



## GULMARG, KASHMIR

An old Kashmiri ski guide poses with his old pair of skis in Gulmarg, Kashmir.



# Why We Ski

**Circling the globe asking a simple question,  
Why Do You Ski? The answers go deep.**

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I have this image. My father, vital in his forties, broad shoulders and tapered waist. I am a child and he is skiing ahead of me in a red jacket on a white Colorado piste at 11,000 feet. We are alone. It's snowing and the wind is high. Great gusts sweep across the mountain's face. Snow swirls and lifts, drawing and redrawing an opaque curtain. Ahead my father disappears, appears, disappears again. Still, I continue on and so does he. It doesn't occur to me to be afraid. I trust, simply, that my dad will lead me.



Another image, a decade later. My mother pushing her tips over a steep Canadian ridge. I am older now, skiing on my own. I wave from the lift but she doesn't see, so intent is she on penning her signature into fresh snow. As she descends, a plume of cold smoke lifts from her heels. She's gone before I skid onto the ridge, but I see her signature still there, drawn like calligraphy on an all-white slate.

Ask me why I ski, decades later, and I will tell you: I'm looking for those moments. My mother. My father. Their marks in the snow. I'm looking for that. I'm looking for them.

Why do you ski?

It's a question I've asked hundreds of people all over the world. Austria. Japan. Portillo. California. I sit on lifts and in airplanes and on cracked leather sofas next to snapping fires asking strangers for their thoughts. During the pandemic I typed the question into Facebook, Instagram, and countless emails. I phrase it the same way, over and over, every time. Why do you ski?

Initially I get short answers. Sometimes a single word or phrase.

"Freedom." "Fresh air." "For the people we meet." "It's my happy place." "It's the most perfect way to move in winter." "It keeps me young." "It allows me to move my old body in gravity-defying ways." "For the après." "Because skiing is better than sex."

If I go deeper I get deeper insight. It takes digging but it's there. "I love the view from the top of the lift," says Melissa. "It makes me feel incredibly tiny." A woman named Annie gives me three words: "Fun, family, connection." John says he can sense an overnight snowfall "even before I open my eyes in the morning, because the sound is different." And a stranger called Deidre tells me skiing is how she expresses her moods. "Ski fast, ski slow, ski through the trees, hit jumps—it's all based on how I'm feeling that day." I imagine Deidre as a harried ski mom, wordlessly chewing out her kids: "Uh-oh, Mom's pissed! She's skiing bumps on Gunbarrel again!"

Sometimes answers to Why do you ski? are haunting or heartbreaking, like Vivian's, who suffers depression: "Skiing is the one thing that has never failed to give me joy." And Gregg's, who sighs as he says, "Skiing is just so much. It shapes, informs, and lifts me." He adds, "Since you asked, I haven't been able to get this question out of my mind."



It's true, the answer to Why do you ski? is often layered with candy-colored icing. Those curvy Obermeyer girls and busty Lange women of the '70s made us yearn to ski, even if in 2021 it's politically incorrect to say so. Sun Valley was built on the Hollywood promise of apple-cheeked brunettes and barrel-chested men on snow with names like Ernest and Gary. In the '80s, sunny, snowy TV ads by ChapStick and Juicy Fruit were "aspirational".

And let's not forget the lure of friendship and kinship drawing us to the slopes. I re-read Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*. Despite the risk and the doom of his Everest climb, he talks about climbing as giving him a "sense of community". I can't help drawing a parallel to skiing. I think of those cocky guys in Greg Stump's rockumentaries who buddy up to dance down Chamonix's Couloir Poubelle—Frankie Goes To Hollywood on soundtrack, and Stumpy telling us extreme skiing is "a game where losing means checking out for good." Or I think of the venture capitalists and investment bankers—men and women—who race to Revelstoke or Alta or Jackson Hole every year for hits of adrenaline, like Vegas only with fresher air. It's what Krakauer calls a "high-altitude fraternity". As skiers, our closest



## Borovets, Bulgaria

Borovets ski station, Bulgaria during the final weekend of operation for the season.



friends are often other skiers. My father's advice: "Make sure you marry a skier."

Thrill plays a role in *Why We Ski*, too—in fact, it's a major player. In *The Story of Modern Skiing*, author John Fry describes Barnum and Bailey's Circus in 1907, where a man on "skees" soars "across a yawning, death-defying chasm" in Madison Square Garden, "an act of a thousand thrills!" The act was a hit, its ski jumper a star—a young Norwegian called Carl Howelsen, later of Steamboat's Howelsen Hill. When the circus left town, at least it left us a legacy, a lasting thrill.

Recently I asked this question of Ken Read, the Crazy Canuck who won multiple downhill on the World Cup circuit because he was considered... well, crazy.

Ken, I asked, why do you ski?

He answered simply that he is on a lifelong "elusive quest" for the perfect turn. "On five occasions I found it," he says. No surprise, those five occasions were Read's wins on the greats: Val d'Isère, Chamonix, Schladming, Wengen, and Kitzbühel's fearsome Hahnenkamm. "It just clicked," he says. "I felt 'as one' with the skis and snow. I could totally relax, let the skis run." Maybe that's why Ken skis, he wants that feeling to return.

Read isn't alone in citing a mystical force, one taking the helm, steering him toward a win... or at least toward exaltation on snow. Ask nearly any skier who's heli-skied in Argentina, British Columbia, Alaska—it doesn't matter where—and you'll hear the words "Mecca" and "mind blowing" and "other worldly", as if some higher power took control of their skis at 13,000 feet.

In her revered, cultish tome *Deep Powder Snow*, the late author, philosopher and environmentalist Dolores LaChappelle of Silverton, Colorado, talks about a flow state. It is the act of finding bliss in skiing by giving in—not to skiing the mountain, but to the mountain skiing you.

As she writes in *Deep Powder Snow* (1993), "I discovered that I was not turning the skis, but that the snow was. I then quit trying to control the skis and turned them over to these forces. Once this rhythmic relationship with snow and gravity is established on a steep slope, there is no longer an 'I', but a continuous flowing interaction that has no boundaries."

Trippy, huh?

Housed in the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, LaChappelle's research still holds sway. To gain deeper



Sheregesh, Russia



## Stranda, Norway



left to right

1. A father and daughter take a break on the slopes of Sheregesh, Siberia, Russia.

2. Young Norwegian skiers enroute to the lift from the parking lot of Strandafjellet ski station in Stranda, Norway.

understanding, I catch up with Steven Meyers, once a close friend and mentee of LaChapelle's, now a senior lecturer at Fort Lewis College. On backcountry terrain above Red Mountain Pass back in the day, Meyers spent hours following in the tracks of Dolores. "Whatever she did, I did," he says.

His description of the philosopher's skiing style is one of a lithe dancer—a goddess-like creature with a rhythmical bounce and a swinging braid. "She never skied anything without skiing it beautifully. She always flowed, I never saw her make a turn that wasn't elegant." When asked what the philosopher might have been thinking while skiing, Meyers says, "I don't think she was in her mind when she was skiing, that's why she was blissed out."

In *Deep Powder Snow*, a book out of print and hard to find, LaChapelle draws the inevitable link between 'how to ski' and 'how to live'. She ends it by suggesting we be "fully

aware of the earth and the sky and the gods and you, the mortal, playing among them."

It is trippy. But it makes you think.

Perhaps the closest I've come to connecting with an answer to Why we ski? came from a book called *It's a Slippery Slope* by Spalding Gray. Recently I read it front-to-back in a single morning, then read it again. It's about learning to ski, but also about learning to cope. And it's the first time I've encountered a writer able to put the elation of the sport into words. "Then there we were in Aspen, Colorado," Gray writes as a brand new skier, "me pacing back and forth in the Jerome Hotel like a moonstruck lad and looking out the window at Ajax Mountain... and coming down it were all these little gods and goddesses like toy soldiers with white rooster tails shooting out of their ski boots. I said, 'Ramona, we must go up and see the gods and goddesses come down...'"

As he becomes more proficient at the sport, Gray compares a ski slope to a "white





Garden of Eden" where "we were dancing in the day." Gray describes being out of balance most of his life, yet finding balance in skiing. "In those rare moments," he writes, "I feel hints of perfection. It's like Zen, but not as subtle." And then, on a day he's finally in tune with the slope, he goes all spiritual, all Dolores LaChapelle: "Only to see and feel it as it came, and then to let it go, or not even that, because there was no letting go since there was no containment, no memory, only flow..."

I've taken to gazing at Kari Medig's haunting photos, shown here, collected for a project called 1000 Words For Snow. I stare into the eyes of these odd skiers, captured in the Golan Heights or in Morocco's High Atlas mountains. It was Kari who introduced me to LaChapelle. I want to ask every single one of his strange subjects, Why do you ski?

But the question is enormous and elusive. Defining the riddle is like catching the wind. Perhaps the simple answer is the most useful. It comes from a colleague, Peter Kray, who wrote *The God Of Skiing*, a love letter, Hemingway-style, to the sport. "Why don't I ski?" Kray asks in return. "Every time I go to the hill, on the drive home I usually end up thinking, 'Why do anything other than skiing?'" **S**







Oukaïmeden, Morocco

clockwise left to right

1. Apres ski at Brezovica ski resort in Kosovo.

2. A skier from Cote d'Ivoire poses with her skis on her first day of skiing at Oukaïmeden ski resort, Moroccan Atlas Mountains.

3. A "kawaii" snowboarder (kawaii meaning cute or loveable in Japanese) poses on the slopes of Happo One ski resort in Hakuba, Japan.

4. Orthodox Jewish skiers enjoy a photo op at the beginner slopes on Mt Hermon, Golan Heights, Israel.

5. An Indian tourist couple gets lessons from a local ski instructor on the highway to Rohtang Pass in the Indian Himalaya.



Hakuba, Japan



Rohtang Pass - Indian Himalaya