



# Aspen

## THE ULTIMATE UPHILL BATTLE

**If you're among the growing legion of ski tourers, it might be time to test your uphill legs with the Power of Four, a legendary ski competition involving a punishing, 24-mile route with climbs of more than 10,000ft. Words: Ellie Ross**

It's 8am at the base of Aspen's Highlands mountain and all is quiet. The early morning sunlight plays on the Rockies above. A handful of supporters are starting to gather, wrapped up against the biting cold as they await the first arrivals of today's gruelling contest.

This is the halfway point of the Audi Power of Four, a ski mountaineering competition where athletes race in pairs up and down the four mountains that make up this Colorado ski area.

The punishing, 24-mile route has more than 10,000ft of climbs and takes even the fastest skiers around five-and-a-half hours to complete. A Power of Two race covers half the ascent, but is still seriously physically demanding.

Since the first lift opened in 1947, Aspen has become America's most glamorous ski region, visited by everyone from the Obamas to the Kardashians. And yet the vibe is surprisingly relaxed. From people-watching on the Ajax Tavern's terrace to catching some live music at Belly Up, or drinking a modest \$4 (£3) beer at Woody Creek Tavern, the look is more jeans than designer jackets.

Fur jackets are what we could do with today, though, waiting in the chill at the Power of Four transition zone. Cheers and bells finally signal the racers rounding a bend towards us. Running with a ski in each hand, they head to the feed station to refuel on electrolytes and

energy gels. Icicles hang from beards; frozen hydration packs get smashed against the floor to thaw. Teammates help each other transition for the hill ahead — applying skins to skis, buckling boots and snapping on skis. The race requires you to stay within a few seconds of your teammate, so some bungee cord themselves together. Then they're off again, in their skin-tight bodysuits, beginning the interminable shuffle up the snow-covered slope.

Now in its seventh year, the Power of Four is a testament to the increasing popularity of what Europeans call 'ski touring' or 'skinning', and what Aspen locals refer to as 'uphill skiing'. The concept is simple: you ascend the

IMAGE: ESPN IMAGES





mountain on skis (helped by grippy climbing skins attached to the bases) before skiing down. Not only does it allow access to areas beyond the ski lifts, it's also a serious outdoor workout.

Aspen Mayor Steve Skadron coined the term 'the uphill economy', believing that uphill skiers — and the outdoor companies that supply them — could power economic growth.

"Aspen is the epicentre of uphill fitness," Skadron says. "It helps that we happen to be the base of two of the largest ski touring races in the country, the Power of Four and the Grand Traverse. Around 20 years ago, you'd only see a handful of people skiing uphill. Now, some days there are more people going uphill than downhill."

Aspen is also leading the charge on sustainability. The resort is on track to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 25% by 2020 from 2000 levels. Projects include a methane-capturing plant that generates enough energy to offset the total usage of Aspen resort.

Ironic, given that Aspen's pavements are heated and many residents drive SUVs and travel by private jet. Auden Schendler, vice president of sustainability for Aspen Skiing Company, says: "Aspen's a hugely consumptive place — there are jets and

powerful people, so who are we to talk about climate change? But, don't we have a responsibility to try to solve these problems because we're consumptive? What better place to model these solutions than in front of the influential people who come to Aspen?"

Back on the slopes, I'm feeling inspired by the Power of Four. But, lacking ski mountaineering experience, I enrol in a lesser version of uphill skiing. Led by a guide, I'll tackle the Tiehack section of the race, tucked to the east of Buttermilk Mountain, the smallest of Aspen's four peaks.

The name of the trail harks back to Aspen's silver mining heyday between 1879 and 1893, when the town produced one sixth of the nation's silver. To transport it, timber was felled to make sleepers for the Colorado Midland Railway by workers called tie hackers, and the name Tiehack stuck.

With 1,653ft of climbing ahead, I'm pleased to be in the hands of Ted Mahon, a ski instructor with more than 20 years' experience. Ted has climbed and skied all of Colorado's 'fourteeners' (mountain peaks with an elevation of at least 14,000ft), and summited Everest.

"Uphill skiing offers a sense of fulfilment you don't get in a chairlift," Ted explains. "There's something about

it — you're still skiing, but at the same time you're also climbing a mountain. The point is to enjoy skiing in a slightly different way and realise it's not all about the ski down."

First, Ted talks me through the gear. There's no need for fleeces or thermals, just extra layers in the backpack, and we swap helmets for headbands and goggles for sunglasses. We extend our poles by 10cm to help stay upright, breathe properly and push ourselves forward.

Ski bindings allow the heels to lift for uphill, then clip into a solid binding for downhill. The boots go from walk to ski mode at the touch of a button.

Finally, we apply the sticky but removable skins to the base of our skis. Traditional sealskins have been replaced by artificial nylon and mohair, helping skiers glide uphill without slipping backwards. The transition process takes me 10 minutes; in a race, it takes athletes just 30 seconds.

We set off, the Tiehack Trail looming steeply ahead, following waymarked signs; unlike some US resorts that don't permit uphill skiing, all of Aspen's mountains have uphill routes.

I try to copy the way Ted slides his skis forward, instead of lifting them, and the way he looks up and forward, planting his poles near his toes and pushing his skis forward with his hips. I get into a rhythm and within minutes I'm sweating and my glutes ache.

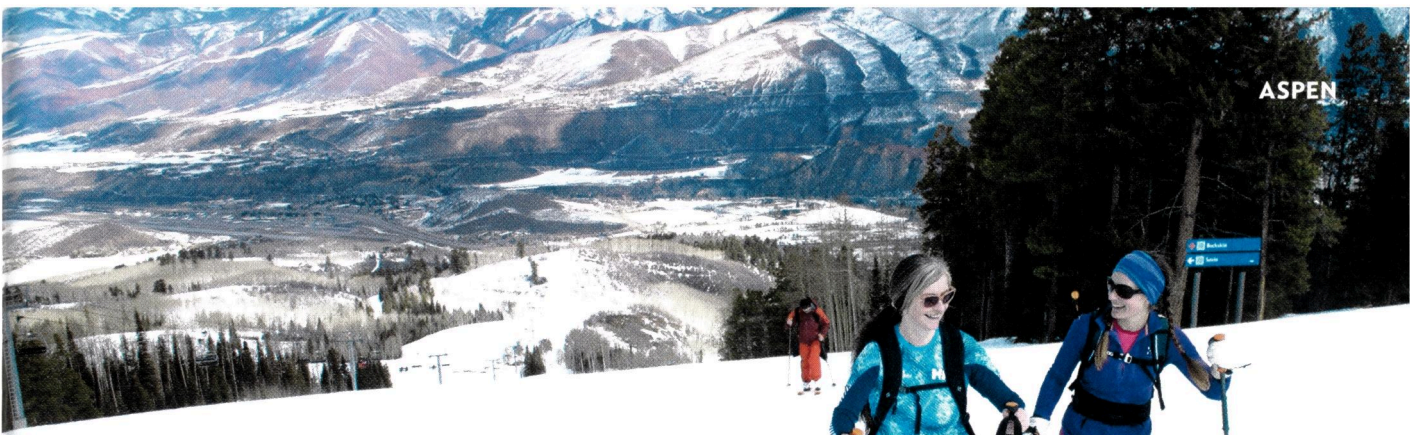
A major difference between skiing in Europe and the States is that US resorts tend to be higher, so snow quality is good from summit to base. But the altitude affects my breathing, laboured with the exertion of every stride. Still, the beauty of the landscape is inspiring.

After 90 minutes, we reach our goal: Cliffhouse, a mountain-top restaurant serving excellent Asian cuisine with panoramic views of Pyramid Peak. The sense of achievement in having reached it under my own steam is topped only by the feeling of satisfaction as we ski back down again, appreciating every swooping turn all the more because of the effort I put in on the way up. □

**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Uphilling in tricky conditions

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Competitors in the Power of Four; uphill; Men's slopestyle eliminations at the Winter X Games





## ESSENTIALS

### HOW TO DO IT

British Airways operates daily direct flights between Heathrow and Denver; return fares start from £501. [britishairways.com](http://britishairways.com)  
 Deluxe King rooms at the centrally located Limelight Hotel in Aspen start from \$305 (£232) per night, B&B. [limelighthotels.com/aspen](http://limelighthotels.com/aspen)

### MORE INFO

[aspensnowmass.com](http://aspensnowmass.com)  
[go-colorado.com/aspen](http://go-colorado.com/aspen)

# Aspen's big 5

## ENDURANCE SNOW SPORTS EVENTS

### POWER OF FOUR

February: This annual, elite endurance race for professional and recreational athletes. Teams of two race 24 miles, climbing more than 10,000ft. Winners of the men's and women's events walk away with a \$1,500 (£1,178) cash prize. [aspensnowmass.com](http://aspensnowmass.com)

### THE GRAND TRAVERSE

March: This annual 40-mile ski mountaineering race from Crested Butte to Aspen. [thegrandtraverse.org](http://thegrandtraverse.org).

### WINTER X GAMES

January: Aspen's Buttermilk Mountain has hosted this extreme sports event since 2002. [xgames.espn.com](http://xgames.espn.com)

### POWER OF TWO

February: Using the second half of the Power of Four course, teams of two begin at Aspen Highlands, ascending the Highland Bowl and the back of Aspen Mountain.

### ASPEN ASCENT WEEKEND

April: A new annual Buttermilk event exclusively for uphill skiers. [aspensnowmass.com/while-you-are-here/events/aspen-uphill-weekend](http://aspensnowmass.com/while-you-are-here/events/aspen-uphill-weekend)

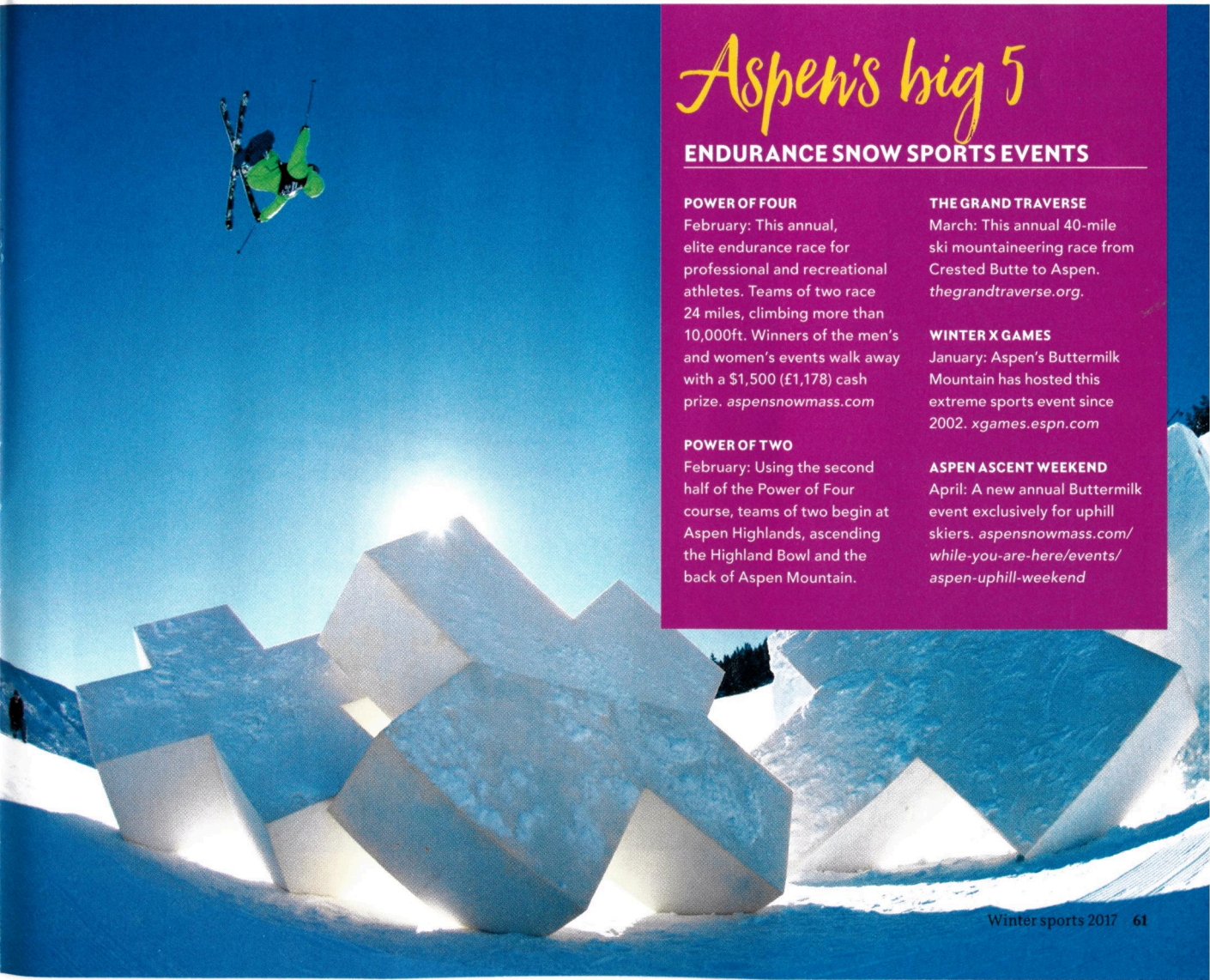


IMAGE: ESPN IMAGES