

## Tele Takeover

Taos, New Mexico

By Susan Schnier

Scott Barady, one of many New Mexico freeheelers cultivating their own flavor of Southwest culture.

Photo by Mike Holmquist

It's just snowed three feet of Taos powder—a precipitation phenomenon so light and dry that it's more 'martini' than 'champagne.' The surroundings of the morning assault all senses; hearing crinkling Gore-tex, tasting the invigoration of coffee, and smelling the musky scent of ever-present herbal remedy. But while it's a typical powder day at Taos Ski Valley, it's actually very unusual. Not the controversial lack of snowboarders; old school Taos has never let them in. No, today the big news appears to be that every other skier in line sports freeheel gear. Big anywhere else, yes, but not Taos, where up to 50% of skiers might free the heel on a powder day. Telemark at Taos and you will lose your "alternative" status, but you'll likely gain kindred freeheel partners exuding an unquenchable thirst for untamed terrain.

Steeped in southwest culture, with a half-hour drive from the Taos Pueblo, tumbleweeds, and the artsy town of Taos, the high-elevation hamlet of Taos Ski Valley juts out the top of a steep box canyon. "Most people that live here now were hitchhiking or driving their VW bus through town on their way to California 20 years ago," explains Chris of the Thunderbird Lodge. "Either they lost a wheel or didn't get a ride, and they ended up staying. With Taos, you either love it or hate it."

For freeheelers, there's nothing to hate, just leg-burning bump runs, steep and tight forest excursions, and a long, smooth ridgeline. Gnarly conditions like hidden rocks and stumps bond freeheelers together at Taos with a strength we only wish the snow crystals had. From alpine to tele, tourist to

local, and teen to grandparent, weathered "Ridgeheads" spend their days trekking from the top of Chair 6 along the sprawling ridgeline, choosing their poison. Spectators will observe telemark styles as diverse as the eccentrics who call Taos home, from rippers doing it for decades to fearful newbies tentatively sliding their knees back like puppet strings over which they had lost control.

If you want to hone your skills before attacking the Ridge, at Taos you don't have to wait around for that one telemark instructor who only works two days a week. Fifteen out of Taos's 100 adult instructors telemark, as do a handful of instructors for children. A six-week weekend telemark clinic, taught by freeheel guru Hank TK often draws men and women from Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Los Alamos.

So if you're looking for steep, dry powder away from the normal locales of Colorado or Utah, and, above all else, the camaraderie of sharing a mountain with fellow freeheelers, move Taos to the top of your list. Fall in with the telemark ranks hiking to the Ridge, but remember, like so many before you, you might not ever leave.



## ESSENTIALS

**Getting there:** From Albuquerque take I-25 to Santa Fe, exit on 599 north to by-pass Santa Fe, Highway 285 to Route 68 to Taos. From Taos, take Route 522 north to Route 150.

**Top Elevation:** 11,819 feet (highest lift-served), or 12,481 feet (with the hike to Kachina Peak)

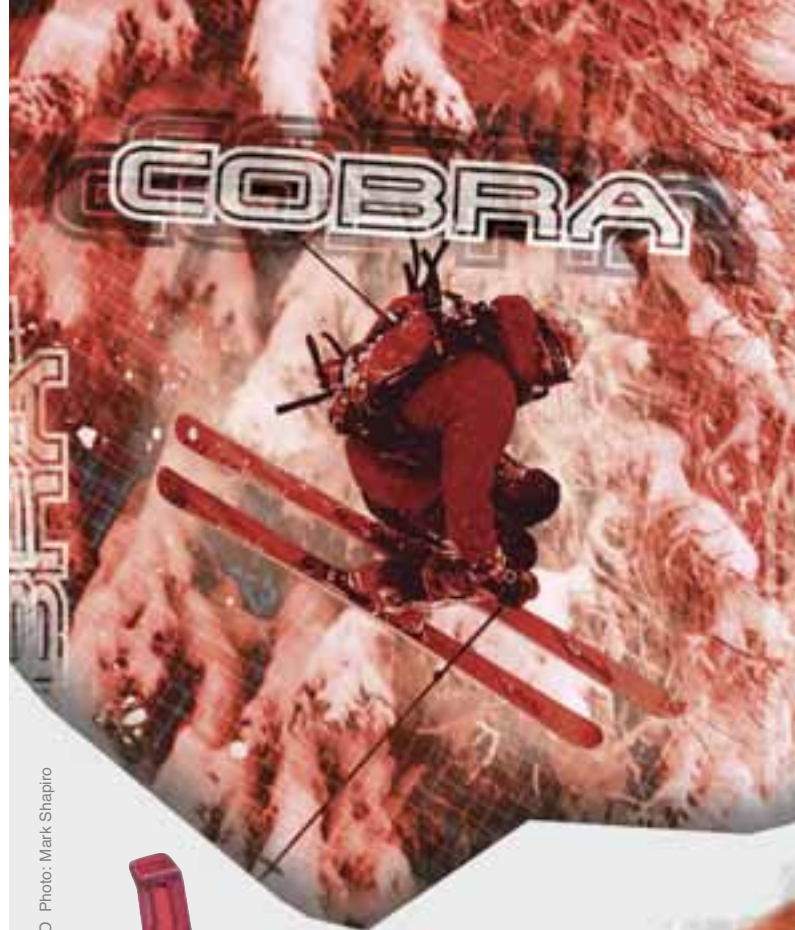
**Vertical:** 2,612 feet, or 3,244 feet from Kachina Peak

**Terrain:** 1,096 acres

**Lift Ticket:** \$55 after December 18th, \$43 children 12-17.

**Website:** [www.skitaos.org](http://www.skitaos.org)

**Notes:** On Thursdays, scour the slopes for the hidden "Martini Tree," a tradition started by ski school founder, Ernie Blake, when he used the gin drink to coax a fearful student down Al's Run. Serve yourself if you find it. If not, you can order one at the base area après-ski joint called the Martini Tree. Taos offers the latest telemark rental gear in the shop, as well as telemark events like Demo Day, Tele Fun Day, the 6-week locals clinic, and a tele ski week for company and coaching.



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