

OUTSIDE ONLINE
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2013

Friday Interview: Scott Sundberg

The founder of SEABA, a heliskiing and backcountry adventure provider based in Alaska, talks about turning the ultimate ski bum fantasy into a reality, how to get a job at a heli operation, and tips for first-time heli-skiers

By: KELLEY MCMILLAN



Photo: Andrew Miller/SEABA

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Haines, Alaska.

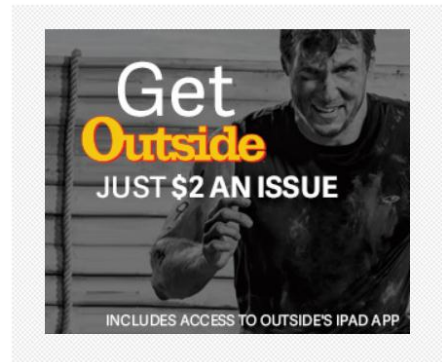


Haines, Alaska.

The Snow Report

Heli-skiing in Alaska is on every serious skier's bucket list. The mountains are big. The snow is deep and plentiful. There are spines, huge faces, and many first descents to be had. While Canadian Mountain Holidays opened the first heli-ski operations in North America in the 1970s, heli-skiing in Alaska is a relatively new endeavor. After the World Extreme Skiing competitions in the early '90s, which lured many of the planet's top skiers to Alaska and introduced them to the region's untapped skiing potential, heli-skiing operations began to pop up across the state.

It would take 10 years and a few ski bums for the momentum to move to the southeast corner of the state, to Haines, Alaska. Like many ski bums, Wyoming-bred Scott "Sunny" Sundberg had a dream: He loved powder, steep skiing, and he wanted it all the time. He saw enormous potential in Haines: some of the highest summit-to-sea mountains in the world, a geographically desirable location—Haines is tucked into an inlet overlooking the Chilkat River, which both protects Haines, and allows it to benefit from, the storms that rip through Prince William Sound—and tons of powder. Last season, over 80 feet of snow blanketed the Chilkat and Takinisha mountains that rise up above town.



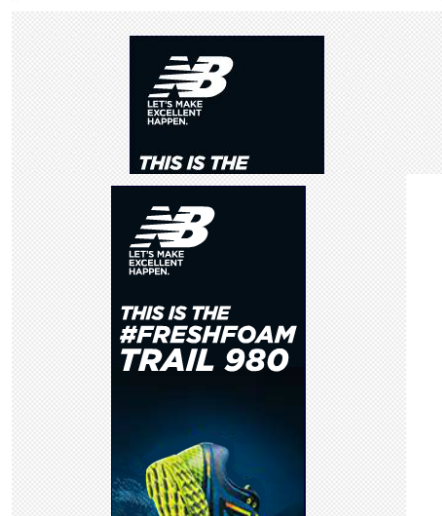
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In 2002, Sundberg turned his dream into a reality when he, along with his business partner Shawn MacNamara, opened SEABA, a heli-skiing and backcountry adventure operation based in Haines. Over 10 years later, SEABA now offers heli-skiing, backcountry camping, and ski touring excursions. It's a mainstay in ski porn—TGR, Red Bull, and Warren Miller have all filmed with SEABA—and the operation has hosted some of the world's most notable snow athletes, including Cody Townsend, Jeremy Jones, and Daron Rahlves. Their guide roster includes accomplished skiers like Reggie Crist, Tom Wayes, and Kent McBride. Bottom line: If you've got one shot to ski Alaska, you should seriously consider Haines.

Here, Sundberg talks about turning the ultimate ski bum fantasy into a reality, how to get a job at a heli operation, and tips for first-time heli-skiers.

How did you launch SEABA?

I had been involved with another operation in Juneau as a guide and small-percentage owner. I was working to get some turns. With the other operation, the long-term business plan was not there. I wanted a business, not a hobby.

SEABA was not just heli-skiing in my eyes; it was the platform to launch remote, custom adventures for anytime of year. Heli-skiing came first, and Haines was the place to start.

Shawn and I did so in March of 2002, starting small with familiar people in the industry. We basically financed our new business on other occupations and by working for free for years. It wasn't too hard considering the payout was the best skiing we could ever imagine.

Why did you pick Haines to launch your heli-ski operation?

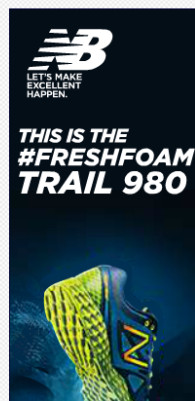
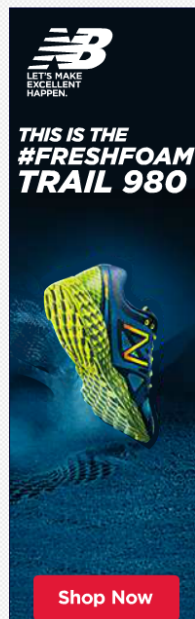
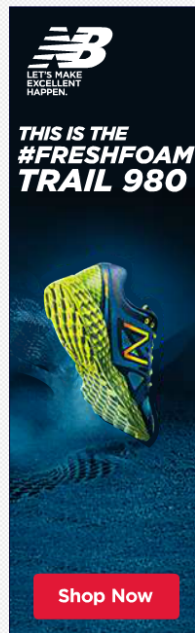
I ended up in Haines for a few reasons. The first is that after watching Rap Films' *Snow Drifters* in 1992 when they went to Haines and skied some insane spines, Shawn and I knew we had to go there. We were crazed heli skiers. We had the first telemark descent of the Mendenhall towers outside of Juneau and that was the beginning. We have had an insatiable thirst for way steep or waist deep ever since.

What makes the mountains around Haines so good for skiing and snowboarding?

If you could sit down and design a perfect ski environment from the natural, meteorological, and geomorphological standpoint, you would get Haines. The mountains are very large, featured, and present all sorts of terrain and options for a skier or snowboarder. Simply put, after 30 years in Alaska, I feel that Haines presents the best combination of big mountains, clear skies, big dumps, and ease of access.

How is the skiing in Haines different from Valdez or Girdwood?

The differences are subtle, but they add up. Everywhere in Alaska you can find insane, mind-blowing skiing. Girdwood, and the west Chugach, offer great skiing, but it tends to be to hit or miss with the weather—too cold, too stormy, etc.



Valdez is similar, although the east Chugach and southern side are in a different climate and offer different mountain terrain. When the snow is good and the big mountains are out, there are some tremendous gems to be harvested in the Valdez area. Valdez is known for incredibly steep and large ramps. People should go there, too. However, both of these places do not have any tree skiing when the weather is down, and that can be often. Haines has 1,000 of acres of good, steep tree skiing which helps people rack up vertical just like British Columbia.

It's probably most skiers' dream to work at a heli op.

What are the misconceptions about working or owning a heli-skiing operation?

The misconception is that it's all skiing. Owning is probably a lot different than being an employee. If you work at a heli op, you probably do have the best job in the world. As an owner though, you take on huge risk. You burn the candle at both ends. No one is ever satisfied. There are never any guarantees. The reason I got into it, and have managed to wade through the red tape, is because Haines is where I want to be. It allows me to be creative and, ultimately, to be in charge of my own destiny.

What's the best part of owning a heli-skiing operation?

For me the best part of owning a heli op is looking at all the faces in the lodge after skiing and seeing them lit up with exuberance. It's hearing clients tell their epic tales of deep and steep, getting scared to the gods, and knowing that these people are here telling these stories because we have put in the time and energy to make it happen. We change lives forever.

What's the hardest part about your job?

The worst part so far—and things can always get worse—is dealing with the normal woes of being a business owner and having to deal with the growing demands that come from this type of endeavor. Whether it's fighting C.A.V.E. people (Citizens Against Virtually Everything) or dealing with the season line-up of scheduling, booking, collecting, and execution. These are the difficulties in the business, they are not always bad, but they keep you on your toes and probably up late, too.

What advice would you give to someone who wants to get a job at a heli op—whether it's being a guide or a bartender?

My advice would be to get your credentials, experience, and resume in order and then apply. Once you have applied, know that it can take years to get in. Persistence, without being annoying, is key. For guides, it also takes reputation and a good client base. Generally, if you can bring us clients, you're the man! Or lady.

What advice would you give the first time heli-skier?

The first time heli-skier should do their research to determine what trip would serve them the best. Most people that have a budget shop around. They should be looking at value and the ability to actually get what they are paying for: skiing. Start small and at an operation that will cater to what they feel is their ideal. Is it skiing? Amenities? Access? Bring a friend or two so it makes it really memorable if you are only going to go heli-skiing a few times in your life.

What are the best months to heli-ski in Alaska?


The best months to ski Alaska are mid-February through the second week of April.

A vertical advertisement for the New Balance Fresh Foam Trail 980. At the top is the New Balance logo with the tagline "LET'S MAKE EXCELLENT HAPPEN." Below this, the text "THIS IS THE #FRESHFOAM TRAIL 980" is displayed in white. The central image shows a yellow and black trail running shoe with a prominent tread pattern on the sole, set against a dark blue background with a subtle tire track pattern. At the bottom, a red button with the text "Shop Now" is visible.

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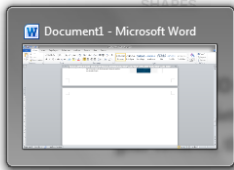
Shop Now

How is skiing in Alaska different from skiing in the lower 48, or any place else in the world for that matter?

And why should it be on every skier's bucket list?

If you look to challenge yourself, there are a few places that you should visit. Alaska is one of them. The coastal climate provides the type of snow that comes in large quantities and sticks to everything. The mountains are huge and provide the canvas on which to draw on, and the early spring daylight offers surreal vistas, with vibrant colors. The experience is unmatched. There are places that provide a lot of these characteristics, but Alaska really brings them together in one package.

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