

LIGHT, LIGHTER, MAMAY POWDER

MANY FACTORS HAVE TO COME TOGETHER IN THE RIGHT WAY TO CREATE THAT REALLY DRY-AS-DUST POWDER. HOWEVER, EVERY NOW AND THEN, ALL THE PIECES FALL INTO PLACE. TEMPERATURE. AIR HUMIDITY. PRECIPITATION. THIS HAPPENS SURPRISINGLY OFTEN IN THE MAMAY VALLEY BY LAKE BAIKAL IN SIBERIA. COME ALONG

The author of the article claims that he is finished as a skier after riding perfect powder in the Mamay Valley.



SIBERIA POWDER

TEXT NICLAS SJÖGREN FOTO JAKOB HELBIG

take advantage of the others being polite and open up the first untouched run. We are aiming for an eastern slope with few trees. I stay objective but all I can say is that it has been snowing just over a meter in the past two days. The temperature has remained between 5 and 10°C below zero. And there has basically been no wind. The snow is like dust. Like the bubbles in champagne. Lighter than down. I'm blind already by the third turn. Deaf. Speechless. I move like a mole under the snow cover. I fall weightlessly, but in control, in a cold dance, a bottomless dream where the world is good. Where visual impressions are not necessary to navigate. My whole organism is drawn, sucked up, by gravity, thrown forward by intuition. Myself and I shoot through a flock of butterflies consisting of snow crystals. They tickle, I laugh. I ride through cold smoke. I am an Einstein idea on skis, existing in spacetime. I am an imploding universe. I am everything and just me. I am a shot of



But let me turn back time a bit and talk some more about this "thing" to frenetically chase the best pow in the world. You may have read or seen *The Beach*? You know, the story about that paradise beach in Thailand that only a few initiates know of. It feels a bit like that when I manage to weasel myself into this group of seven French, one Dane and two Russians to go to what is perhaps the next "world's best" powder mecca pilgrimage. Just the hassle of getting here Surely, only the

I FALL INTO CONTROLLED WEIGHTLESSNESS IN A COLD DANCE, A BOTTOMLESS DREAM WHERE THE WORLD IS GOOD.

Russian vodka for breakfast. I am a pure, crystallized will. The only sensation that reaches through the rush of happiness is the lactic acid in the thighs signalling a break. I stop and pant like a hound. Like a powderhound. Like a miniature poodle trapped for too long in a car. I am passionate. It's the last day of November and the first run of the season for me and the 10-man strong group that has made it to a fairly hard to reach corner of the world. We are in the Mamay Valley, between Lake Baikal and Mongolia. We have just been struck by powder that cannot be described. I am complete as a mammal. I will never have to ski again. I have longed for this. I have chased this. - It will be difficult to top this season start, says Yannick Besancon after a couple of more runs. His voice emerges through his bottom-frozen facial hair, he looks like an advertising poster for powder skiing. Yannick is our French guide who is here scouting the Mamay Valley in search of the next powder paradise to present to picky powderhounds from all over the world.



The great hordes of powder-hounds have not yet found their way to the Mamay Valley. It makes sense though since there are no lifts here. There are only a small number of illegally built cabins. Yes, the authorities in Siberia think that the area is so sparsely populated that anyone who wants to has an undocumented right to build a cabin on this state-owned land as long as you don't litter or cut down too many trees. But as a cabin owner, you cannot claim any ownership whatsoever. But it



No glaciers, low avalanche risk and no other skiers. The chance of untouched powder, on the other hand, is imminent.



The sign is visualising the wildness factor in this part of Siberia.



Our guide Yannick Besançon in one of the easily accessible bowls in the southeast aspect.



Pour, pour, pour. Just to the edges.



Spasiba to our ski and snow-hating chef Sacha.



The snow was so cold and deep that after a few days of riding, cauliflower grew like cold protection on the face.

blindfold is missing. We land in Irkutsk and thankfully we have a full day in the city. It's Saturday and both mercury shows 30°C below zero and the fishmonger is lining up frozen fish without packaging in plastic crates, fish caught in Lake Baikal, and this under a bare sky. Irkutsk is one of the coldest cities in the world. Yes, the whole city is a gigantic freezer. That is why we visit the area already at the end of November beginning of December. This is when winter gets a grip of Lake Baikal. The extreme inland climate causes the temperature to drop rapidly and the humid air of the lake creates sort of a snow cannon not surpassed anywhere else in the world. If you are lucky. The indoor market has a huge selection of meat products, fresh milk poured into old water bottles, an impressive cheese assortment and in a somewhat hidden part of the market we encounter two butchers who have just slaughtered a cow. In the streets, the new collides with the old. The oligarchs' fat Mercs, horses and carriages, trolleybuses. And by the way, are trolleybuses old-fashioned or are they da shit considering that they run on electricity? When my Danish friend and I hit the town later on in the evening, everywhere we go is chic and stylish. We have our best meal at *True cost*, a luxurious place where you have to pay an entrance fee (equivalent to 15 SEK). None of the staff really speak English but we communicate via google translate and they are being very helpful. Some noisy smoking youngsters outside one of the pubs become overjoyed when we tell them that we are from Scandinavia. The overall atmosphere is good and in retrospect I might regret a bit that I said no to go clubbing and get beyond drunk with the group of eager youngsters. But the powder dream, which will come true tomorrow, even puts me off the will to party.

also seems like nobody dares to occupy someone else's cabin. There is no sewer system. You get your water from the river. Phone coverage is a joke, so communication is done via com-radio. Electricity? Just for an hour a day when the portable diesel-powered generator is running. According to our Russian guide Stepan, the rescue service prefers to not come out here – it's too expensive, too far and too complicated. There have been two fatalities over the last couple of years. One of them was a French guide buried in an avalanche the year

IF YOU THINK THAT THE WORLD'S BEST POWDER IS WORTH THE RISK-TAKING, THEN THE CHOICE IS SIMPLE.

before last. Stepan dryly states that “you must hope that your friends can and want to help you if something happens”. Yes, it's quite rough, but if you think that the world's best powder is worth the risk-taking, then the choice is simple. The cabin we live in is built of the simplest possible materials. Logs and plywood were pulled here with a military vehicle. It was in the early 2000s after some Russian snowboard enthusiasts from Irkutsk discovered the valley. Before the splitboard had had its big breakthrough, you had to bootpack up. Today, many Russians are still on splitboards while our group consists of only skiers with alpine touring equipment. If you stayed over in the valley in the early 2000s, you did so in a tent. And a few years ago, some rich Russians also discovered the valley by helicopter. A few times we actually hear both helicopters and snowmobiles, moving forward in powder snow make. Uphill, we're panting. Downhill, we're trying to not scream of euphoria. Today, the rumour is starting to spread internationally and soon more people will know that the best powder snow, the untracked powder snow, can be found in the Mamay Valley. Call a place paradise, and kiss it goodbye, somehow. But that's how cultures evolve, I guess. We share information and the world becomes a little bit better and we get a little bit closer to each other.



We should of course have taken the Trans-Siberian Railway, but we fly via Moscow to Irkutsk. From there, we get a ride with a minivan, five hours straight out into the

Siberian wilderness between the southern part of Lake Baikal and northern Mongolia. Then we spend two hours skinning the nine kilometres and ascending the couple of hundred height meters up to the plywood cabin. And, well, well, well. All the rumours about this well-kept secret turn out to have a pretty high level of truth in them. The snow is totally dumping. After getting settled in the simple cottage and testing the outhouse, we sit speechless and look out through the single glazed window in the part of the cabin that you can call the kitchen. I swear that I can see the snow cover getting thicker by the minute. It's 14 degrees Celsius below and the snow that is falling is ridiculously light. The conversation is lively. We mainly socialize in English, but the excitement over this evening's snowfall sends French, Danish, Swedish and Russian into the conversation.

Expectations weigh so heavily over the group that the crossing monologues just gently come out from each and one's corner of the mouth. Damn, that's some snow. A bit like Winston Churchill explained how Champagne should be, but: "cold, dry and deep".

Siberian pine is crackling in the fireplace and on the gas stove a Russian meat soup is cooking. A bottle of vodka goes around the table, but we're all being careful, afraid to have too much and sabotage tomorrow. We fall asleep in a sauna like heat in the attic. Shoulder to shoulder on leaf thin sleeping mats. I sleep like shit and get up well before sunrise. The cabin is freezing cold but our chef Sacha quickly gets the fire going in the stove and cooks a huge barley porridge that we devour, all keeping in mind that we are going to skin from just after breakfast all the way through to dusk at four pm, with only one packed sandwich for lunch. The chaos when eight French, one Dane, one Swede and two Russians are to have breakfast, pack backpacks, put on skins, sort out ski boots, look for liners and share the space in a cabin of 20 m² can closest be described as a snake pit filled with drunk eager orangutans disco dancing holding giant flycatchers in their hands. It's hard to be efficient. But soon everyone is lined up outside the cabin and our guide Yannick tests our transceivers.



An old Arabic saying springs to mind: "There are three things that cannot be hidden: love, smoke and a man riding on a camel." I would like to add "powder snow"

To not tell would make you feel mean.



**WHAT A FUCKING SNOW. A BIT LIKE WHEN
WINSTON CHURCHILL EXPLAINED HOW
CHAMPAGNE POWDER SHOULD BE:
"COLD, DRY AND DEEP".**

"The rush of bottomless powder feels like a butterfly herd of snow crystals. It's simply amazing"



Travel

Travel by train with the Trans-Siberian Railway, or fly, to Irkutsk. From there, bus, car, minivan or taxi to where you start skinning up (or rent a snowmobile) into the Mamay Valley. We paid 6,500 SEK for a round trip Stockholm - Irkutsk (flight via Moscow). Guiding, meals and lodging (with two nights in Irkutsk) was 1,500 euros per person. Alcoholic beverages not included. You bring everything you need for a week in a simple mountain cabin. Sleeping bag, sleeping mat, ridiculously warm clothes, avalanche equipment, the works. There is nothing to buy in the Mamay Valley. Eastern Snow arranged our trip.

Skiing

The skiing takes place between 850 and 1,700 meters above sea level. These are no impressive figures but there is not much traverse skiing and the runs naturally follow the fall line. The topography is almost perfect. For half of the drop you can botanize in the forest when there is flat light and snowfall (which is of course often given the amount of snow). They don't officially measure the amount of snow that falls here, but our guides firmly claim that it is unrivalled in terms of depth and quality here at the end of November beginning of December. From the end of December until February it's often too cold to enjoy skiing here.

Irkutsk

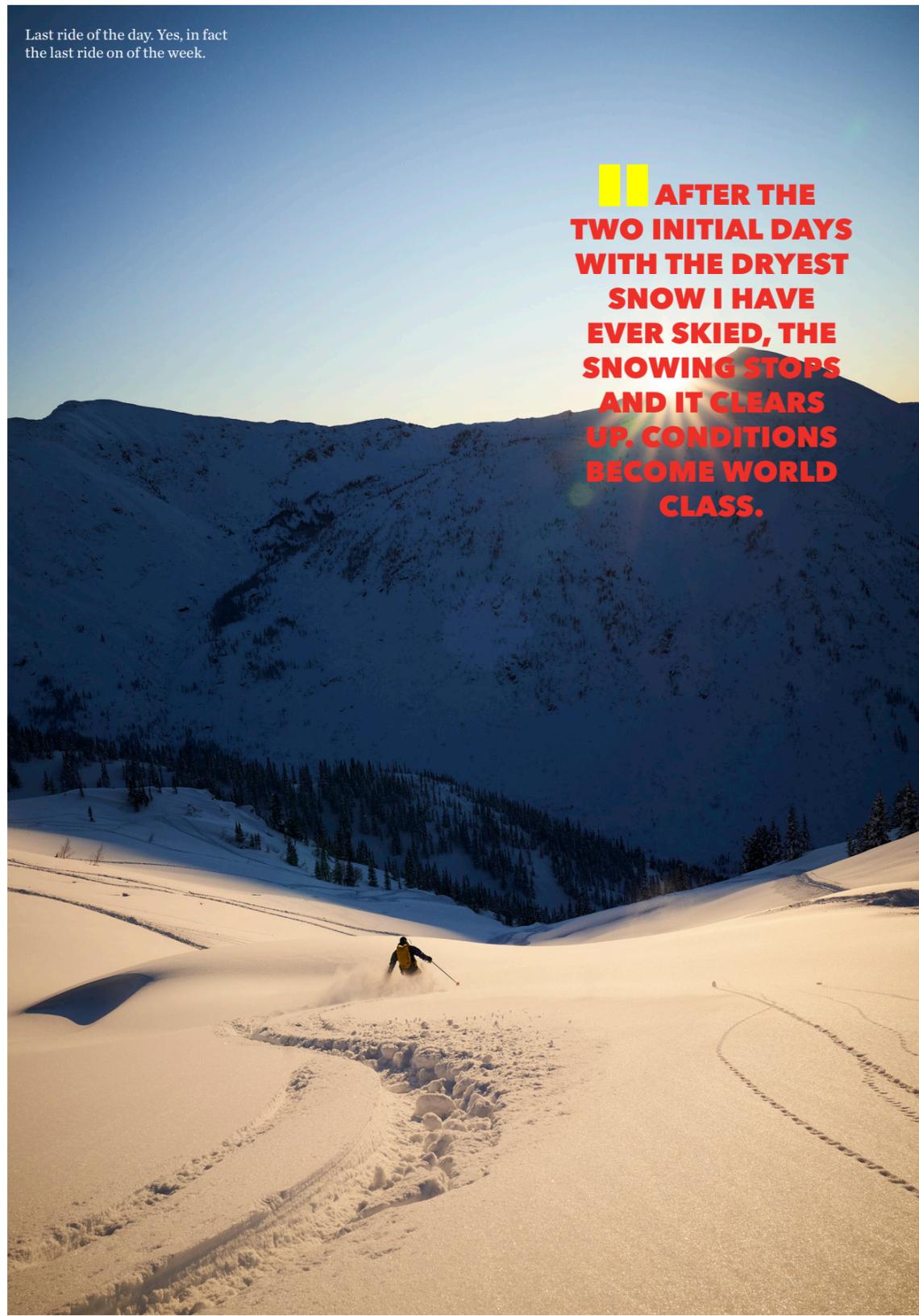
Irkutsk is located on the southern shore of Lake Baikal, has 600,000 inhabitants and is therefore one of Siberia's largest cities. It's an important military town and seat of the Archbishop of the Russian Orthodox Church. Make sure you visit a church, the decor is nice kitschy. It's 5,000 kilometres to Moscow.

The best restaurant we went to was True cost. The worst was the Irish pub Harats, they served watery beer, industrial hamburgers and displayed unbearable sports on big screens. The town has both indoor and outdoor markets. A must visit. In addition, there's a cool mix of people here, a magnificent Russian melting pot of Caucasians, Armenians, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Mongols, the whole lot.

Prejudices

When we land in Irkutsk, our driver immediately makes it clear to us that he knows what we think that we know about Russians. "Okay, let's go to the local nuclear power plant that just had a meltdown, get drunk on vodka, strip down to the waist and wrestle with bears. Minus 40. Russian style." Mmmm. Well, this is probably how some people imagine the Russians, I would say that the Russians are like people are in general. If you scratch a little bit on the thin cultural varnish, we are of course all the same. French, Danes, Swedes. And of course, Russians.

Last ride of the day. Yes, in fact the last ride on of the week.



AFTER THE TWO INITIAL DAYS WITH THE DRYEST SNOW I HAVE EVER SKIED, THE SNOWING STOPS AND IT CLEARS UP. CONDITIONS BECOME WORLD CLASS.



The days roll on. You adapt pretty quickly to the simple life without running water and electricity from the mains. Outhouse. Get water in the river. The phone is only used as a camera. Sacha's mighty breakfast porridge. The soups. The dry white bread. Fat bacon. Smetana. Grains. The body adjusts to hard work and high metabolism. We eat like teenage boys. Get up at the crack of dawn. Stuff our faces. On with the skins. Then we go touring. A couple of hours up to the highest peaks. And then unforgettable untracked descents. After the two initial days with the driest snow I have ever come across, it stops snowing and the weather clears up. Conditions become more normal world class. Untracked, light but no longer bottomless featherlight. Powder snow but no longer dust. We do the Tri Berezi, which means "Three birches"

Snorkeling is quite 1979, but there were honestly moments when we seriously thought about how to breathe.



in Swedish. The Northern circusturn. The Avalanche circus. And many runs that have no names yet. We ride with Lake Baikal in the backdrop and to the west we see dark snow clouds forming before the next snowfall. I like the monotony. The slow, continuous skinning uphill. Off with the skins. On with more clothes and goggles. Tighten the boots, change into riding mode. A quick bite to eat. A few sips of lukewarm sweet tea from the thermos. Shred your powder. Repeat. It becomes a job, a very challenging but satisfying job. And then, in the evenings we sit in the small basic cabin and brag about our runs. Isolated. Enthused. I throw out the question “what is the best snow you have ever skied”. The French in the group are, to say the least, experienced powder hunters. Val, for example, is a ski instructor (i.e. the French guide trained variant) and works a great deal in the Grand Massif and in the Chamonix area. Julianne as well. They often visit other powder snow metropolises. Yannick, who has brought this group together, travels between Kamchatka, Japan, Kazakhstan, France and North America in search of powder. Philippe, a helicopter pilot, who, in addition to flying skiers, also rides a huge amount of untracked snow. Photographer Jacob Helbig has been hunting powder snow for years for, among others, the French ski magazine Skieur. And so on. Everyone in the group agrees that they have never experienced better snow than the one we had during the first magical days in the Mamay Valley.

I’ll let Yannick sum it up.

- Colorado, Utah, Japan and others obviously have amazing snow. But there is no freaking way you can compare. But I dare to say that you have perhaps the best chance in the world to ski an unlimited amount of untracked snow of this quality and quantity right here in the Mamay Valley. If you like to travel far away, experience something else than well-organized tourism, and you like adventure and wilderness, it makes perfect sense to come here.

No one in the cabin contradicts this.



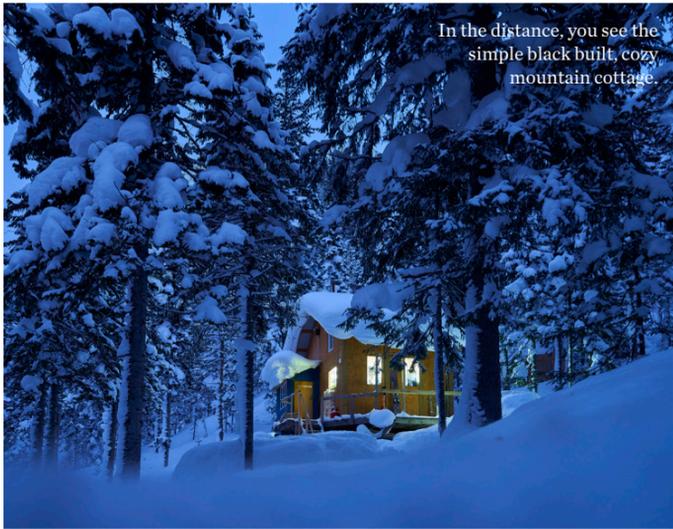
Our group is accompanied by uncertified mountain guides. Stepan is a local guide and he aims to cooperate with the Russian mountain guide organization. Yannick is an experienced powderhound but without the formal guide education. However, many in our group are French ski instructors, which means that they have the training and knowledge for off-piste experiences. Admitting that the real UIAGM

It can be said that the conditions for downhill skiing in the Mamay valley were discovered about 20 years ago. A couple of snowboarders, students from Irkutsk, came here on the weekends to bootpack and ride powder. They travelled here by train that included an overnight stop in a school. A 24-hour one-way trip. Then, a walk up the valley with tents, equipment and boards. Do two runs. Get blind drunk on cheap vodka, stay the night and then a 24-hour trip back to Irkutsk. The more well-off, the ones who went by car or taxi and maybe even rented a snowmobile to ride up the valley, were not considered as dedicated. It became sort of a thing to show how much you wanted to sacrifice for the powder snow, says Stepan, our Russian guide who has spent 15 seasons in the valley since he was first introduced to it by his father, an alpinist and outdoor maniac and one of the very first to come skiing here. The first cabin was built in 2005. In 2008, Stepan helped build the cabin we stay in. Today, there are almost 20 cabins in the valley, most of them are not for lodging powderhounds, but only for outdoor enthusiasts and some snowmobile loonies. Up until the season of 2017-2018, snow conditions here were a well-kept secret amongst the Irkutsk residents. Not all Russians here are fully happy with the French, Danes and Swedes coming to “their” garden of Eden. But it would be an exaggeration to say that there’s tension in the air.

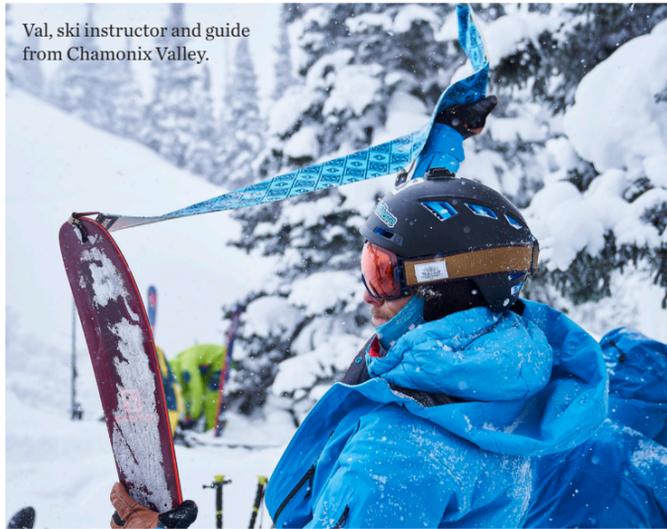
When we visit the Mamay Valley, there is a total of about 45 skiers in the area. Something our guides have never experienced before. But there is enough powder for everyone. Every now and then we come across other groups, but it’s never tracked out or crowded. But the word spreads quickly. Most skiers who experience the conditions we have will probably have a hard time keeping quiet about it. If the Mamay valley had had a tourist friendly infrastructure and mountain rescue, the invasion would have been a fact. But since the area is hard to access it will probably remain a small paradise for at least a couple of more years.



But back to the snow. What we there and then claim is the best snow in the world, is it really that good? Is there a difference between snow and snow? Is there a difference between, for example, Japow and North American powder? Where do you really find the THE greatest snow on earth. I think many people would have a hard time in a blind test. The opportunity makes the thief. Snow crystals are formed according to physical laws, regardless of national boundaries. There is no magic in



In the distance, you see the simple black built, cozy mountain cottage.



Val, ski instructor and guide from Chamonix Valley.

mountain guides may not be as enthusiastic about the ski instructors taking clients on raw off-piste. But I notice nothing of that when I speak to Fred Buttard, a French-Swedish “real” mountain guide, who has brought a French group of ski tourers to Mamay at the same time as we are there. A few weeks after our visit to Mamay, Swedish mountain guide Jossi Lindblom is there with a heliskiing group. Yes, you get it. Mamay is too good to remain unknown. There will be more people in Mamay in the near future, but as I said, the circumstances mean that only a few people can be bothered.



Weightless powder?

Newly fallen fluffy snow, the normal world class type, weighs only 30 kilos per cubic meter. The snow that fell in Mamay when we were there weighed only about a third of that. Wet fresh snow usually weighs between 100 and 200 kilos per cubic meter. And the heaviest water-drenched spring snow can weigh up to 400 kilos per cubic meter.

What is snow?

Looking at physics and chemistry, snow is just frozen water, that is, two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen molecule that have decided to assume a solid crystallized form. Depending on how the cooling of the H₂O liquid takes place, the snow crystal has different shapes and properties. The ice crystals in snowflakes are often constructed in hexagonal shapes. This depends on the properties of the water molecule. And although homo sapiens have been to the moon, engineered internal combustion engines and nuclear power plants, and discovered black holes, it has been darned impossible to invent a really good ski wax that works on all types of snow. In fact, you can't even wax properly when it really matters even if you employ the utmost expertise. That's how complex snow is. Normal lovely, sticky, dry, gluey, coarse, fluffy, concrete packed or transformed. Snow that, depending on the circumstances, can splash, grumble, whine, scream, chuckle, rustle or clink. It's also a fact that we cannot make as good snow as nature can. Admittedly, our snowmaking systems can cover a hill and create a durable shell that will last for thousands of shuffling skiers. But that really fluffy powder snow is difficult to imitate in an artificial way.



this. However, temperature, freezing point, wind and air humidity naturally all have to be taken into account. Although the subjective experience is of course the most important of them all. The one having the most fun wins. And the most fun is when you can down untracked powder without having to rush, without anyone else getting in your way.

Is the snow better in Mamay than in Colorado, Japan or Austria? Nah. Perfect is perfect. A good day is a good day. But the conditions for untouched powder early on in the season are good, very good in Mamay. So, it is paradisiac. Not more nor less.



Words for snow

The Eskimos don't have, as it is often said, 200 or 300 or 700 different words for snow. It's rather so that their language (the Eskimo-Aleut language) is just, like for example

Swedish, polysynthetic. This means that it is possible to form compound words of different meaning-bearing morphemes. “Dry-as-no-can-do-snowmen-of-snow”, for example. But it is a fact that Swedish and several other languages spoken where snow falls, have a plethora of words about snow and its properties. Powder, crust, slush, sleet, smooth, drifting, avalanche, hail, wet, sky chubs, and many more. Besides, you can also add all the compound words concerning snow: wet snow, sugary snow, cardboard snow, fresh snow, rainy snow, cauliflower snow, powder snow, and many more. So, don't buy the old myth of the Eskimos

and their flair for snowy words. Swedish has just as many, that is, about a dozen. In Sami, there are no less than 300 words or expressions that relates to and explain snow and ice.

Perhaps we, the Swedes, are a bit sloppy when we literally call the lightest and most fluffy snow “light loose snow” or puder (from the English powder which means a substance of fine particles, equivalent to pulver which is in fact the Danes' designation). Snow light as dust. Champagne powder. There is not really any scientific designation. Hardly even a proper word. However, the lightest snow is in a Sami dialect called habllek. In Japan, you add yuki to words in order to describe snow quality. Mochiyuki signifies light snow, but skiers prefer to use pauda (from powder). The Germans say pulverschnee, the French neige poudreuse. The Russians porošok snega (порошок снега) but most often powder. The Danes say pulver.



WHERE DO YOU REALLY FIND THE GREATEST SNOW ON EARTH? I THINK MANY PEOPLE WOULD HAVE A HARD TIME IN A BLIND TEST.