

Girls Days Out

Heli or Cat – exploring the New Zealand Backcountry in style

By Rachael Oakes-ash

Anna Segal and Ingrid Backstrom - two names synonymous with phenomenal girls' skiing progression. Ingrid is the queen of the big mountain, the feminine touch in epic ski movies like Warren Miller's *Impact* (2004) and Matchstick Production's *Hit List* (2005) and winner of the 2009 Powder Magazine Video Awards for best female performance for *Claim* (2008). Anna is the slopestyle princess, winner of the Aspen X Games Slopestyle in 2009 - the only Aussie to have won an X Games gold - and silver medalist at the 2009 NZ Open Slopestyle.

Ingrid and Anna are taking girls' skiing to exciting new places, but catching them both in New Zealand in 2009 Rachel Oakes-Ash took them places. She steals time to heli ski with Ingrid between the World Heli Challenge and Ingrid's return home to the USA for summer and takes Anna on a cat skiing road trip after the NZ Open.

INGRID BACKSTROM RIDING SHOTGUN. (STODDART)
OPPOSITE PAGE: INGRID, SMOOTH TURNS ON A BIG, EMPTY FACE. (STODDART)



FLYING HIGH WITH INGRID BACKSTROM

Skiing with Ingrid Backstrom would make even the hardest male skier quake in his boots. The girl can ski. And I mean really ski. Better than most blokes ski. As good as the best on the gnarliest ski lines, leave your stomach at the door ski.

Which is possibly why I am making excuses while we wait in the hanger in the Southern Alps, New Zealand region for the chopper to take us heli skiing with Southern Lakes Heli Ski. It's early September and we're on a girl's day out - me, Ingrid and photographer Camilla Stoddart, Ingrid is a laidback, ski-bum-to-the-core who calls Squaw Valley home. She and her brothers, freeskiier Arne and snowboarder Ralph, spent their early winters at Crystal Mountain, Washington, making the trek in their parents' car from Seattle. The three are best mates and both brothers attribute their own prowess to their older sister.

Not much fazes Ingrid on the outside, though a less than stellar ski performance can have her kicking herself under the table. Despite dominating the women at the World Heli Challenge - held the first week of September 2009 - her reason for being in New Zealand, she still lamented a wrong turn and an untaken line during the week of competition. For the record, she placed third overall in the women's ski category and did it with style.

Today Warren Miller cinematographer Tom Day has Australian ski darling Chris Booth and an entourage in the same heli circuit as we are, hoping to milk some shots out of the variable snow, and Aussie pro free skier Tim Myers begs for the fourth seat in our chopper and as he skis like a girl we agree.

It's a fun crew. You're only as good as the people you ski with; when they're the world's best everyone lifts their game. Ingrid and Tim find some lips to jump off, though I suspect Tim is showing off for Ms Backstrom. Camilla scrambles over rocks to get some shots - the sun is teasing her with glorious light at the right place in the wrong time and vice versa - and we watch the Warren Miller boys sniff around for some leftover powder.

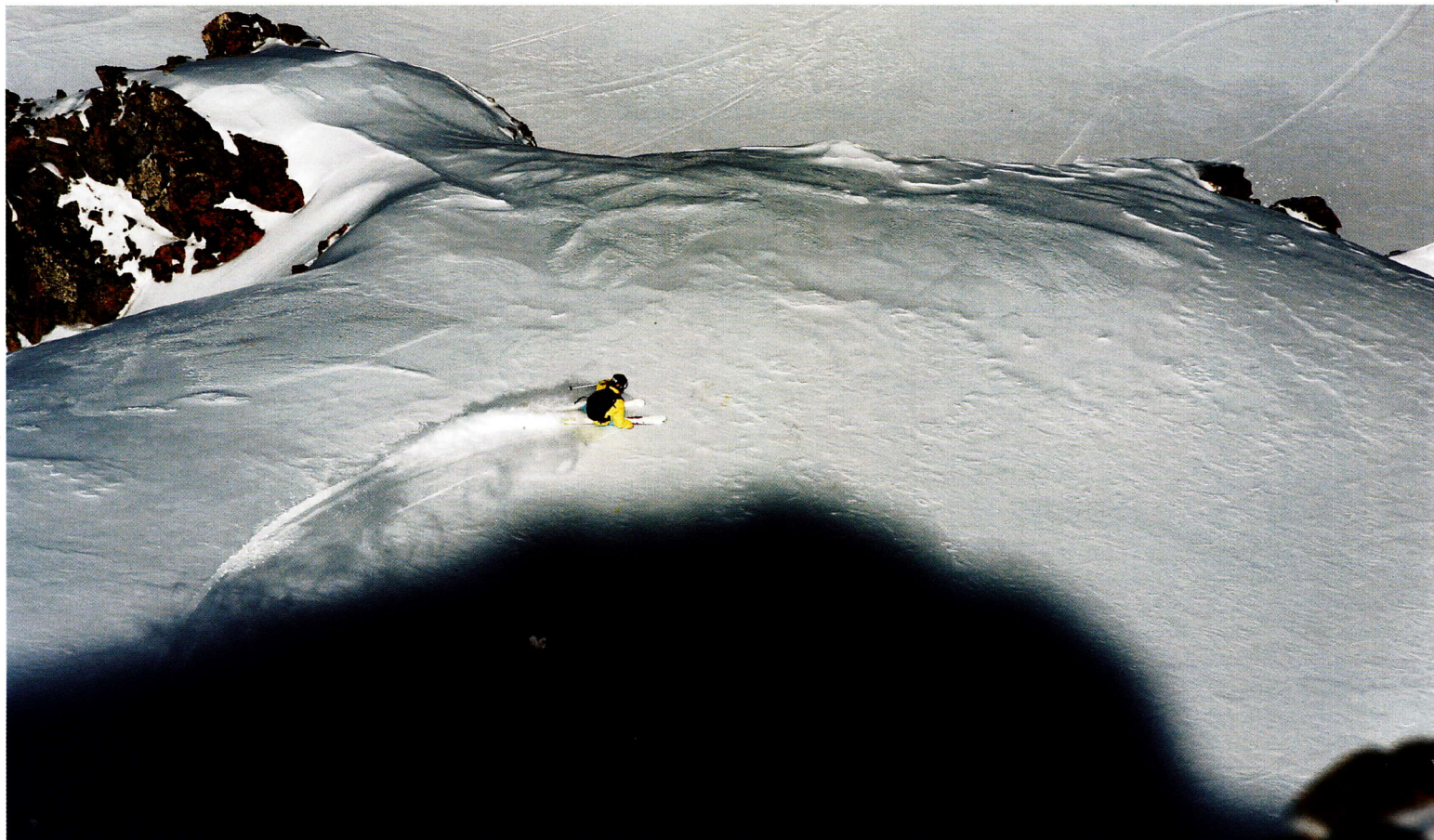
Half an hour with Ingrid and you forget she's a superstar, which is just as well for her, as who wants to go skiing with a bunch of sycophants? Our guide finds us the best lines and ridges possible and stretches the chopper time to the last possible minutes. Ingrid is thankful; it's her last day on snow for a while before she flies back to the USA summer and on to China for trekking.

Our honorary girl for a day, Tim Myers, sums it up as the chopper departs, leaving us on the valley floor.

"If skiing like a girl makes me Tim Backstrom then I'll don a skirt any day."



Farmer Donald Bray and his wife Barbara turn their summer grazing pastures into a five thousand hectare cat skiing playground



ANNA SEGAL, LETTING THEM RUN IN THE ALPINE WILDERNESS. (RUNDLE)
INSET: PRETTY COOL, HAVING YOUR OWN CAT TO ACCESS YOUR OWN PRIVATE TERRAIN. (RUNDLE)

CESHIRE CAT SKIING WITH ANNA SEGAL

Any smaller and you could put Anna Segal on a key ring, then at least you'd know where she was at all times. This pocket rocket of terrain park talent spends her life flitting between university in Melbourne, training at Mount Buller, hanging with her posse in Breckenridge or climbing the freestyle skiing podiums of North America, Europe and New Zealand.

I first met Anna in Utah when photographer Chris Hocking and I took her backcountry virginity in the Wasatch Range in the 2007/08 season. We forced her to skin up Utah hills with the sun on her face then pushed her off cliffs and watched in awe as she giggled her way through the whole experience without blinking then begged for more.

Not one to renege on a promise, eighteen months later I have found more of what she wants at family owned and run Alpуре Peaks farm just outside of Tekapo. Farmer Donald Bray and his wife Barbara turn their summer grazing pastures into a five thousand hectare cat skiing playground and, with guide Simon, they're taking us to play amongst the South Canterbury peaks.

On the initial cat ride we salivate at the steeper ridgelines and chutes but they are out of range today due to avalanche conditions, so we head for the mellower terrain to start. Who cares when the snow is fresh and untouched and we're the first ones in for days? Not Anna. She's as happy as a pig in mud.

Anna's been skiing for eighteen of her twenty four years, preferring the piste to start then eating moguls for breakfast in competition. At fifteen she got into freeskiing, found the terrain park and started wearing her pants down low. K2, Pow Gloves and Skins saw the light and sponsorship meant she could follow her dream.

For now she's taking first tracks, slicing up the powder in front of me and making it look as easy as pressing the 'on' switch of an energiser bunny. When I find out Farmer Bray has twin boys Anna's age, I attempt to sell her off over the packed lunch provided by Barbara. If she marries in we get to cat ski this pristine terrain all season long. But eight runs and countless farm baked cookies later we're back in the SUV heading down to the farm and Anna remains single.

Alpure Peaks is a curious experience, one you wouldn't find anywhere but in the remote areas of New Zealand. There's no glitz, no glam, just good folk sharing their slice of the world with strangers who never forget.

NEED TO KNOW

Southern Lakes Heli Ski

These guys offer full day circuits, private charters and overnight experiences in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. www.southernlakesheliski.co.nz

Alpure Peaks

Sleep over: Peppers Bluewater resort is a 30-minute drive from Alpуре Peaks homestead. With one, two and three bedroom apartments with lake views, the resort is the closest civilisation to the operation. <http://www.peppers.co.nz/bluewater/>

Ski down: Alpуре Peaks cat skiing is a two-hour drive from Methven or half an hour from Tekapo. The operation runs from July 1 to October 15, conditions permitting. The farm is on the market and the cat skiing may not operate in 2010.

Getting there: Air New Zealand fly direct to Christchurch from Sydney daily. www.airnewzealand.com.au or 13 24 76