



Victor resident and prolific skier, climber, and mountain guide Luke Smithwick traverses the mountainside in the high glacial basin Annapurna Sanctuary in Nepal.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY
LUKE SMITHWICK

Ski Touring, Here and in the Himalayas

The Tetons provide a first-class training ground for this world explorer

When I sat down to write this piece, I was just days from a backcountry ski trip in Patagonia. At my home in Victor, winter was beginning to feel not too far away. As I pedaled singletrack through the forests of the Big Hole Range I could smell the first signs of fall. Leaf rot and the last blooms of fireweed indicated that our first snowstorms in the high alpine reaches would soon arrive.

I frequented the Teton Range in my past travels, but late last summer I made the shift from visitor to resident. I now live in downtown Victor, which will serve as my home base between travels to Nepal, where I ski and climb professionally. I've been exploring the Himalayas as a skier, climber, and mountain guide for nearly a decade, partly as a sponsored skier and climber and the other part guiding skiing and climbing expeditions with my company, Himalaya Alpine Guides.

The access this Idaho valley provides to the mountains drew me to settle in the Tetons. I'm certainly not alone in my affinity for the region's backcountry terrain: touring out to glades of cold dry snow on Teton Pass, exploring in the Big Holes, and finding quiet stashes of powder across the intermountain ranges. Teton Valley boasts a healthy snowpack that remains consistent every winter, amazing trail riding and running during the summer months, and a land-

scape in the valley proper that reminds me of my childhood home in North Carolina. But what really pulled me to the Tetons is the vertical relief, the big approach days, and great technical terrain in quality granite with consistent storms during the winter months—my favorite season. The terrain and weather allow me to train for my upcoming expeditions and focus on getting strong and fit for what the next adventure entails. And to do so in a landscape like this is super inspiring and extraordinary in its own right. I feel lucky, indeed, to call this area home.

And while there's no real need to travel to ski when our Idaho home has such spectacular terrain, ready access, and quality snow for backcountry skiing, I am pulled to the Himalayas. I've developed a love for the culture and natural history of the Himalayas that keeps me coming back to explore a bit further as a skier year after year. By the time the first big storms hit the Tetons this year,



I'll be returning for my seventy-fourth Himalayan expedition. (On this particular trip, we are attempting Mount Shivling, a sharp iconic peak in the central Garhwal Himalayas.)

Skiing the Himalayas

The Himalayas are known as a place to which many go to hike and climb, yet relatively few go for skiing. The range stretches across Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Orographically fragmented, the Himalayas offer a multitude of varying snowpacks and types of ski terrain fit to be explored. Nepal alone is a very diverse country for skiing, and



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I frequent a variety of regions in search of accomplishing my next expedition, particularly in the Humla district, the Annapurna Range, and Langtang National Park.

HUMLA DISTRICT

The far west corner of the Humla district—a mountainous area of 2,000 square miles and peaks as high as 23,000 feet—consistently has some of the deepest snowpacks in the Himalayas.

The people of the Humla region, who speak several languages and belong to many different ethnic groups, are subsistence farmers, working to cultivate a mere 2 percent of the land due to harsh terrain. They have a healthy respect and reverence for the massive mountains towering above their tiny pastoral villages. I began exploring the Humla region for skiing in 2018 after noticing that the big storms that track through Kashmir, where I worked as the backcountry avalanche forecaster and snow safety director at Gulmarg Ski Resort, continued into northwestern Nepal. Called “western disturbances,” these storms originate in the Mediterranean Sea and move eastward into the Himalayas, often depositing meters of snow. Perfect for exploratory ski touring and lots of practice shoveling—two activities we all know well here in Teton Valley.

The deepest snow for skiing in Nepal is in the west. As you progress across the country the snowpack becomes progressively shallower, finally reaching the rela-

tively dry Everest region in the northeast corner. The season for skiing the Nepal Himalayas is February and March, when the snows come to the “lower” elevations of 10,000 to 16,000 feet. The higher elevations of the Nepal Himalayas, scoured by the westerly winds during winter, are unfit for skiing. Plus, linking turns at elevations below 16,000 feet is a lot more fun than scraping down a wind-scoured face at 23,000 feet while feeling nauseated from lack of oxygen. Who wants to do that?

ANNAPURNA RANGE

In the center of the country, the Annapurna Range unlocks an amazing variety of terrain for powder skiing on the flanks, couloirs, panels, and faces beneath the 23,000- and 26,000-foot giants that characterize the region. Here the Gurung people, of Tibetan descent, make a living farming millet and maize or wheat, buckwheat, barley, and potatoes on the steep terraced slopes beneath the peaks.

The Annapurna Range unlocks an amazing variety of terrain for powder skiing ... beneath the 23,000- and 26,000-foot giants that characterize the region.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The author skins up a mountain during an expedition in Nepal's Humla region; prayer flags sway in the breeze in Langtang National Park; a skintrack in Annapurna Sanctuary.



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ABOVE The author takes a break during a powder day at Gulmarg Ski Resort in Kashmir, where he worked as a backcountry avalanche forecaster and snow safety director.

The Annapurna Range is home to large couloirs and ramps at its eastern fringe, where the snowpack begins to form in December and becomes skiable by February (much later than back home, where skiers and snowboarders are hopefully enjoying a powder-filled season). These can be accessed on foot from the villages of the Marsyangdi River Valley. Choughs (black crows) arc and dive in the air, prayer flags snap in the breeze beneath cerulean blue skies, and the smell of juniper wood smoke permeates the air as you climb higher and higher into the Himalayas.

LANGTANG NATIONAL PARK

And when snow allows, Nepal's Langtang National Park is another favorite spot—maybe more for the culture than the reliable conditions. Catching Langtang for powder skiing is about as rare of an occurrence as grabbing a parking spot on Teton Pass at 10 a.m. on a Sunday in January. Every few seasons, however, Langtang does provide some good skiing, and visiting with Tamang locals while enjoying a chang brew next to a warm fire is tough to beat after a day of powder skiing in the nearby birch forests and wide-open bowls.

While I write, and reflect on explorations past and to come in Himalaya travels, the fall chores beckon: there are weeds to pull in the yard and packing to continue for my next overseas adventure. While I plan to continue exploring new terrain in the Himalayas, I will relish coming home to the Tetons, where deep snow and amazing landscapes await.

Here's to a great winter of skiing, wherever your explorations take you. See you out on the skin track! **TV**



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