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SUMMER 2003 VOL. 31 NO. 6

OUT THERE

25 ideas
for adventure
this summer

SKIING SOUTH AMERICA
ALPINE AND FREESTYLE
SEASON WRAP UP
HIKING BY CHAIRLIFT
GEAR, GADGETS AND
MORE STUFF

SKI CANADA
SUMMER 2003
VOL. 31 NO. 6



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Las Leñas and Portillo offer the best of South America: vast terrain, deep snow and plenty of sun.

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

By Mark Lasseter

"NEVER MIND YOU, DID YOU SEE WHAT HAPPENED TO ME? MY KNEE'S SHOT!"

Fellow Whistlerite Cara Dolan and I had just fought our way out of the challenging initial section of one of the most feared and sought-after chutes in Las Leñas, the notorious Frankie's. Access is via the infamous high-alpine Marte chairlift (aptly named after Mars, the God of War) which serves as the key to the white room. Las Leñas claims that when the white room is open, the resort possesses the most lift-accessed terrain in the world, not to mention some of the steepest.

While there is some avalanche control in Las Leñas, slough and avalanche slides are the downside to being allowed to ski 30- to 50-degree powder chutes that would certainly be closed in North America. Watching Covershot and Steve, two of our shovelling partners, enter Frankie's first and glide effortlessly through the silent ocean of fresh powder, Cara and I were relieved at what appeared to be fairly stable conditions.

Leaving lots of space between each skier, we entered the 50-degree slope one at a time. Unable to avoid my own slough, however, I was taken for a ride. Flanked by rocks on both sides, there appeared to be no obvious escape routes. All I could do was lean back and ride it for all I was worth. Ultimately grateful for its diminutive nature, I luckily was able to eventually swerve out a long-awaited side exit. The slough flowed past me to the base of the hill and I enjoyed a private sigh of relief.

My experience was nothing compared to Cara's behind me. After her third turn, a much larger riptide forced her to take it on the knee instead of the chin. She fought to maintain her footing while being held prisoner in a Las Leñas wave of white water that left her riding the break while bouncing off various rocks. This would have earned her bonus points if this were pinball, but since it was skiing, she arrived at my resting point aching all over.

"I think I'm going to go down," she said. I reminded her of the three-hour snow-removal mission we had been involved in an hour earlier under the direction of patrollers Patty and Roberto. The two of us had been part of a posse of 30 skiers and riders from Europe, Argentina, the U.S. and Canada who, after four frustrating days of waiting, had gone up on snowcats with shovels in hand to help excavate a buried section of the Marte chair. Yes, the chair actually got buried after a major dump in Las Leñas. And there was more than 1,250 cm of dumpage last season.

But the reward for our manual labour was pre-negotiated (always pre-negotiate in South America!) lift-line priority for the day, with an identifiable tag given to us by the patrollers. Although shaken up a bit after our first run, I didn't want to give up my valuable VIP card to this hardcore powder bar after putting up with sometimes hour-long line-ups for the two weeks leading up to this day. I knew the powder we had experienced was just a taste of what lay ahead in some of the less-risky chutes. Since most of the skiers had gone down due to limited visibility, I assured Cara it would be worth it for her personal gratification—and I needed a partner on my powder journey to assure my personal safety.

"Okay, let's go," she said with a confident smile. We advanced past the hundred people waiting in line as we flashed our much-envied VIP cards that allowed us access to our second attempt on our powder quest up Marte. Unfortunately, Roberto had the patroller's task of standing in between the uploading and downloading chair traffic to assure no mishaps, so there would be no skiing for him that afternoon. While most people would think someone in this situation would appear as happy as a bastard on Father's Day, the friendliness and positive attitude of Argentineans was exemplified by Roberto. He managed to keep a smile on his face the whole time, accompanied by a few Lucky Strike cigarettes, while watching skier traffic and giving a thumb's-up to all of the shovelling crew passing him on the chair.

I suggested the Las Vegas area since I knew it well, and promised Cara, and more importantly myself, that it would be safe. The memory of an American girl



Photo: MATTIAS FREDRIKSSON



Photo: MATTIAS FREDRIKSSON



being taken by helicopter to a Buenos Aires hospital after a mishap here the week before flashed in our heads. "Oh yeah, it will be fine," I said tentatively, and gulped as we decided to gamble in Las Vegas's Powder Palace.

As it turned out, we enjoyed some of the best two hours of chairlift skiing I have ever had. Untracked powder was our reward for traversing to the different chutes and picking our way over to the various entrances in the Las Vegas area. We never saw more than one person on the same run; mostly it was just the two of us. Since these out-of-bounds areas usually close at 4:00 p.m., we used the locals' entrance to squeeze in two extra runs and finally called it a day with an ice-cold Quilmes at the base as the sun set at 5:30, signalling the end of a great day.

But it was just one daily chapter in our book of time spent in Las Leñas—a book that's filled with stories of heroes, power shortages, super panchos, nightlife, vodka con speed, hangovers and, of course, Marte.

NEXT STOP: PORTILLO

Last August, we watched it storm 400 cm of snow in six days before it all blew away to the nearby town of Malargue. I decided to make the eight-hour trek from Las Leñas to Portillo Ski Resort in Chile along with a few other foreigners also spending the season in Las Leñas. So I hired a van with a driver for the ride. We had a great time in Portillo, enjoying fresh lines every day simply by traversing off the Roca Jack Poma lift.

The major resorts of South America, especially Las Leñas and Portillo, are well-run and organized. Portillo is a much smaller resort, with only 450 guests per week, giving that cozy feeling of everyone knowing everyone. The pool supervisor remembered my name from the year before, even though I had been there only one week!

While Portillo has the reputation of being a smaller resort, it does indeed possess steep chutes and couloirs accessible simply by traversing, and has truly great steep-and-deep runs if one is willing to hike a bit. If you're out by 8:30 a.m., you're guaranteed fresh tracks since most people are still finishing their breakfasts.

The crowd at Portillo is a bit more mature than Las Leñas, and there's definitely more English spoken by the staff and guests. Portillo is also one of the most picturesque ski resorts in the world, and has a breathtaking view from the outdoor heated pool of Inca Lake which separates the two main faces of Portillo.

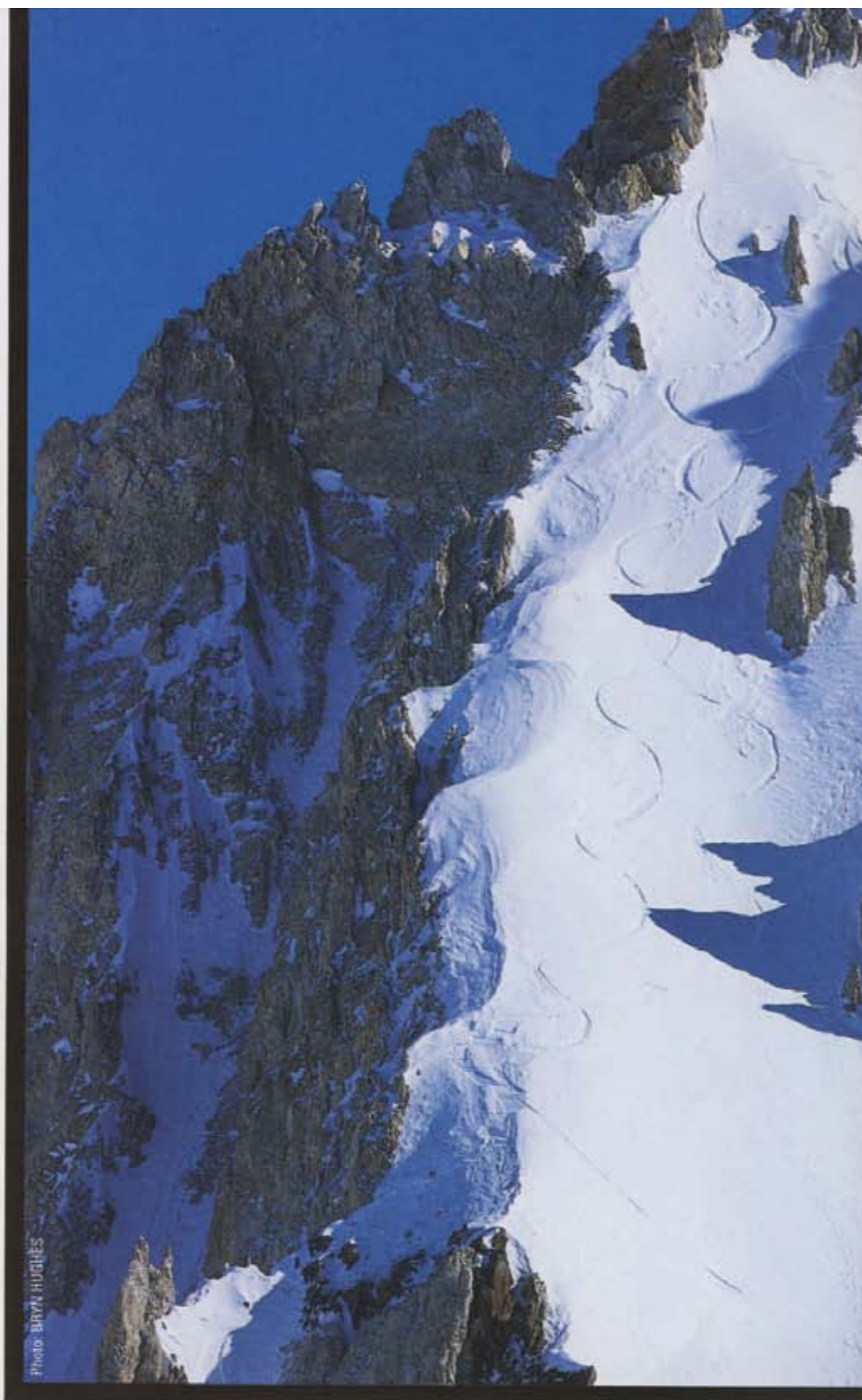


Photo: BRVA HUGHES

ARGENTINA

Las Leñas	Bariloche	Chapelco
www.lasleñas.com	www.bariloche.com	www.chapelco.com.ar
400 km from Mendoza, 1,186 km from Buenos Aires, 70 km from Malargue	1,600 km from Buenos Aires, 16 km from San Carlos de Bariloche	1,600 km from Buenos Aires, 120 km from Bariloche, 9 km from San Martín
Flights: Buenos Aires- Malargue, 1.5 hrs	Flights: Buenos Aires- San Carlos, 2 hrs	Flights: Buenos Aires- San Martín, 2 hrs
Vertical drop: 1,230 m	Vertical drop: 1,021 m	Vertical drop: 730 m
Top elevation: 3,431 m	Top elevation: 2,050 m	Top elevation: 1,980 m
Lifts: 12—7 chairs, 4 surface	Lifts: 32—1 tram, 11 chairs, 20 surface	Lifts: 9—1 gondola, 5 chairs, 3 surface

THE SKIING IN SOUTH AMERICA IS INDEED WORLD-CLASS.

The season in South America and, more importantly, in the Andes Mountain range where Las Leñas and Portillo, Chile—the two most international resorts—are located, usually runs from June 14 to October 4. The snow here is dry and it almost never rains, and both resorts boast 80 per cent sunny days during the season. While the advanced terrain gets most of the press and attention, both resorts have plenty of wide, groomed beginner and intermediate runs.

The nightlife is lively, especially in Las Leñas where one can combine the late-night haunts of UFO Point and J+B Zone until 6:00 a.m., providing the requisite 6-8 p.m. nap rule is observed. Argentinians are some of the most beautiful people in the world, and success requires careful strategy. Argentinians don't get intoxicated to North American levels, so use moderation and keep the tweakage to a minimum if you want a chance to score.

If you're the type of person who complains about his Starbucks frappuccino not being frappy enough or your toilet paper not having the little triangle on it when checking into a room, South America is not for you. If you're an adventurer and like experiencing different cultures and languages, and are passionate about skiing, then South America is for you.

To have realistic expectations of a South American ski excursion and not come home disappointed, plan on indulging in some of the cultural opportunities available. Las Leñas and Portillo are treeless resorts, and when it storms during the day, the advanced skier is handicapped by an alpine that doesn't open. Spend at least 10 days in South America and combine a ski week at one of the resorts with a stay in Santiago, Buenos Aires or Mendoza. Learning how to tango, taking a wine tour, going to thermal baths and soccer matches, or sampling the local foods are just some of the memorable options.

If you visit South America with a positive, laid-back attitude, you are likely to get more out of your experience. My visit was filled with powder and, even more memorable, laughter—sometimes cynical, but more often out of joy and humour. You will never be bored in South America. Quite often the things that seem not normal or disorganized turn out to be the fun aspects of the trip. Just remember to maintain a little *esperanza* and it will all work out.

HEAD SOUTH TO SKI

Skiar: Hugo Hermanson; photo: MAGALI ROY

CHILE

Portillo	Valle Nevado	Termas de Chillan
www.skiportillo.com	www.vallenevado.com	www.termaschillan.cl
150 km from Santiago, 225 km from Mendoza	60 km east from Santiago	300 km south from Santiago, 80 km from Chillan
Ground transfer from Santiago airport	Ground transfer from Santiago airport	Flights: Santiago-Temuco, 45 min.
Vertical drop: 758 m	Vertical drop: 762 m	Vertical drop: 820 m
Top elevation: 3,348 m	Top elevation: 3,659 m	Top elevation: 2,500 m
Lifts: 11—3 chairs, 8 surface	Lifts: 9	Lifts: 8—3 chairs, 5 surface

Photo: MATTIAS FREDRIKSSON



Photo: MAGALI ROY

SOUTH AMERICAN FACT FINDING

Chile and Argentina are extremely safe countries to visit. There really is snow from June to October and it really dumps in the Andes, as it did in 2002 with Portillo receiving 1,158 cm and Las Leñas with more than 1,252 cm. Bring all your own avalanche equipment if you want to go out-of-bounds. Argentina is now very affordable, especially if you rent an apartment. Due to the increase in popularity of South American ski vacations, book accommodations before arriving. While there is a total of 15 ski resorts in Chile and 11 ski resorts in Argentina, we've listed only the six major ones here.

- Argentina and Chile general skiing info: www.andesweb.com
- For Canadian-guided trips to Las Leñas, check out South American Ski Adventures at www.lasLenasski.com, 888/754-1754 (also www.extremelycanadian.com, 800/938-9656)
- Argentina-based ski experts Budget Adventures has a 7 night apartment-hotel accommodation package with round-trip air transfers to Las Leñas from Buenos Aires with 8 days' lifts starting at US\$444. info@stabudgetadventures.com.ar or www.stabudgetadventures.com.ar ☎