

From shiffrin@indiana.edu Wed, Sep 26, 2007 Richard Shiffrin

The sale of the Inn (and the likelihood of demolition after the 2008 AIC conference) could result in this year's conference being the last one in Jackson Hole. This is a particular worry for those attendees who have come to enjoy (or hope to begin enjoying) the backcountry ski opportunities in the area. It is well known world-wide that this area is the best site anywhere for this activity, taking into account access, snow conditions, scenery, weather, and other factors. If AIC is forced to move sites, then this year will be your last chance to partake of one of the best activities in all of sport.

Over the years we have accumulated at AIC a sizeable group of backcountry skiers making outings a pleasant social experience, as well as a spectacular adventure. As usual, we will be using the services of Tom Turiano, who has written the books about backcountry skiing in the local mountain ranges, and has led tours for our group for many years.

What is backcountry skiing? One climbs a mountain (not the resort), using skins on the base of the ski or snowboard equipment to walk up. One then skis or snowboards down in untracked deep powder snow. Three methods can be used: Most common these days is 'Randonee': One uses normal downhill ski equipment, but with a special binding that allows the heel to lift freely for walking uphill. The heel is locked down for the descent, as in normal downhill skiing at the resort. Less common is 'Telemark' gear. In this case the heel remains free for both ascending and descending. To descend, one must either learn the telemark turn technique, or learn how to make parallel turns with the heel free. Least common is snowboarding, because one must either 1) have or rent a 'split snowboard', which comes apart lengthwise into what are like two wide skis, for walking uphill, and is put together for normal snowboard descents, or 2) walk uphill with snowboard on one's backpack, using special short and wide skis, or snowshoes, to ascend, switching for the descent. All equipment can be rented locally, though split snowboards may require a trip over Teton Pass to Idaho.

Those who tried any of these approaches to backcountry skiing believe backcountry to be one of the world's best sports, combining the best elements of hiking, scenery, wilderness, fitness, powder skiing in untracked conditions, and sheer fun.

Some of us go into the backcountry every day at AIC (and usually the day prior and the day after), while others join less often. We are happy to take newcomers along and introduce them to the sport. Newcomers may, for reasons of unfamiliarity or reduced fitness, be worried that they cannot keep up (on the climbing) with more experienced members of the group. This is generally not a worry, because the more experienced members may do 'yo-yo's, climbing and descending an attractive slope several times, while other members may only do so once, resting in the meantime. The general level of fitness needed is similar to that needed for a summer hike of similar vertical feet (say at least 2000-3000 feet) at similar altitude (about 6000 feet at the base near Jackson Hole). Other people worry that there is great danger and/or difficulty in this sport (perhaps a view enhanced by seeing various adventure ski films). In fact the skiing we undertake is mellow and fun. As has been true for many years, I will give a

powerpoint slide show the first day of AIC that illustrates these points.

Note for those wishing to join: The relevant gear must be rented the day or night previous, because it is necessary that we return in time for the talks (of astounding quality, of course), and generally leave in the morning before any rental shops open.

If you are interested, please contact me and let me know (shiffrin@indiana.edu, or 812-855-4972, office, or 812-320-7390, cell). I can provide all the information you need in great detail.

I look forward to seeing you in Jackson Hole (possibly for the last time at AIC).

Rich