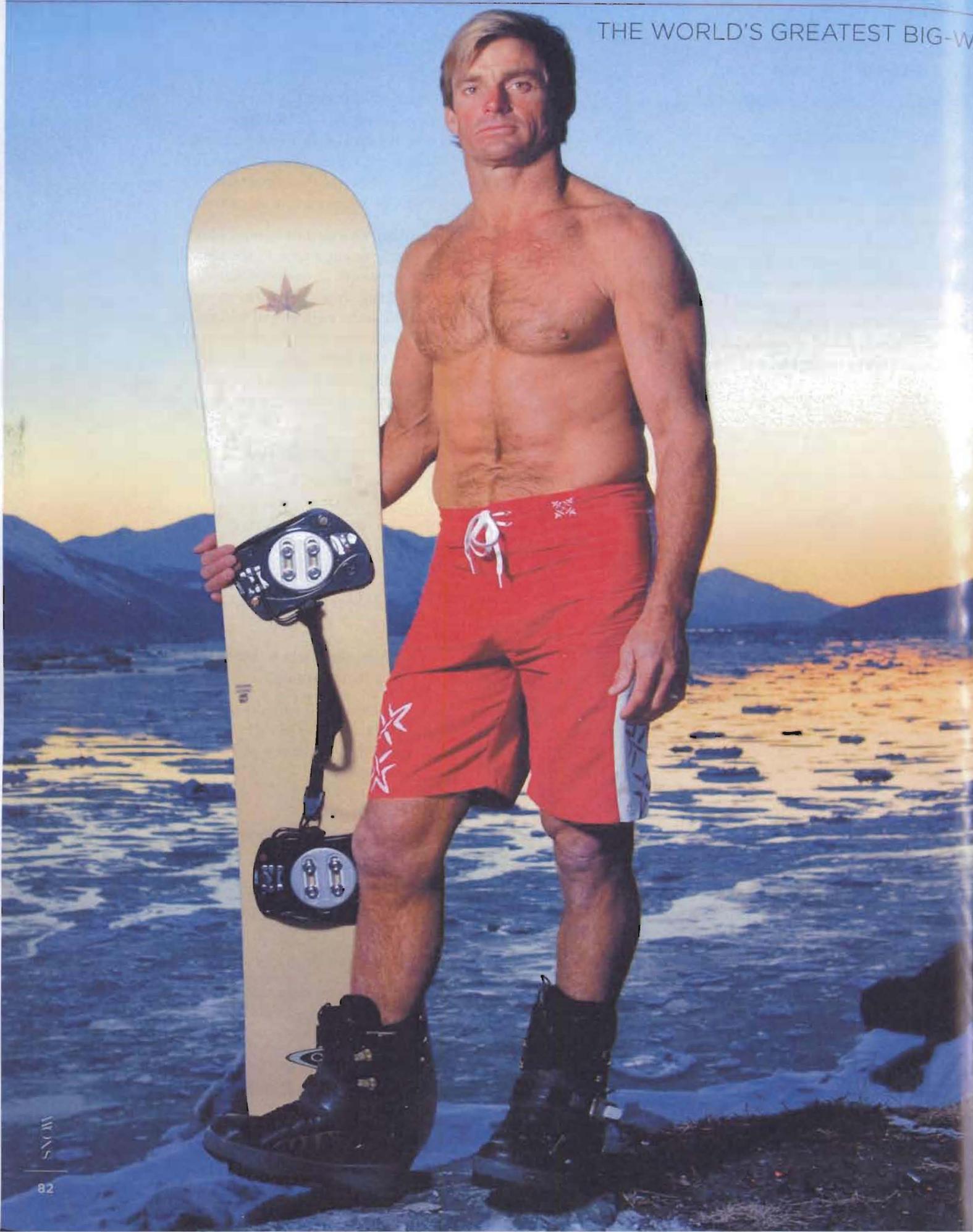


THE WORLD'S GREATEST BIG-W



# LAIRD ALMIGHTY

THE FEROCIOUS RACKET OF HELICOPTER ROTORS FADES, AND WE STAND IN SPELLBOUND SILENCE ATOP A SNOWY RIDGE. AS IF MAGICALLY TRANSPORTED INTO THE NAVE OF A MOUNTAIN CATHEDRAL, WE GAZE AROUND AT THE MASSIVE TRIUMVIRATE GLACIER, THE SMOKING VOLCANO MOUNT SPURR, AND A 150-MILE PANORAMA THAT ENCOMPASSES 20,320-FOOT MOUNT MCKINLEY, THE CHUGACH RANGE, AND THE MOUNTAINS WE ARE ABOUT TO SKI, THE TORDRILLOS.



Previous page: The legend, with outdated board technology and insufficient clothing; from left: Laird at the LZ; smoking Mount Spurr.

Laird Hamilton, the sun-blond male pinup and world's most renowned big-wave surfer, glances at the frozen water around him with a gleeful "Oh, yeah!" and straps on his snowboard.

Guide Darwon Stoneman takes off first, scouting a steep line with the familiar "swoosh, swoosh, swoosh" of skis sashaying through calf-deep powder. When Laird receives the all-clear, he speeds into the fall line as if he were dropping into a 50-foot wave, unleashing one long, remarkable "swooooooooooooooooosh," followed by a billowing rooster tail 20 feet high.

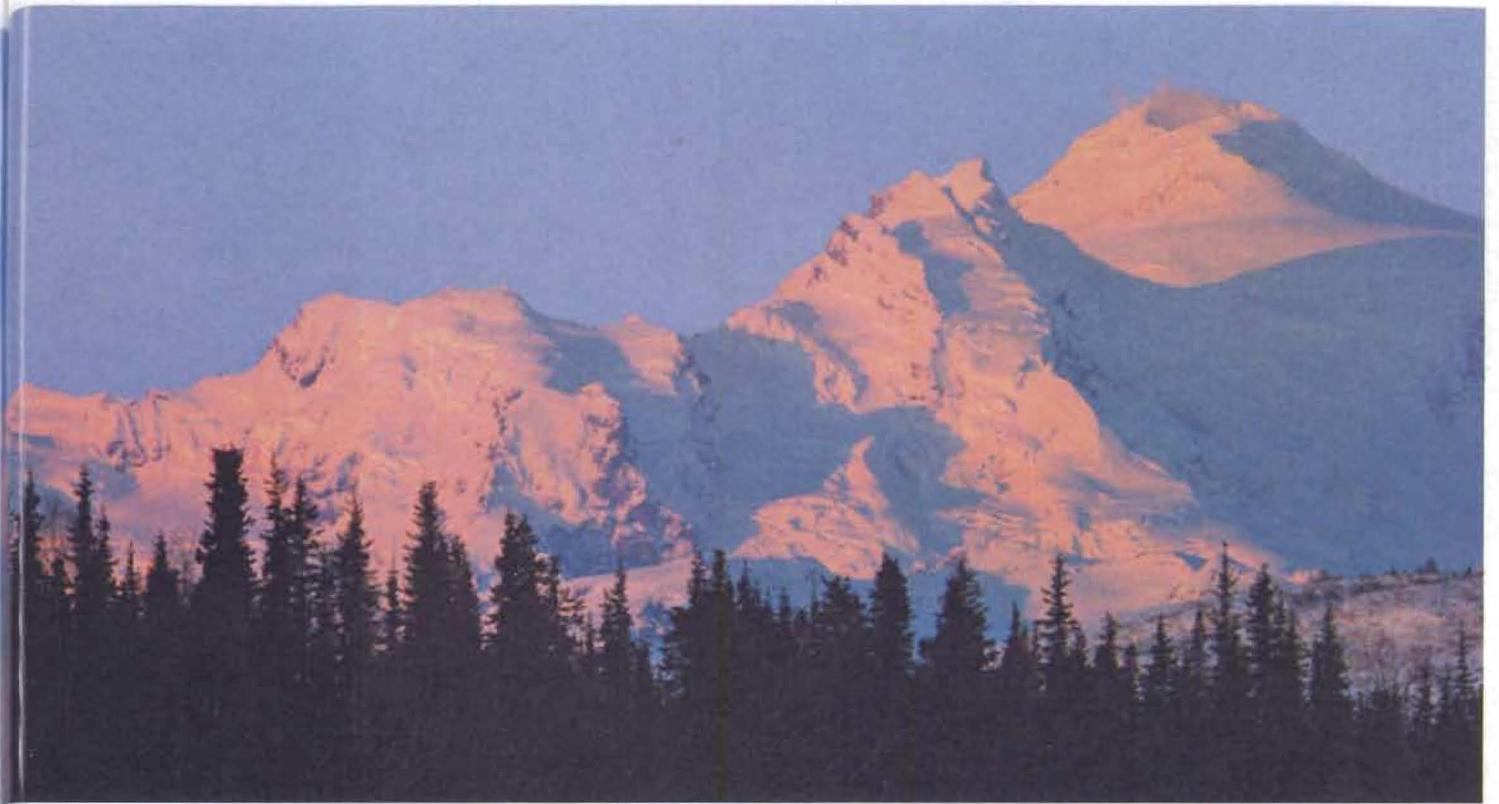
I had met Laird for the first time over breakfast at the Millennium Alaskan Hotel. He sauntered in — wearing flip-flops despite the 10-degree weather outside — and ordered a triple shot of espresso (following the four he'd had before breakfast). I had read up on him, had seen his jaw-dropping film *Riding Giants*. I knew the tales of his growing up in the curl of Hawaii's surfing culture and his paddling the English Channel on a stand-up surfboard. The word "legendary" seemed to be affixed to him like an appendage in every profile I'd seen.

But nothing could prepare me for the real thing: a 6-foot, 3-inch, 215-pound, 43-year-old male prototype as

chiseled as a marble statue, yet as genuine as the fresh inch-long scar where a surfboard had recently imprinted itself on his left cheek. The man with a thousand stitches proves to be as prodigious as advertised.

We had arrived in late March to help inaugurate a new frontier in the helicopter skiing world: a million acres of unskied terrain based out of the luxurious Tordrillo Mountain Lodge, 60 miles west of Anchorage. Skiing here, we will discover, is like being inside an IMAX film all day long, with breathtaking chopper rides over granite ridges, views of 50-mile-long glaciers and the prospect of repeatedly skiing virgin runs of 4,000 vertical feet. Chugach Adventure Guides has been operating helicopter skiing from the resort town of Girdwood (where we will finish our trip) for a decade, but this new winterized lodge in the Tordrillos unveils a unique constellation in the heli-skiing universe: the crossroads of luxury and adventure, relaxation and exploration, indulgence and exhilaration.

As soon as we land on frozen Judd Lake, the Tordrillo Mountain Lodge pops out of the surrounding Sitka spruce, birch, and cottonwood trees. Mike Overcast, the lodge's co-owner\* and a former ski racer (whose name elicits a raised eyebrow from Laird the sun god), greets us with a command to get ready

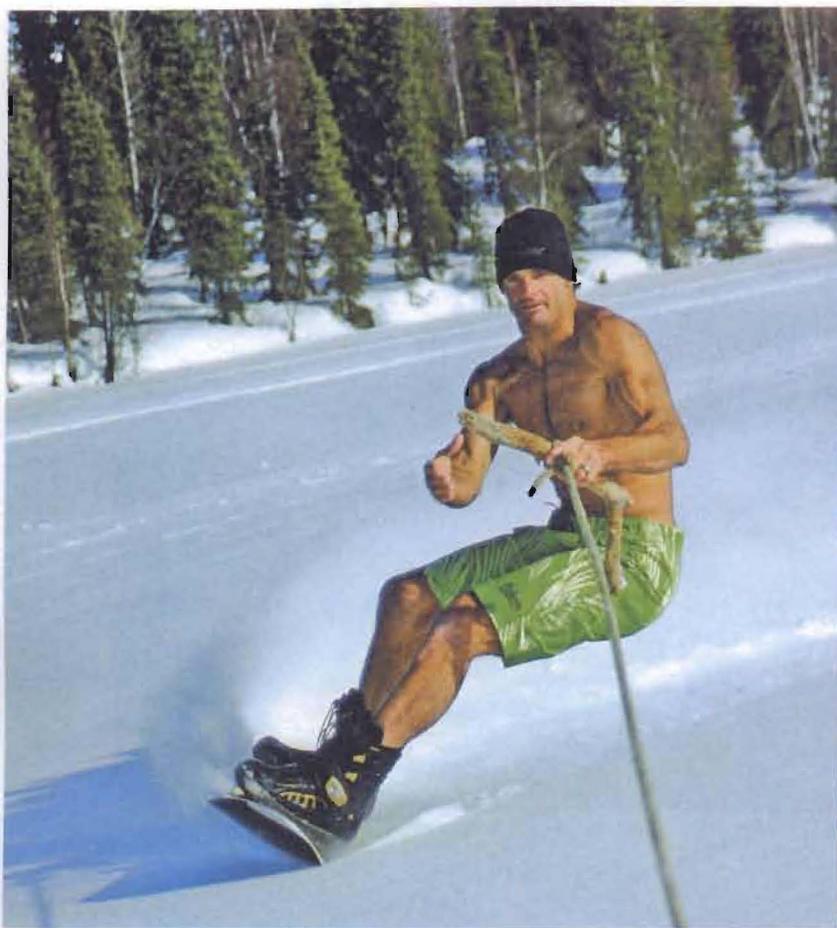


to mount up, pointing to the A-Star helicopter standing by. Our smiles are already irrepressible at the prospect of skiing the peaks hovering on the horizon, then returning to the luxurious lodge for massages, hot tubs, and haute cuisine. The grins will only grow until they become, in Laird's words, permanent "banana face."

We waste no time dropping our bags into the cozy rooms (each has a private bath, an exquisite luxury in the backcountry, where every toilet and vanity is flown in and paid for by the pound), and head outside for our safety briefing. I am the only first-time heli-skier. The avalanche beacon refresher course, instructions to be vigilant getting in and out of the helicopter, and admonishments to follow our guides' instructions provide a stark reminder that we will be skiing in a wilderness that the National Ski Patrol does not service. After lunch, we organize into three teams of four clients and one guide, and head to the hills one group at a time.

The conditions suck. Wind has scoured every aspect of every slope we survey, leaving us to ski a dastardly combination of crust and bulletproof hard pack. I can't help thinking "I could ski ice in my backyard at Eldora."

Laird Hamilton, the sun-blond male pinup and world's most renowned big-wave surfer, glances at the frozen water around him with a gleeful "Oh, yeah!"



From left: The master of tow-in surfing invents another sport; gourmet dinners fuel a day on the slopes; Tordrillo Lodge from the air.

The veterans, however, remain undaunted. They know our time will come.

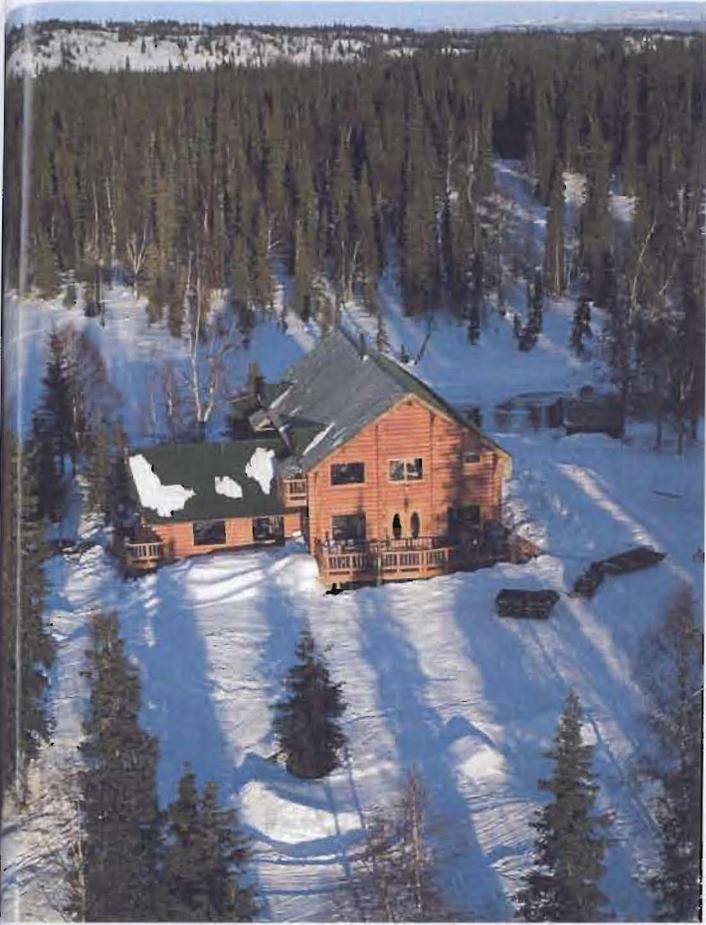
Back at the lodge and undeterred by a little hard-pack snow, Laird goes outside and stokes up the wood-fired hot tub until it is 110 degrees, which contrasts perfectly with the 10-degree temperature. As the sun dips below the horizon, the tub becomes too confining for Laird, who exits to roll in the snow and then jogs across the frozen lake, barefoot and in surf shorts. After a few hundred yards, everybody wonders just how far he will go. A quarter-mile later we are shaking our heads in disbelief. When he returns, his feet and legs are cut up from the snow, but he is otherwise cheery and — truly — not even cold. “I’m a polar bear from Hawaii,” he says, hopping back in the tub.

Whatever disappointment we felt from the poor ski day disappears completely as star chef Nick Massie produces the first of a series of utterly astounding appetizers and meals. Laird, exhibiting an unsurprisingly mutant metabolism, eats his dinner, everybody else’s leftovers, and extras brought in from the kitchen. “I

burn 4,000 calories a day just sitting on a couch,” he says. For everybody else, the formation of the famed “heli-belly,” an occupational hazard of luxury skiing, begins to take shape. It is a hardship we are all willing to endure.

After dinner, Overcast makes a toast to the fulfillment of his dream “to have a place to bring mountain people together.” With a sweeping wave of his hand he takes in the mounted moose head (which he hunted), the hot tub and sauna, the assorted staff (including an on-call masseuse and a genial group of experienced guides who immediately feel like part of the family), and, of course, the vast ranges beyond. “To people who love mountain living,” he says, hoisting his goblet. We join him with inebriated enthusiasm, honored to be part of the unfolding magic.

The evening livens up from here, aided and abetted by a stable of fine wines. Laird prefers pinot noirs, and we partake of a variety of mostly California pinots that, by the end of the week, add up to a most impressive \$6,000 wine bill.\* After a late sunset, the picture window in the dining room fills with fading pastels,



Laird the Action Figure springs to life with his own brand of Alaskan multisport spectacle. The day becomes an odd series of new winter adventure activities that Laird invents.

framing the smoking Mount Spurr in a corridor of spruce trees.

Before going to bed, we plan to assemble for coffee at 8:30 a.m., breakfast at 9, and first helicopter out at 10, understanding that plans in the Alaskan bush are generally just suggestions.

The next morning, Overcast displays the flexibility unique to his operation, providing our group with exclusive permits to roam 40 miles of state-owned land in each direction and to use a 20-mile-wide swath of terrain along the spine of the range. With no recent snow and some vicious hard-pack winds in the closest mountains, he commandeers a Beaver, followed by the A-Star, to shuttle us to a base camp on the Triumvirate Glacier near Mount Spurr. For Laird, the volcano is one more magnetic link between Hawaii and Alaska. "I live on the largest dormant volcano on the planet," he says, referring to Haleakala near his Maui home (where he stays when he isn't in his Malibu home). Hawaii and Alaska, he says, are "like cousins."

As we lunch on hot soup and sandwiches on a peak,

he expounds on his theory that the 49th and 50th states share DNA. He notes that their time difference is only one hour, both sit on the Pacific Ring of Fire, and they are the only two states outside the continental United States. Native Hawaiians and native Alaskans have similar sovereignty struggles. "The same storms that bring big waves to Hawaii bring deep snow here," he says emphatically. Laird is on a roll, like John Belushi in the rousing call-to-arms scene toward the end of *Animal House*. Nobody is sure whether it makes sense to argue. We don't.

Overcast, the helicopter pilot, and the guides combine to locate some excellent powder pockets, and a weather report promising new fluff overnight puts everybody in a hopeful frame of mind. By midafternoon, the clouds roll in and the light turns too flat to land a chopper. We retire to the lodge, another impressive meal, and more pinot.

The next day is a down day for the best of reasons — snow. It's hard to regard it as a hardship, as Laird the Action Figure springs to life with his own brand



Laird edges in on one of Alaska's permanent waves.

of Alaskan multisport spectacle. The day becomes an odd series of new winter adventure activities that Laird invents: aerobic wood chopping; slaloming behind a snowmobile with a tow rope while riding a snowboard in his board shorts, kicking up a water skier's wake; and riding an amphibious Argo tank-track vehicle into the frozen river, where he gets it repeatedly stuck and unstuck. The lodge staff sets a ski track around the lake and Laird tries classic cross-country skiing for the first time, poling around the frozen lake with the grace of a Brahma bull and the technique of a poorly programmed robot. Even so, he is ungodly fast.

By sunset, the no-fly day has been good enough to put everybody in a fine mood, gorging and talking story. Like any good legend, Laird's tale begins with a mythical birth — in a watery "bathysphere" — establishing the dominant theme of his life. He auspiciously introduced his single mom to 1960s surf legend Billy Hamilton. Despite the fact that the marriage didn't last, Laird had initiated his fast track to surf stardom.

He dropped out of school in 11th grade and poured concrete in one of many brute schemes that paid for his surfing habit. As he made his name, Laird steered clear of the riding contests that characterized the new wave of surfing's popularity, and instead found his own way to the cutting edge, riding bigger waves and even using helicopter tows to get on the largest surf in the world. On the way, he suffered five broken ankles, five broken tibias, and assorted contusions and slices — he even has a cadaver's tendon in his right knee. "Only the good die young," he says. "The rest of us have to stick around and take the punishment." When I ask why he subjects himself to such extreme discomfort and life-defying challenges, he shrugs and replies with the royal we: "It's what we do."

Laird started snowboarding in 1986 in Europe, well after he had carved a surfing career. The obvious answer to the obvious question about the time it took him to transition from liquid water to frozen water is "Not very long." He extols the virtues of synergy between



the two sports, and credits snowboarding with the idea of creating foot straps for surfing big waves. He calls mountains “the ocean part of the land,” and as we watch epic ski and surf movies each night, there’s an uncanny resemblance between a wall of white water after a monster wave breaks and the cascading wall of snow that is an avalanche. “The difference between the mountains and the ocean is that the mountains are asleep and you never know when they’re going to wake up,” he says, once again on a rhetorical roll that is equal parts Zen profundity, Valley-boy skater talk, and Yoda on steroids. “One thing about the mountains, though,” he says thoughtfully, “is that you don’t have to wait for them to get big.”

We’ll hear more of this philosophy tonight, and tomorrow, when the morning dawns cloudy with spitting snow. Some of us degenerate into pre-cabin fever symptoms, watching *Jackass II* and peering into the clouds as if we might will them to part.

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“The difference between the mountains and the ocean is that the mountains are asleep and you never know when they’re going to wake up. One thing about the mountains, though, is that you don’t have to wait for them to get big.”

— Laird Hamilton

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Morning dawns clear, and the entire lodge electrifies in anticipation. After a breakfast of Alaskan eggs Benedict — with reindeer sausage, Alaskan king crab, and smoked salmon served on a fresh croissant — we froth at the prospect of a bluebird morning with freshies off every peak.

The day is a dream. Every “LZ” (landing zone) is a postcard. We are constantly reminded we are on the edge of the Pacific Ring of Fire, in what geologists consider an extension of the Aleutian Range. Every time we alight on a new ridge, it takes a few minutes to catch our breath after the chopper peels away. Just standing around

uncanny accuracy that the bright blue morning will soon turn high-wispy lenticular cloudy. With predicted swiftness, the light flattens in midafternoon and the helicopter pilot moves us out.

At the end of the week, Sonny, Laird, and I go to Girdwood with Darwon to suffer through some more helicopter skiing in the Chugach.

It's a 45-minute drive from the Anchorage airport to Girdwood, and Laird doesn't miss a chance to dream up new stunts in this outsized land. Driving up the Turnagain Arm of Cook Inlet, he enthuses with the van driver about the possibility of riding the “bore tide” — an unusual midsummer

*The day is a dream. Every landing zone is a postcard. We are constantly reminded we are on the edge of the Pacific Ring of Fire, in what geologists consider an extension of the Aleutian Range.*

provides a lesson in glaciology and the elemental forces that shaped this wild country: granite batholiths and igneous extrusions, spires and crevasses, seracs and ice falls, ridges and arrets, gullies and couloirs — every mountain feature imaginable.

We mix it up all day, with long, sloping open runs countered by an occasional “no-fall zone” of steep rock-framed chutes. The Tordrillos are not the place to learn to ski powder, but neither are they restricted to skiers auditioning for Warren Miller highlight films. “You can push it too hard,” says Overcast. “I call it trophy hunting: one more couloir, one more steep chute. Sooner or later, something's going to go wrong.” Despite the very real danger of avalanches and exposure, says Overcast, “There has never been a death associated with heli-skiing in Alaska.”

With his malamute-blue eyes scanning the horizon, our host forecasts with

riverain tidal wave he thinks he can surf for 25 miles if conditions are right.

We check in to the majestic Hotel Alyeska at the base of the tram, and now that we're in public the Laird factor comes into sharp focus. Waitresses get nervous just reading the specials. Busboys stutter. The van driver calls a friend who works at the Double Musky Inn and tries to make a dinner reservation for Laird Hamilton. We hear her say “Yeah, right,” and then, finally convinced that it's not a prank, she insists on a hug from Laird. “Tell her I'll give her two hugs,” he says.

It's been snowing for three days before our arrival, so the afternoon we show up is the first chance the helicopters have had to fly since the storm. We jump at the opportunity, heading up the peaks around Seattle Creek for, incredibly, ever more astounding runs. The three of us have our powder rhythm down, so we rip and slide and bound

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around the mountains, careening down gullies, rollers, steep chutes and open bowls as if the entire mountain were our private terrain park. At each ridge, Darwon points out other places we can ski (and will) over the next few days. If the weather turns on us again, we can go cat skiing, and if that fails, the Girdwood resort sits in our backyard, with the U.S. Alpine Championships beginning the next day.

Our last day. The last run. It is past six and the late-afternoon light turns magic into miracle. Our pilot sets us down with scary precision, the chopper's struts floating in space on each side of a knife ridge. The power and awe of the vistas haven't diminished, and even Laird is silent as we survey the big Alaskan horizon and another stretch of untracked dream skiing. Darwon and I carve side-by-side curling tracks down the bowl, then stop to look up at Laird cutting a signature line, his wake backlit by the setting sun like a curtain coming down on our stay.

The Laird factor doesn't stop until the bittersweet end. As we're about to leave the hotel, Ted Ligety — the 23-year-old 2006 Olympic combined alpine gold-medal winner — approaches Laird with humility, knowing which of them is the alpha male here. Laird congratulates Ligety on his successes and wishes him well in the championship races the next day. "You're the legend," Ligety says, clearly agog, and Laird downplays the compliment. "You just have to live awhile," he says.

We crack a last bottle of pinot in the van and watch the sun set behind the Tordrillo range on the horizon to the west, the silhouette of smoldering Mount Spurr a now-familiar landmark orienting us to the horizon. We toast to a week well done — the "powder bag filled," as Laird puts it — and vow to return. "Anytime I can be in a place that's raw and wild and alive, I'll jump on it," he says. "It's what we do." ❧

❧ SEE PAGE 120 FOR RESOURCES.

*Continued from page 109*

Allan, who's also an avid paraglider, still cranks massive daffies — he even throws the odd back flip — off every cliff in site. He charges lines with smooth prowess, a crazy youth at heart. His positive attitude and verve for adventure have deeply affected an industry, his clients, and, ultimately, a place.

It's a legacy that continues to evolve. Like Greenlaw before him, and the Karafilis just down the road, 35-year-old Jason Remple — another born-and-bred Meadow Creeker and SWS's lead guide for the last 10 years — also has ambitious dreams. Remple is two years into a heli-ski operation based out of Meadow Creek. With a ton of experience in both guiding and skiing the general area, Remple's operation, called Stellar Heli Skiing, takes skiers to coveted zones in both the Selkirks and the Purcells, where 4,000-foot descents fall through mountains few have ever skied.

"I think it's great that these guys are starting their own operations," says Allan. "They're terrific guys who know what they're doing. And that's the biggest thing in our industry right now; you need to do it right, otherwise it hurts us as a whole."

Tomorrow everyone will say goodbye to the Drurys and their staff. Goodbye to the snow and the camaraderie and the stories. They'll hug and high five. They'll sign up for next year, of course. They know just how good this place can be, just how wonderful it was yesterday, how incredibly epic it was last year, and, beyond all of that, how lucky they are to be part of its legacy. Not because of the terrain and the snowfall and the history — sure, those play a crucial part — but because of the family of hosts they've grown to know and love. Not just a few operations lost in the mountains, but a town full of families who have embraced powder skiing as a way of life. ❧

❧ SEE PAGE 120 FOR RESOURCES.