

Challenging the Minturn Mile

BY STEPHEN LLOYD WOOD



Photos by Dan Davis

It's early on a brilliant, sunny but frigid December morning as Chris, Perky, Dave and I, sweating and out of breath, reach Ptarmigan Point, a quarter-mile hike along Ptarmigan Ridge from the Grand Traverse, where it forks off from upper Lost Boy.

Struggling through waist-deep snow boosted by the previous night's storm, we pass through the backcountry gate and push through another ten yards or so to a spot near an exposed outcropping of rocks at the summit, more than 11,000 feet above sea level, where we clip into our skis.

In the spirit of team reconnaissance, we gaze over the rim and down to the open fields of untracked powder and beyond, far below, to the pine forests and aspen groves populating the ever-narrowing drainage leading to the Eagle River Valley and the sleepy town of Minturn, our destination.

Without further hesitation, Chris disappears left, launching himself into a nearby glade of spruce trees, spraying them with giant white rooster tails. Dave and I duck far right to claim some equally thrilling, if not quite so spectacular, first tracks in sunny, more wide-open spaces. Perky, giggling and with an impressive display of finesse, plunges straight down the middle.

We reunite where the vast powder bowl ends, the sun casting long shadows from the eastern sky, to compare notes. I hesitate, questioning just why I've never before skied truly virgin, untracked powder — fluffy, smooth as silk and light as a cloud, yet buoyant and responsive to my every wish, without the choppy, underlying inconsistencies left behind by other skiers before me.

"The snow's perfect," says Chris, who's obviously at home in such conditions. "Bottomless."

"Like a dream," adds Dave. "I'm thrilled to be here."

"Colorado champagne powder," Perky chimes in, blowing a handful from the palm of his glove. "The deep stuff."

"Just like the brochures," I laugh.

So it goes on my introduction to the legendary, the notorious, the infamous Minturn Mile, an out-of-bounds commuter run for residents of the namesake railroad town, a regular winter adventure for a growing number of local thrill seekers and recently the topic of stories in publications ranging from the *Vail Trail* to *The New York Times*.

For this occasion, I've invited a motley crew: extreme skier and local hero Chris Anthony, the veteran "heavy man" of the Warren Miller Film Team, who confesses to skiing the Mile regularly since he was a kid; Eric "Perky" Perkins, a savvy ski hound with incredible knowledge of the local backcountry, including The Mile, which he claims to have skied "possibly hundreds of times;" and one-time Minturn Miler Dave Lieberman, a fellow ski instructor at Beaver Creek Resort whose main occupation is teaching people to scuba dive off the coast of California's Catalina Island — and who claims to have brought a snorkel, just in case.

The aforementioned powder play is just the beginning of a wild ride, indeed, bringing Chris's words on the Vista Bahn Express earlier that morning into crisp relief: "For sure, the Minturn Mile is a classic part of the Vail culture, a rite of passage. But it still should be treated like the backcountry. It shouldn't be taken lightly. You never know when something goofy can happen back there that can become a big disaster."

Soon enough, with Chris's words fresh on my mind, the four of us are paying the price for that mystical powder frolic above, tackling below what Perky calls "The Gully," a mile or so of narrow, twisting, rolling terrain along the banks of South Game Creek, before braving an intimidating stream crossing at "The Beaver Pond," a frozen wetland at the confluence with Game Creek.

"One bad step, your skis are in the water," Perky yells from the far bank. "Worse yet, your boots are wet for the rest of the ride."

I ponder whether to dismount my skis, get a running start and jump the stream, or to keep my skis on and straddle the frigid trickle, hoping only the tips of my poles enter the water. The straddle-and-hope method, though not graceful, works well enough for me.

From there, it's plummeting nervously down another mile or so of what's appropriately called "The Luge," a rough-and-tumble, yard-wide path through treacherous bottomland forest. In summer, it's a challenging single-track hiking and biking trail along the bed of Game Creek. In early winter, not wide enough to make any real turns, or even sideslip, the route forces me to control my speed with a hastily improvised new technique I now call "Woody's straight-legged, fingers-crossed power wedge."

The canyon walls ultimately open up to reveal a view of Meadow Mountain to the west.

All that's left is a short climb to avoid invading private property and a tricky final few turns down to the trailhead, where experienced Milers typically stash vehicles for the trip home — or another round.

"Some guys in Minturn do laps of this all day," Perky says as we load into his Toyota. "They have their wives or girlfriends drive them to Vail. Then they ski down to Minturn, pick up a car, drive back to Vail, do another lap, then take the bus back to Vail to pick up their car."

"There's usually nobody here until late afternoon," he adds, "so when they get down the (Minturn) Saloon is open."

Depending on conditions, experienced skiers can do the Minturn Mile, top to bottom, in less than an hour. This day, even with several extended stops to take photos during our morning adventure, it's barely noon by the time we get back to Vail Village. Chris and Dave have other commitments, but I'm game for another run down The Mile in the afternoon, and Perky seems excited to show me another route. Up the Vista Bahn, then the Wildwood Express, for a couple of warm-up cruisers in Game Creek Bowl, and we're ready for another go.

Perky heads straight and fast for the lowest backcountry gate, off Lost Boy, where a mile-long ridgeline separating Game Creek Bowl from its out-of-bounds sister is discernable only by a sharp line dividing groves of unrelentingly tight aspens from an even tighter forest of old-growth lodgepole pines.

"Follow the 'Darkwoods,'" he says, giggling again as he disappears into the void, his tracks nearly impossible to follow.



From left, "Diver Dave" Lieberman, Steve Wood and Eric "Perky" Perkins head for the traditional finale of the Minturn Mile: celebrating at the venerable Minturn Saloon.

ultimate celebration at the legendary Minturn Saloon, the oldest establishment of its kind in Eagle County, built in 1901, where they serve "the best margaritas around," is spoiled. Unfortunately for us this day, despite two trips down The Mile, the beloved bar and restaurant, with its renowned stone fireplace, is closed for a private party.

Which is OK, I guess, my new annual rite of passage now having been journeyed, twice.

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CAUTION! OUT OF BOUNDS

Realities along The Mile

The Minturn Mile — actually more than three miles long — begins at the westernmost boundaries of Vail Mountain ski resort, either at the top backcountry gate at Ptarmigan Point or below at other gates along the Lost Boy ski trail circling Vail's Game Creek Bowl. From there, along

whichever route one chooses — and there are several — The Mile plunges more than 3,100 feet in elevation, through a wide variety of backcountry terrain, to an unofficial trailhead about a half a mile north of and across the abandoned railroad tracks from downtown Minturn.

Depending on the weather, the time of day and the time of year, conditions can be extremely variable. Despite upper reaches sometimes covered with fresh, deep snow, perhaps it's most prudent to consider the lower reaches — narrow, winding, single-track trail, a perilous stream crossing and

challenging stretches along the banks of Game Creek and South Game Creek — when considering clothing, equipment and survival gear. The Minturn Mile is entirely within the White River National Forest, yet accessed from within the boundaries of the Vail Mountain ski resort using chairlifts operated by Vail Resorts. Emergencies on public lands in Eagle County are under the jurisdiction of the Eagle County Sheriff's Department, which under dire circumstances can authorize rescue missions by either Vail Mountain Rescue or the resort's ski patrol — often at the expense of the party being rescued, including those for helicopter service.

Not surprisingly, both the U.S. Forest Service and the ski company have strict policies regarding people who venture beyond the resort's boundaries.

"(The Minturn Mile) is not typical avalanche terrain; but there's no control work, no phone, no patrol sweeps. Once you leave the ski area, they're not responsible," says Forest Service Snow Ranger Dan Dressler. "We recommend letting people know where you're going and when you expect to be back out, and plan ahead."

"The Minturn Mile is out of bounds, off the trail map; all out-of-bounds rules apply," adds Jen Brown, spokeswoman for Vail Mountain. "When you pass through a backcountry gate, you're on your own."

The sun is slowly setting in the west; the snow now is entirely different from the morning's bottomless powder; the reality of the backcountry is more apparent in the trees, where fallen timbers litter the landscape amid other debris that's never been cleared by loggers or resort employees. I can hear, and sometimes see, Perky lurking patiently while I carefully negotiate branches, stumps and other exposed obstacles, praying I'll make it over other, unexposed obstacles without gouging my skis, or worse, getting hurt. Eventually, we clear Perky's Darkwoods, his route thankfully having bypassed The Gully entirely and joined our morning tracks at The Beaver Pond. We still face the stream crossing, however, before negotiating The Luge.

Dog tired, muscles now sore and weak, the power wedge is my only option again. I think about how happy I am now to see the canyon open up to reveal the sun setting over Meadow Mountain — and the trailhead, where Dave awaits with his car to rescue us from the half-mile slog to town. Our