater guide and ski tech who lives in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, recounts his eureka moment. “I’d been hiking the bootpack to Teton Pass for 20 years. And then with a kite I could go up it in two or three minutes, passing 30 hikers on the way, before skiing down. And then do it again, as many times as I wanted.” Now Phillips spends hours perusing Google Earth satellite imagery, scouting his next snowkite first ascents. “I’ve found a lot of cool stuff this way,” he says. “We are always looking for the biggest mountains we can find where the wind is blowing straight up them.”

Phillips is talking about anabatic wind, when thermal energy pushes air uphill. But really, any direction works, rarely confining you to a conventional top-to-bottom fall line. “You can kite across it, down it, up it—your fall line is 360 degrees

instead of only one degree,” explains Lucas. I get a taste of how this feels at Strawberry when the wind fills in behind the prior day’s blitzkrieg snowfall. Smith, Brown, Lucas, Buzianis, and I launch our kites in a clearing and head toward a band of bluffs rising 1,000 feet above the frozen reservoir. It’s the first time I’ve snowkited uphill, and it’s fast. High-speed quads are glacial in comparison.

I’m normally reluctant to jump while skiing because the hard landings thrash my knees. Not so with snowkiting. Seesawing my kite’s control bar generates a slingshot effect that flings me upward. Once I’m airborne, the kite responds like a parachute, slowing my descent. I glide for a few seconds before landing on a feathery cushion of waist-deep joy. But most liberating is the sheer freedom to go anywhere, in any direction. Instead of hucking from the top of a cornice, I can carve laterally beneath its lip for its entire length; it’s like getting barreled, surf-style, by a snow wave. Snowkiting shatters orthodox notions of what constitutes skiable terrain. “A light bulb goes off, and suddenly you start looking at stuff that may not be very good skiing but is fantastic snowkiting,” says McLean. And as for that endless face shot he mentioned? It’s legit. ♦