

## GOING BOWLING Aspen Highlands, Colorado

by Susan Schnier

Photo: Phillip Drake  
Skier: Stephan Drake

A scruffy brown terrier poked its ears out of the Gucci handbag that sat on the floor in front of me. As I waited in line at the airport, I counted seven black and gold Gucci bags in a range of sizes and shapes. The dog bobbed back into hiding as a shrill voice, emanating from a heavily made-up, carefully manicured woman, blared into my consciousness. She had lost one of her bags and was screeching at a patient man behind the counter. I glanced down at my ratty sneakers and wondered what a dirtbag like me was doing in Aspen.

In contrast to Aspen's rugged natural landscape, most of the people that live there are lathered in luxury. The average price of a home is over four million dollars, and the resort's employees cannot afford to live there—rather they rent and own homes in one of three more modest towns about a half hour away. But for ski-bums in the know, the commute is well worth it. Aspen Highlands, one of four areas in the region and the locals' favorite, has the most challenging terrain of the pack as well as spectacular backcountry access.

Aspen Highland has the only trail map in

the area that spells out the legality of backcountry access from the resort and warns skiers to "be aware of uphill pedestrian traffic." It's not uncommon to see hikers beneath the Loge Peak lift on their way to the 12,392-foot summit (USGS added 10 feet this year) of Highland Bowl.

The bowl, wide-open, steep and vast has a certain mystique about it. In 1982 Lou Dawson was lured by its beauty and suffered a broken femur from a massive slide that ripped right down the center. But in spite of this slide and many others like it that ended in tragedy, the bowl has

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maintained its allure and despite the odds, the people want it open. The history of the past 30 years is instructive: When the Aspen Highlands ski patrol first asked the resort to open Highland Bowl in the early 70s, it encountered tremendous resistance on all sides. The resort operators and many locals opposed the idea, saying that it was

too dangerous. But the patrol prevailed, driven by vested interest and inspired by endless views of surrounding 14,000+ foot peaks, they opened the area to guided hiking tours in 1981 and heli tours in 1983.

### The Golden Years

For three years, from 1981 to 1984 patrollers and backcountry enthusiasts trekked up the bowl, either dropping in and returning to the lifts for another lap, or descending elsewhere on the ridge for a longer run and more rigorous hike out. Long-time Highlands patroller, Mac Smith—once a skiing rugrat who'd tear up the mountain, skiing over the skis of students in group lessons and racing away before the instructor could catch him—calls this period the "golden years" of Highland's backcountry policy.

### The Dark Ages

According to Smith, that all ended when three patrollers were killed in Highland Bowl in 1984. The mountain immediately closed the bowl, prompting what Smith describes as the "dark ages." The area was closed for 13 years before Smith and the rest of the patrol were able to achieve a reopening. It was a tough period, Smith

explains, "but the desire never died since it came from passion."

During those years, only treed runs in the Temerity area off of the lower ridge were open. Temerity requires less than a 10-minute hike and resembles resort more than backcountry skiing.

### The Reopening

In 1994, when the Aspen Skiing Company bought Highlands, the patrol began scouting the bowl for a reopening. This was a huge victory for the Highlands patrol and backcountry skiers and riders, but patrol moved very slowly on the project, carefully inching the ski area boundary up from the top of the Loge Peak chairlift.

Back in the 70s, patrol divided the bowl into four zones, based on aspect and amount of sun exposure. The south-facing R(ed) zone is the hottest, with the Y(ellow) zone following, then the B(lue) zone and finally, the coolest, northern facing G(reen) zone. The patrol has chipped away at these zones, opening more terrain ever year and adding backcountry access gates along the ridge. They opened the lower Y-zone in 1997 and they haven't rested since. In 1998 they unleashed more of the Y-zone, and in

1999 and 2000 patrol opened the B zone, allowing descents from the peak's highest point. Last year a small part of the G-zone was opened. "It was a small piece of land, but a big step forward in terms of keeping morale high," says Smith.

This season patrol will add more of the steep, north-facing, heavily treed G-zone to the skiable area of the bowl. This opening will also allow skiers and riders to head straight down the drainage below the bowl and out to Castle Creek Road.

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### Avalanche Danger

Coming from California, where our unwritten policy is "if the snow sticks to it, we can ski it," (except for the 24-hour, post-storm window), I was unprepared for the weakness of the Colorado snowpack. The day before, on a backcountry excursion from Aspen Mountain, I finished a run near a gathering of eight other skiers. Shattering the silence, the snow dropped beneath us, settling and crushing the weak layer below. My first thought was earthquake. My first rational thought was avalanche. Along with a hand-



Photo: Ken Missbrenner  
View: Highland Bowl, R Zone not pictured, not open

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Dawson's Slide

ful of other maritimers, I scurried off the vulnerable slope and into the safety of the trees. Our guide was unfazed, but I was awakened to the limitations of the Colorado backcountry and the effort required to create safer backcountry terrain from hazardous natural conditions.

### Bowl Maintenance

From the peak, lines off of Highlands bowl have pitches of up to 48° and cover prime avalanche terrain. In order to safely open this area, the patrol along with local volunteers prep the base layers in the early season. When the first snow hits, the control crew hikes out the ridge and spreads out into a line. Because the terrain below is often rocky, with some small cliffs, the crew clips into a belay system before descending into the bowl. Then they walk down the slope, taking care to compress the snow with every step, and back up again.

The crew assembles every time new snow falls for the first few months of the early winter.



The depth of the slide that Lou Dawson set off in Highland Bowl is about one Lou high  
Photos: Tom Hicks

Some Aspen-area locals take advantage of this opportunity to sweat for their ski pass—not something done by the denizens of the posh town below. Once the primary snow layers have been compressed, the patrol continues avalanche control when new snow arrives by more traditional measures, like ski-cutting and explosives.

There are three major aspects of the bowl and each storm cycle loads a different aspect. Regardless of where the storm came from, the bowl always has a “tripling effect”—if other areas received 5 inches of snow, there will be parts of the bowl with 15. According to Highlands patroller Tim Grogan, it is hard to find conditions like the bowl anywhere else in the state, and they are sec-

ond perhaps only to helicopter or snow-cat skiing. But even if you use motorized options, he explains, you won't find the same caliber of terrain since wild terrain of the same pitch would be too dangerous.

### Where to Go

To access Highland Bowl, ride the Loge Peak chair to the summit and head straight off the lift. Start hiking when your skis won't carry you any farther and boot pack to the top of the peak. The hike to the top

of Highland Peak takes about 30-45 minutes, depending on your speed, and results in a 707-foot elevation gain. There you'll enjoy views of Maroon Bells and Pyramid Peak, two 14,000ft+ peaks off to the southwest. Pick a line anywhere down the enormous bowl. To return to the lifts, veer left at the bottom of the bowl and take the Grand Traverse.

For a longer run and hike, skip the traverse, continue down the ravine to Castle Creek Road and hitch a ride.

Another option besides the main bowl is to enter Child's Play from the gates at the east side of the ridge, drop into the trees and ski out the

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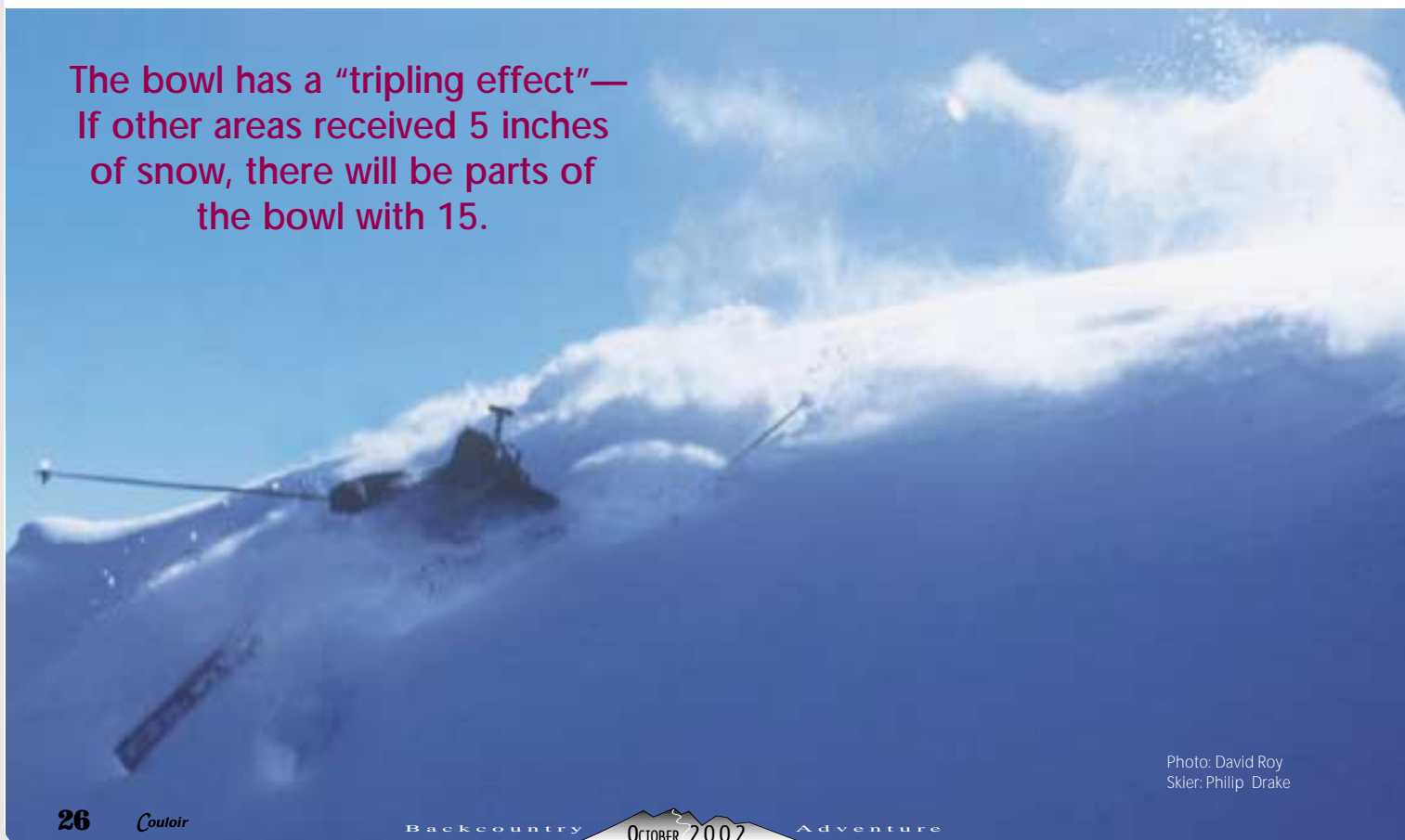


Photo: David Roy  
Skier: Phillip Drake


Hiker: Kirsten Newhard  
Photo: Penn Newhard



ravine at the bottom down to the road. You will not be able to return to the lifts if you chose this route.

If you're pressed for time, you don't have to make it to the summit to find great terrain, you can drop in anywhere along the ridge to the hiker's left, rip the bowl, and return to the lifts via the Grand Traverse. As you hike to the ridge you'll pass four "gates." You must observe closures at these gates, if they are in effect. However, you can continue on to the summit, even if a gate is closed, as long as you hike outside of the boundary area that lines the ridge (walk to the hiker's right of the boot pack).

Another possible option, though not recommended, is to ski off the ridge to the hiker's right and drop into the steep and narrow chutes of Maroon bowl. But user beware: This area is uncontrolled and avalanches in this tempting zone have taken many lives and threatened many others in the past few years alone.

Highland Bowl holds snow well into May, and the resort is considering opening the Expedition and Loge Peak lifts in the post-season to provide access to the bowl as well as the surrounding backcountry that is more stable in the late spring. But Highland Bowl opens as early as the patrol and volunteers can manage. Just don't let Aspen's reputation scare you away; the prevailing culture of affluence is just a minor distraction from an ever-growing backcountry ethic with a rich history centered on Highland Bowl. 

### CONTACT

[www.aspenhighlands.com/highlands](http://www.aspenhighlands.com/highlands)  
or 800-525-6200

BETA

### LOCATION

From Denver: 220 miles west via I-70 and Colorado 82. From Grand Junction: 125 miles east via I-70 and Colorado 82. From Eagle County Airport: 70 miles west via I-70 and Colorado 82. Snowmass Village is located 5 miles off Colorado 82 via Brush Creek Road. Aspen is located 5 miles past Brush Creek road via Colorado 82.

### TICKETS

\$65 for an adult ticket, or hike up to the summit for free—Highlands requires that hikers are past the Merry-Go-Round restaurant by 9am.

### AVALANCHE CONDITIONS

Colorado Avalanche Information Center:  
[geosurvey.state.co.us/avalanche](http://geosurvey.state.co.us/avalanche)

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