

IT'S ALL UPHILL IN ASPEN BUT IT'S WORTH IT



SKIING in Aspen, Colorado – that icon of North American ski resorts – is about many things.

It's about incredible feats in the X Games. It's people-watching on the terrace of Ajax Tavern restaurant, hiking uphill to ski the legendary Highland Bowls and drinking beer in the Woody Creek Tavern where Hunter S Thompson hung out.

It's about silver mining history, art galleries, live music, après in the Little Nell hotel and ogling women in fur jackets and white ski pants.

Increasingly, it's also about what Aspen mayor Steve Skadron calls the 'uphill economy'.

The uphill economy refers to what we in Europe call ski touring and skinning, and what Aspen locals call Alpine touring and uphill skiing.

Skinning means hiking up mountains (who needs chair lifts?!) with ski bindings that release to allow you to hike uphill and skins attached to the base of your skis to stop you sliding back down.

Skinning is not only brilliant exercise – it also lets you get away from the pistes and into the backcountry. For me, it's the essence of skiing, taking me deep into the mountains and their tranquil beauty.

Uphill skiing has tripled in popularity in Aspen and Steve Skadron is on a mission to make the town an epicentre for the activity, with a plan to attract ski touring manufacturers who want a base in one of the coolest resorts in the world.

I know a bit about uphill skiing. Over a decade ago, I completed the six-day Haute Route ski tour from Chamonix to Zermatt, skinning and skiing to remote mountain huts

between France and Switzerland. Not without some difficulty I might add but it was one of the most memorable things I've ever done.

This week, I made a belated return to uphill skiing and a small contribution to Aspen's uphill economy.

Having flown into Aspen on Tuesday night (enjoying a stunning red sunset on arrival), I woke early next day and dragged my jet-lagged bod up the mountain literally.

Using lightweight touring skis and bindings, I hiked from the base at Aspen to the top of Tie Hack lift – a 1,600ft or 1.75 mile vertical ascent.

It was a hard slog so consider carefully what I'm going to tell you next. I completed the hike with Aspen ski instructor and endurance athlete Ted Mahon who has just this weekend competed in Aspen's Power of Four ski mountaineering race. He competed with his wife Kirsty, who was the first woman to scale all Colorado's 14,000 ft peaks. in 2010.

The Power of Four race is named after Aspen's four mountains – Ajax, Snowmass, Buttermilk and Highland Bowls. The race, which winners complete in less than five hours, takes around 200 competitors across all four mountains; skinning, hiking and skiing the backcountry from Snowmass to west Buttermilk and back to Aspen.

Here comes the impressive bit – competitors cover 24 miles of terrain and a massive 10,000ft of vertical climb, often in freezing temperatures and challenging conditions, which makes my little hike seem very small indeed.

Even better, the race is organised by 27-year-old Daragh Kneeshaw. Daragh's surname is Welsh but his

parents hail from Dublin – Churchtown and Rathfarnham to be precise – so I feel no shame whatsoever in claiming him as one of our own!

I got to watch the start and finish points of the Power of Four race, cheering Ted Mahon and Kristy on.

I've two things to tell you – if you ever visit Aspen, take a lesson with Ted, his instruction is bullet-proof.

Secondly, give uphill skiing a go. The best thing about it is that you burn lots of calories and can justify devouring ridiculously good truffle fries in the Ajax Tavern afterwards.

xx Catherine.