

Just about every major resort brags about its snow. Mt. Baker shrugs, and lays its Royal Flush on the table: the resort recorded 1,140 inches of snow during the '98-99 season, the world record for a single winter. Here skiers (lower right) view the glory of Mount Shuksan from the Shuksan Arm, gateway to Baker's backcountry.

# the **e**nforcer



Mt. Baker general manager Duncan Howat wants you to enjoy the überdeep backcountry powder his resort is famous for—but only if you do so by his rules.

**By Michael Behar**  
**Photographs by Garrett Grove**



Clockwise, far left: Mount Baker GM Duncan Howat. Judge, jury and executioner—of the resort's backcountry safety policy; deep into Baker's out-of-bounds terrain. Any questions? Baker patroller Ben Williamson tossing one over the edge; checking safety gear at the boundary rope; patrol Andy Sahlfeld (front) and Rowan Yerxa prepping.



### The powder arrived late to Mt. Baker Ski Area last season.

Clinging to the craggy slopes of the North Cascades in Washington State, the 1,000-acre resort—founded in 1953 and locally owned and operated—is just 50 miles from the sea. When moisture-laden storms barrel off the Pacific Ocean, they slam headlong into Baker, dropping the goods. During the 1998–1999 season, Baker recorded 1,140 inches of snow, the world record for a single winter. That was when local riders wouldn't even look at their boards unless overnight totals had topped a foot. It was so deep that employees had to dig trenches beneath lifts to prevent the chairs from running aground.

This season, however, began with a rare drought. And then it started puking nonstop. Shortly before my visit in mid-February, Baker accumulated 110 inches in just seven days, or about 60 percent of its midwinter base depth. It's still snowing when I ski off Chair 8 toward the rope line to a spot where guests frequently access Baker's famed backcountry, encompassing

the oft-photographed Shuksan Arm and neighboring Table Mountain. Conditions are dangerously unstable. But that isn't deterring the dozens of skiers who are waiting to make first tracks in some of the steepest and consistently snowiest lift-accessible backcountry in North America. Patrol has just finished bombing the most avalanche-prone pitches. One in particular, named The

Beast, unleashed a slab measuring seven feet tall. Letting skiers into the backcountry right now seems a little crazy.

But Duncan Howat, Mt. Baker's general manager, isn't worried. He informs me that avalanches have killed only one person since 1999—the year Howat decided to rethink Baker's backcountry strategy. Access used to be a free-for-all, he tells me. But in 1999, on Valentine's Day—after 20 feet of snow had fallen in just two weeks—a monster slab, some 15 feet thick, broke off the Shuksan Arm and killed a boarder and a skier, the latter's body wasn't found until the snow melted out two years later. “At that point, we decided there were too many idiots and we had to start educating people,” Howat says.

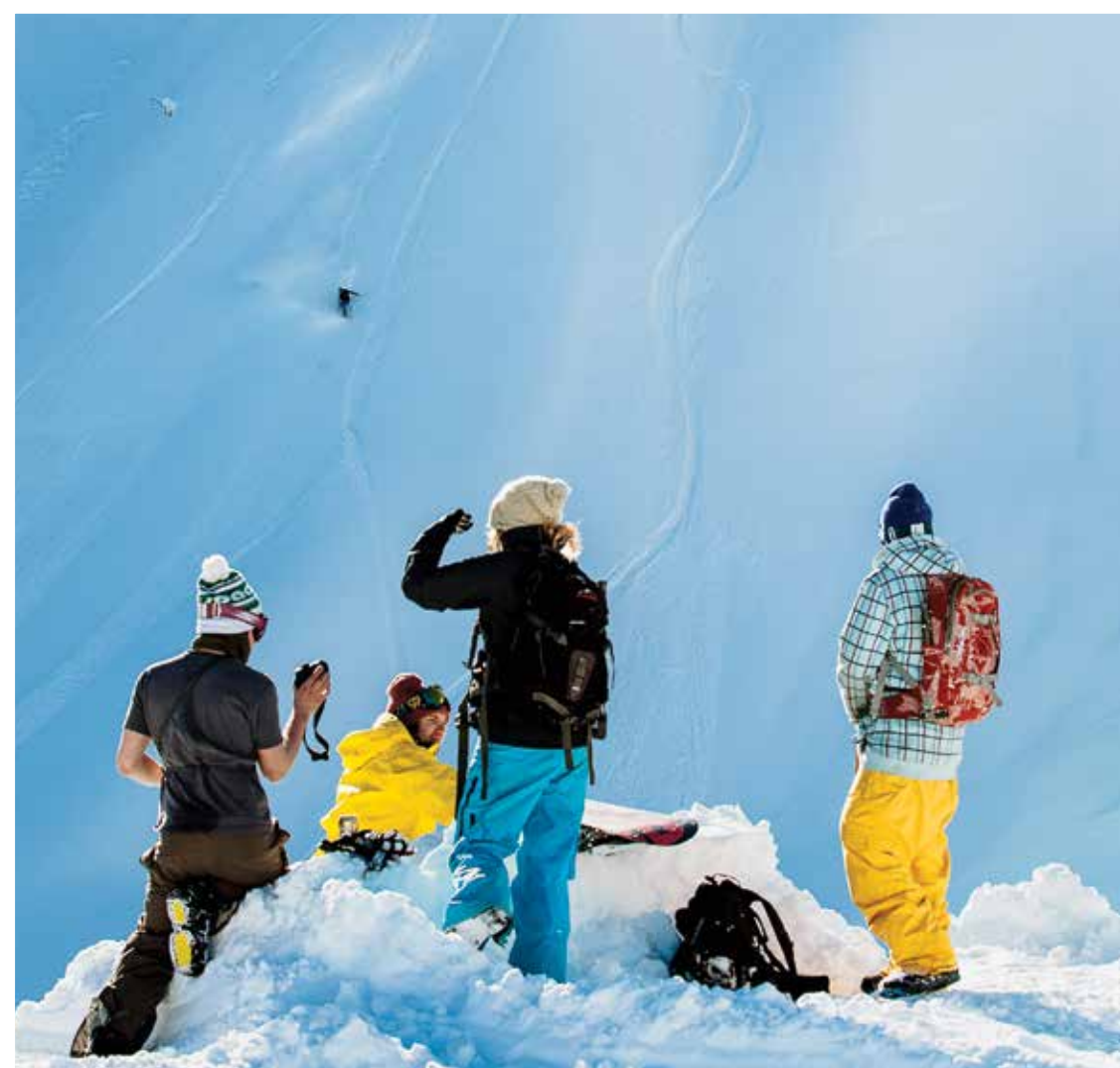
He devised a then-pioneering new backcountry policy. It works like this: When guests want to exit the ski area, they are required to pack a transceiver and shovel, with a probe, cell phone and two-way radio highly recommended. Everyone also must ski with a partner. Baker doesn't use traditional access gates; a boundary rope demarcates

the resort's perimeter and skiers can cross it wherever they desire.

In that sense, the policy runs largely on the honor system. Except that patrollers regularly survey the rope line, spot-checking skiers exiting the resort or those returning. The patroller will quiz them on avalanche conditions (posted daily in Baker's parking lots and lodges and on its website) and then pose some questions designed to ferret out whether they've had any formal snow-safety training. If they're headed beyond the ropes and the patroller isn't satisfied, he'll try to dissuade them from leaving. Intransigents aren't stopped, notes Howat. “We tell them they can go out. But when they come back, the hammer will come down. We're gonna pull their ticket and send 'em home.”

### Howat grew up in Yakima, Washington.

In his early 20s, he farmed grapes and skied at nearby White Pass, often with Olympians Phil and Steve Mahre. “I used to run gates with them,” he says. Employed at Baker since 1968, Howat turned 70 this year. Despite hip and knee replacements, he's still on the hill nearly every day, occasionally skiing but usually blazing up cat tracks on his snowmobile, barking orders into a radio.



Above: A skier works his way toward the top of Table Mountain in the Baker backcountry; Taking in the show on the Shuksan Arm from the top of Chair 8.

Because Baker, like many winter resorts, leases land from the U.S. Forest Service, it has the option to prevent those who ride its lifts from skiing beyond designated boundaries. Buying a lift ticket establishes a contract that gives resorts control over where (and when) their guests can ski. But that approach has never jibed with Howat, who thinks limiting access to Baker's backcountry would be unethical. "The land belongs to everybody. That's the way it should be." And yet, he acknowledges, there most certainly are consequences to his open-door philosophy. "The second you're five feet beyond the rope line, you can die instantly. So if you want to go out there and destroy yourself, have at it."

Before you do, Howat, who has been buried twice by avalanches, wants you to learn a few things. With his daughter, Gwyn, 47, he's set up a Mountain Education Center at the base area, charging just \$40 for an introductory snow-safety course. If you can't afford tuition, they've lined up private sponsors who will underwrite the cost—Gwyn calls it a "scholarship"—assuming you qualify. "Our intention is to minimize the potential for accidents as best we can," says Gwyn, Baker's business manager. "We're not making decisions for

people and we're not determining whether it's safe. We are giving them the information to make their own choices about the level of risk they're willing to assume." The Howats are sticklers for personal responsibility. If Duncan catches a skier without a lift ticket, instead of calling the cops, he often puts him to work. "We'll make him shovel snow for a day or two." Refuse to comply and Howat might appropriate your gear, boots included. "I'll have them walking out of here in their socks."

**The allure of Baker's backcountry is** obvious. Virtually all of its 2,000 or so acres are visible from inbounds. While riding up Chair 1 (lifts are numbered, not named), I watch two skiers just beyond Baker's western perimeter drop a cornice into an untracked bowl. To reach the terrain, they had made a short traverse; and they'll get back to Chair 1 without having to bootpack a single step. Their floaty turns whip up heavenly white plumes, and I'm insanely jealous. I've never had any training and I'm not carrying safety gear—and yet

here I am contemplating a lap through the backcountry.

Baker ski patroller Brandon Helmstetter assures me that my reckless temptation is perfectly normal. To demonstrate, he leads me to a spot along Baker's boundary where skiers typically re-enter the area from a backcountry route called Rumble Gully. A few years ago, a powerful avalanche swept through this drainage into the ski area. We're standing here when a group of four comes

urges them to enroll in one of Baker's safety courses and then issues a warning: Do it again and get kicked off the hill.

There are about 150 resorts in the U.S. with lift-accessible backcountry terrain. Ski areas, however, don't precisely monitor traffic beyond their boundaries. Boosted by improvements in gear and a push to popularize this once niche segment, the numbers of backcountry skiers—or wannabe backcountry skiers—is spiking.

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ripping under the rope line. A moment later, a solo skier pops out of the trees. Then two more appear on a knoll just above us. None of them is carrying snow-safety equipment.

Helmstetter corrals them onto a berm. "See all that flattened timber you came through?" he asks, pointing uphill. There are numerous snapped trees, some with trunks more than a foot in diameter. "That's what avalanches do here." After a five-minute lecture on backcountry risks, Helmstetter

"From what we are able to gather, a large segment of the public is taking advantage of the backcountry via resort access gates," says Tom Murphy, operations director for the Denver-based American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE). Baker patroller Sam Llobet tells me "our backcountry use has increased a hundredfold in five years." The Howats blame crowded slopes and films glamorizing big-mountain skiing for fueling the trend.



Clockwise, above: A lineup heading beyond the ropes to Hemispheres; throwing a rooster tail straight down the fall line; occupational hazard: a skier-triggered avalanche in the Shuksan Arm during a high-danger day.



So why are so many alpine skiers willing to risk death for a few virgin turns? In May, AIARE completed a first-ever study, called Project Zero (as in zero avalanche-related deaths), designed to find out. AIARE hired social-marketing consultant Randi Kruse to conduct focus groups in British Columbia, Washington State, Utah, and Colorado.

Her biggest surprise was that all those red-lettered signs that resorts post at gates don't affect behavior. "We asked everyone specifically whether or not they looked at them," Kruse says. "They all said, 'No, of course we don't.'" Instead, she found that skiers evaluate risk through their peers. Specifically, if those peers have snow-safety skills, their advice is more likely heeded. "They choose ski partners based on how much avalanche training they have," Kruse says. Skiers, it turns out, listen to other skiers, not direly worded signs—or even patrollers.

**The results of Project Zero led Kruse to** suggest in her report to AIARE that seeding lift-accessed backcountry with skiers who are endorsed by resorts and versed in snow safety (she calls them "avalanche-trained ambassadors") could save lives. This is happening informally at Baker. Patrollers aren't policing the rope line around the clock and there are many places where it's easy to duck into the backcountry unnoticed,



but in these instances, veteran backcountry skiers will often try to deter green ones from venturing farther. Gwyn tells me, "We have one of the best-educated backcountry-user communities around. People are enforcing the backcountry policy themselves."

Perhaps no other ski area in the U.S. takes such an active role in ensuring out-of-bounds safety. Why not? Dave Byrd, director of risk management for the National Ski Areas Association, offers his theory: "You've got to be careful about pissing off your guests while also trying to promote safety. There's a real fine line." He also says "policing" can be off-putting to some patrollers. "[They] do not like to be perceived as the bad guys."



Clockwise, above: tracks leading out of bounds; de-skinning; the Chair 8 patrol hut stands guard on the legendary OB terrain of Mount Shuksan.

Legally, there is no requirement for resorts to warn or school backcountry users. This doesn't concern Howat, who calls his policy "a moral obligation" to create smarter skiers. "We're not babysitting, we're educating," he says. Murphy, at AIARE, hopes Project Zero will prompt other resorts to get more proactive about backcountry safety. "All stakeholders share responsibility to reduce avalanche fatalities," he says. Kruse calls Baker's efforts "a beautiful example of what we need to see more of."

In Colorado, where avalanches kill more people than in any other state, the lift-accessible backcountry at Vail Mountain is both popular and lethal. Since 1986, its East Vail Chutes have claimed 8 lives, including, in January, the 24-year-old grandson of the ski area's founder. Blaise Carrig, president of Vail Resorts' Mountain Division, says riders are made aware when they're exiting resort boundaries. At Vail, as is common at most resorts, patrollers don't monitor access gates. But there's plenty of foreboding signage. "We work hard to make it clear to our guests when they are leaving the resort," he said. "At those resort exit points, we inform our guests of the risks present in the backcountry so they can make well-informed decisions."

For his part, Howat is unapologetically anti-corporate. He's banned all advertising at Baker—on its trail maps, website, or in any of its facilities—and even forced Pepsi to remove its logo from the soda dispensers in the cafeterias. It wasn't until January that Howat allowed a television in the day lodge,



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Not long ago, while snowshoeing, Howat caught two teenagers stealing signs. "They wanted to put them in their bedrooms," he says. "They were season-pass holders and I was going to ban them from the area for the rest of the year." The offenders had skis and climbing skins, so instead Howat offered a wager: "I told them, if you can beat me to the top, you can keep your passes. These kids, thinking that this guy with white hair couldn't do it, took the bet, and it almost killed them. They didn't make it."

He pulled their passes, and talked to the kids' parents, and learned the teens had a number of ski-area signs in their bedrooms, including a "Stop Cliff" warning. Howat told them "that was like stealing stop signs from busy intersections, and carried the potential for serious harm." The parents sent the boys to see Howat. "I had them hike up to every place that they took signs from, and we discussed the severity of what they did," he says. "One of those great life lessons learned."

Howat insists that his hands-on approach to managing Baker lets him stay close to his customers. Indeed, at the rope line where most skiers head into the Shuksan Arm, I meet several people who tell me they welcome his tactics. In fact, they're here because of them, convinced that Baker is the only ski area that genuinely cares about their well-being. "If we hadn't created the policy and started the Mountain Education Center, it would have been chaos," Howat says. "It's dangerous out there." ●