

TUMALO *Honey*

Nighttime is the Light Time for this Oregon Tour

Can my skis really make so much noise? It's amazing how sound dominates when sight takes leave. Stopping, I hear my wife behind me, breathing steadily as her own skis rasp away on the hard pack. The conditions don't look promising, but she smiles, simply happy to be outside. Nearby, our border collie roots around in the shadows, sniffing for locals.

A combination of factors has brought us here: the moon fattened by a month of fruition; a clear night sky; and an impulsive voice that simply blurted out, "Hey, wanna go night skiing?"

Now here we are, striding up a dark mountain on our lightweight gear, huffing along in the brisk air. Our packs are trim, our gear whittled down. There's one indulgence though: a steel Thermos brimming with hot chocolate. We're making tracks to the top of Tumalo Mountain, a modest-sized cinder cone in central Oregon where a deep cirque waits on the far side. From parking lot to panoramic top, it's almost two miles, and climbs some 1200'. As our impromptu excursion is proving, accessibility is high on Tumalo's scorecard—from our home in Bend, it's a 25-minute drive to the base.

We push on through a thick canopy of hemlocks that diffus-

es the moonlight into a dull glow. The snow beneath us is still illuminated and lures us on. We ski into shadows with our headlamps off, and it's like passing through dark windows. Higher up, we cross a small clearing flooded with moonlight—blue-white light bursts from the surroundings. It's light enough to kick back and read a book. We note the shallow tracks of a hare strung out

across the white slope; the dog is quick to investigate.

Then it's back into the trees and the rhythm of the climb. Pole, kick, glide. Pole, kick, glide. Our boots squeaking, bindings grinding. We hear an owl's call, and I say a quick prayer for Mr. Bun-Bun.

We break out above tree line, bathed in the steady light. Mt. Bachelor looms

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Bob Woodward

large under the moon, and the Three Sisters fan out to the west in a massive set of icy swells.

As we approach the summit, conditions are scaly, icy—like frozen salsa. Boots replace skis as we pick our way through clusters of stunted trees where potholes of spindrift make us weave like drunks, sinking in and staggering to get out.

At the top, a stiff wind greets us. The lights of Bend breathe below. We ease ourselves to the edge of the bowl and peer down into what resembles a massive frosted windshield scoured by the wind that pummels our faces. We opt for Plan B.

Hunkered down in a small tree well, we share hot chocolate. In the distance, a flash catches my eye. Deep in a

ravine, lights wobble through the trees, moving fast and frantically—snowmobilers. They've come out under the cover of night to spill into the forbidden land of the wilderness. Little do they know, there's a backcountry ranger who makes a habit of taking night runs to nab these unsuspecting diesel dogs.

We find our way back down to some better snow, clamp into bindings and adjust poles. I tighten my pack and push off into the night.

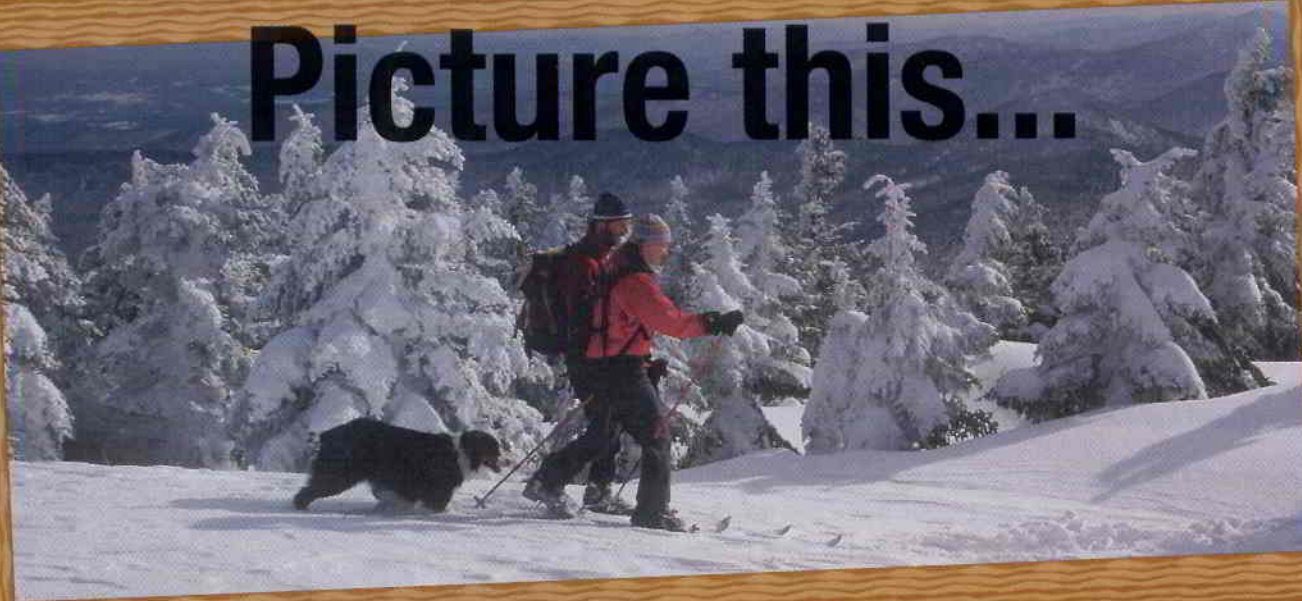
It's a strange thing to make drop-knee turns at night. Even under the glare of the moon, the slope feels like a faraway place, not entirely beneath your skis. And where once you could see obstacles, like pizza-sized plates of

ice, now you simply prepare for them—you don't so much sight your descent as you do sense it. It throws off your form, but you adapt. You have to concede to a let-go feeling.

I plant my pole and kneel, plant and kneel—I'm moving in slow motion in a world with only small consequences. There's nothing but burning muscles and whispering ski edges. All skiing should be so pure.

I pull up and watch as my wife dances along in the moonlight, with the dog bounding alongside her. In a state of deep concentration, or lost in the moment, they glide past me, and I follow them down. **BC**

Picture this...



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