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March 2007 | mensjournal.com

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SNOWKITING ACROSS THE WINDSWEPT GLACIERS OF

ALASKA

It sounded like an adrenaline junkie's dream: snowkiting Alaska's Bagley Ice Field. But then a vicious storm rolled in and showed the author what it might feel like when hell freezes over. BY JONATHAN GREEN

THERE IS A SHARP BANG IN THE CHILL ARCTIC AIR AS A bloodred nylon kite, 10 meters wide, snaps open above our heads. At the other end of the kite strings, strapped into a harness and wearing skis, Ken Lucas pulls down a pair of goggles the size of a Volkswagen Beetle's windshield and whoops with joy. "Awesome!" he shouts, as he picks up speed. "Let's kite, dude!"

Trailing from his waist is a towline that photographer Andrew McGarry is clutching like a drowning man. Within a few seconds they are both swallowed by a thickening mist that has been creeping down unnoticed from the nearby mountains.

I'm standing on a huge icy plateau below the hulking 18,008-foot pyramid of Mount St. Elias, roughly at the top of the Alaska

panhandle. This is the Bagley Ice Field, a massive remnant of the Pleistocene ice sheets that once covered much of North America. Thousands of feet thick, 15 miles wide in places, and billiard-table flat, it extends for more than 125 miles from Canada to the southwest corner of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. The plan, quite simply, is to run the length of the Bagley by snowkite, the hippest new winter toy since the advent of the snowboard.

"This country will blow your socks off," said bush pilot Paul Claus when he set me down barely an hour earlier. "Every time I land my plane out there, I can take three steps and I am walking a spot no one has walked before."

Only five minutes after he rocketed off, Ken comes thundering out of the mist, moving so fast it looks as if his kite has snagged a

The 125-plus-mile-long Bagley is great for snowkiting, but not so good for human survival.

Photographs by
ANDREW MCGARRY





The only way into — and out of — the Bagley Ice Field is via Paul Claus's bush plane. Claus once skied the length of the Bagley. It took him 40 days. Flying is better.

low-flying F-15. "Fuck!" he shouts as he shoots by, his skis clattering on the ice. A sudden, savage gust hoists him into the air like a helpless marionette and deposits him with a thump onto the snow 30 yards away.

As Ken flails about, trying to free himself from his kite, Andrew's voice comes crackling over the radio. "Where is everyone?" he says. "I'm alone, and I can't see anything. Can someone come get me?"

MY TRIP TO THE BAGLEY BEGAN LAST March in Utah. A snowkite salesman named Brian Schenck, whose firm is the U.S. distributor for Ozone Kites, had invited a group of skiers and boarders, along with a few journalists, to test-drive the miraculous contraptions at a spot called Skyline.

Propelled by wind instead of gravity, a snowkite lets you ski uphill as well as down, without the need for a chairlift or climbing skins. Proponents of the sport (so far, a fringy group of hardcore snowboarders, big-mountain skiers, and paraglider types) claim kites give you almost superhuman hucking powers.

In strong winds kites can reach speeds of 60 mph or pull a sled full of exploration gear. Nowadays nearly all South Pole expeditions use kites.

"This is going to revolutionize the ski industry," raved Schenck, a fast-talker who could sell surfboards to Eskimos. Ozone sold 400 kites in the U.S. five years ago. By the end of 2006 it had sold 8,000. "No one needs to buy lift passes anymore, or expensive plane tickets to resorts."

But simultaneously skiing and flying a 10-meter-wide kite is not easy. The learning curve involves being dragged through the snow on your face as you frantically try to release the red safety catch to douse the kite. I watched one Florida-based magazine writer get rag-dolled around snowy mountain meadows, his pants filling with snow, before he stalked off to drink hot chocolate in an SUV, cursing bitterly. When you get it right, though, it's like being tied to a jet engine; you can race up mountain slopes and scythe through the snow at dizzying speed.

One night in Utah, as we sat by the chalet fire, Schenck slipped an avuncular arm around my

shoulders and outlined his dream of a new snowkiting mecca in the snowy wastes of Alaska. "The Bagley Ice Field," he said, "is the future of snowkiting. We're going to be staging a snowkiting festival there every year. You can run for miles, then sip beer every night. The skies are blue, the wind is always there. Who knows? Maybe we'll do some cool mountain ascents."

This first trip, he added, would be a sort of tester. We could have Alaskan guides, brand-new kites, cozy tents from Mountain Hardwear, and anything else we'd need for a pioneering trip to the newest snow-sport frontier. Schenck had sold me. I signed up.

THE TRIP BEGAN TO GO AWRY EVEN BEFORE we left. Schenck bailed out just days before departure, suddenly remembering that it conflicted with a business obligation. Then his friend from Mountain Hardwear dropped out. ("I just had a bad feeling about this one," he later

JONATHAN GREEN wrote about jet-skiing the entire Mississippi River in the July 2005 *Men's Journal*.



Snowkiting is best done in windy locations, which can often be, well, too windy. On day two of the storm Ken Lucas (left) and Eric Gustafson dry out soggy gear and try not to think about how much they'd rather be kiting.

told me.) And finally, to cap it all off, the airline lost all my gear: skis, boots, tent, polar sleeping bag.

And this was clearly going to be a very small snowkiting "festival." Besides me and Andrew, there were just two others, shanghaied by Schenck at the last minute. Ken Lucas, a 49-year-old from Oregon, and Eric Gustafson, 47, from Cape Cod, were two lifelong ski bums. A hyperkinetic, foxlike man, Ken is like the zany vegetarian uncle you never had. He runs a traveling snowkiting school and punctuates his sentences with a nasal "Awesome!" Eric is more of a snowboard-dad type, with Beatles bangs; he teaches kitesurfing on Cape Cod in the summer and snowkiting in Utah in winter. The designated leader of the trip, he seems slightly more responsible than Ken.

With kiting's increasing popularity, finding areas free of trees, roads, and power lines, but with plenty of wind, has become an obsessive quest for kites. Eric and Ken were thrilled to be on such a mission. "We're gonna be zipping around on snow where no one has walked before!" Eric jabbered on the drive to Chitina to catch our bush plane. "Yeah!"

Only some of us have any Alaskan experience, yet Ken and Eric dismissed the idea of hiring local

guides. "We're going to rely on our own knowledge out there," said Ken, putting on his goggles before we even got out of the car. "Oh, man, this is going to be awesome! Awesome! Awesome!"

Their manic excitement was abruptly quelled by Claus, who was waiting with a single-turbine Otter at a remote gravel airstrip. A ruddy-faced frontiersman with a fierce scowl, Claus has climbed each of the 16 highest peaks in the U.S., nine of which are in Wrangell-St. Elias, which is essentially his backyard, and he's famous for his ability to land his Super Cub anywhere, anytime.

When something goes wrong in the park, the person to call is Paul Claus. More often than not it's to retrieve dead bodies from crevasses. "I am the one way in and the one way out of here," he informed us. And, famously, he doesn't suffer fools. When Andrew asked to be dropped at a certain place on the ice field, Claus gave him a look. "So you're just going to close your eyes and pick a spot on the map?" he rasped with irritation. "You'll probably die if I put you there." The rest of the loading was done in silence.

I decided to stay at Claus's lodge until my gear arrived, while he flew the others to the ice field to set up camp. It was a short hop to his wilderness home. We landed on a frozen river, where I decamped and bade farewell to the others. They were high-fiving in the plane, slapping one another on the back. As Claus accelerated down the runway Ken waved at me through a window, his face pushed up against the glass like an excited child being driven to the beach.

That night at dinner in the Ultima Thule Lodge, the hideaway Claus and his family carved out of the spruce forests, Claus talked about the reality of the Bagley Ice Field in sober terms. Once, after a forced landing, he survived for several days only by cutting the insulation out of the plane's seats and stuffing it into his clothing. He's one of the few men to have crossed the Bagley on skis. It took 40 days.

"You know that you are not the first to attempt

to kite this, don't you?" he asked me.

Almost 20 years earlier, in 1987, an expedition sponsored by a Colorado company had journeyed to the Bagley in search of snowkiting Valhalla. Two members of the party of 11 ended up getting stranded by a vicious storm for two weeks.

All this was making my stomach somersault. "Have any of your group been here before?" inquired Claus, with an askance tilt of his head. "Any of your group got any long-term Himalayan experience?"

Nope, I shrugged guiltily.

"Well, then," he said, "you may have trouble on your hands."

ALASKA'S BAGLEY ICE FIELD ICE AGE REMNANT

Located at the top of the Alaska panhandle, the Bagley Ice Field is a leftover from the vast ice sheets that once covered North America, and one of the most striking features of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. Ultima Thule Lodge, Paul Claus's family hideaway, is located smack in the middle of the park and can be accessed only by plane (ultimathulelodge.com).



MY BAGS FINALLY MATERIALIZE AFTER two days, but a storm is building with impatient force. We take off twice but have to turn back each time. Finally, on the third day, there is a lull, and Claus thinks we can make it. Before takeoff he reads a verse from a duct-taped Bible while standing under the wing. "These mountains and what you are about to see will show you the mighty power of God," he declares when he has finished. "This place is evidence of his power." I feel an acidic knot rise in my throat.

We fly low on a southeast bearing, skirting the storm clouds. After 40 minutes Claus aims for a col in the barren mountains. The skids barely miss the ridge-line, and just when I think we'll make a burning hole in the ground, he pulls the nose up and we skid to a stop within 50 feet of the tents. "Get out of here fast," Claus bellows over the snarl of the propeller. I clamber out, hurling my skis and backpack onto the snow, and within 30 seconds he is airborne and flying home at full throttle.

There's been no wind, and thus no kiting, for three days, and everyone seems tense. But that's about to change; the breeze is picking up and an ominous sky is rolling in. To windless kites these are good signs. Now we'll be able to kite, rather than doing what we should be doing: digging in to weather the coming storm. Before I can even unpack, everyone skis down from our campsite to the ice field, a half mile away, where they throw kites aloft and begin to zip around.

Chaos strikes not long after I've skied down to join them. Ken has lost Andrew, and the radios are going haywire with panicked shouting. As I'm helping Ken to his feet after his crash, I turn and look up at our base camp just in time to see Eric chasing a round orange expedition-style tent that's being blown about like a runaway beach ball. "Oh, no! Oh, no!" Ken screams. "We got a situation here! For fuck's sake, help me!"

An hour later the mother of all storms explodes around us. We gather in the cook tent, a canopy secured over a five-foot-deep hole the others dug in the ground, with snow benches and a cooking platform. Andrew was found at the spot at which he'd dropped Ken's tow rope; now, appearing frightened, he's swigging hard on a bottle of Jack Daniel's. As 70-mph gusts batter the tent canopy, we spoon down hot noodles before wordlessly retiring to our tents.

Because my arctic tent failed to turn up in Anchorage due to the cancellation of the Mountain Hardwear guy, I have only my flimsy three-season tent, which I'd planned to use for storage. I climb in to find a five-inch layer of snow over my sleeping bag and clothes, blown in through the mesh sides. Despite four layers of clothing and my polar sleeping bag, I spend the night shivering violently, my breath turning to ice on the inside of the tent.

The next morning I awake to a world gone fish-belly white. In the driving snow I can't even see the cook tent, 25 yards to my right. The temperature has fallen to -10 degrees, but the windchill means it



Snowkiting is spectacular to watch, but the learning curve typically involves facefuls of snow.

feels even colder. We congregate in the cook tent, after digging it out. At first there are traces of gallows humor, but by the storm's second day a more sober mind-set takes hold. When Andrew thaws a bottle of Gatorade, using up precious fuel, and then leaves it to freeze again, Ken can't take it. "What the fuck, man!" he spits, stomping out of the tent in disgust.

There is no way to wash, so I face a terrible dilemma at night: Do I pull the sleeping bag over my head and suffocate on my own medieval stench or leave my face outside to freeze? I choose the former, which only adds to the misery of sleeping in moist and chilly discomfort.

AS THE DAYS WEAR ON WE COME TO DREAD bathroom calls. Leaving the relative warmth of the cook tent to drop our pants in a raging blizzard is a major ordeal. "Goddammit," says Eric one morning, sadness and frustration in his voice. "I gotta take a dump."

PLAN YOUR ADVENTURE

LEARN TO FLY A KITE

Five places in the lower 48 where you can get the hang, literally, of snowkiting

As fast and wild as an Alaskan blizzard, snowkiting is swiftly breaking into the winter sports mainstream. It's not easy to learn, but these outfits can help you master the technique. Utah-based **Windzup** offers private snowkiting lessons and clinics at Skyline (near Fairview, about 90 minutes from Salt Lake City) and other spots around the state (from \$75 for a one-hour lesson; windzup.com). Also active in Utah is Eric Gustafson's **Fun Seekers**, which offers beginner and advanced courses at sites such as Strawberry Reservoir, 40 minutes from Park City (from \$75 per hour; funseekers.org). On the East Coast **Powerline Sports** provides group lessons for up to four people, as well as private courses, on New Hampshire's Massabesic Lake (from \$95; powerlinesports.com). Just a stone's throw from the Breckenridge Ski Resort, **Colorado Kite Force** offers a full-day course for beginners and private lessons for more advanced kites (from \$75 an hour; coloradokiteforce.com). Ken Lucas's company, **TeleFair**, operates free snowkiting clinics at ski resorts and other locations around the U.S. (\$60 for follow-up lessons; telefair.com). If you feel ambitious and happen to live near, say, a frozen lake or a mountain meadow, a basic snowkite starts at \$395 from Ozone Kites (flyozone.com). —TIM MCCAHL

We had sensibly dug a latrine a hundred yards from camp, but it kept filling with snow. As the storm intensified we all grew lazier and started to go closer to the tents; running out, dropping our trousers, and then hastily hitching them up and running back inside as fast as possible. But this also proved hazardous, because we were fetching snow from outside the tents to melt for water.

"What the hell?" exclaims Ken one day, pointing at the pot he is tending. "I mean what is that?" Floating on the surface is a strip of toilet paper. We all stare at our feet awkwardly.

Then disaster strikes again. At 4 AM on the third night Andrew's tent completely collapses under the weight of the snow. We find him in the cook tent in the morning, shivering uncontrollably. "This sucks, man," he chatters, looking decidedly hypothermic. His beard and eyebrows are frosted with ice, like Jack Nicholson's at the end of *The Shining*. Outside, his tent is a limp shroud buried in snow. He'd spent much of the trip defrosting beers and gulping Jack; now he's hanging his head in shame. "I can't believe I was so stupid not to pitch my tent right," he says morosely. "I could've died last night."

We spend the rest of the day digging him a snow cave under the cook tent, pulling out snow with a sled until we've made a space big enough to stand up in. The storm roars overhead, but all is eerily silent in the blue cavern.

Andrew's gear is soaked. We dry his sleeping bag by hanging it over a stove while he curls up shivering in dry clothes. We can't deny him heat and warmth, but his mistake may cost us all dearly. "If he had been paying attention to his own situation he wouldn't be burning off all our fuel," Ken whispers angrily to Eric.

That night, with a considerable part of our food outside, buried and lost, I spend an hour digging out a packet of Ramen Spicy Chile Chicken noodles with an ice ax. "Okay," says Eric, taking charge. "We will need to ration now since we don't know how long this is going to go on."

There is no response from anyone else, just downcast looks. "What happens if Claus can't get us out of here?" Ken asks finally. There is no way to walk out; the nearest civilization is Claus's lodge, 70 miles northwest. We'll have to wait it out.

FIVE DAYS AFTER THE STORM erupted I awake to cries of jubilation outside. "Would ya look at that!" Ken says. Pulling back the tent flap, I see Mount St. Elias soaring against an electric-blue sky. The air is crisp and unbelievably fresh, and our clothes and tents seem supercharged in the blinding light. Claus was right: It's a beauty of biblical grandeur.

Not only have we been saved, it seems, but there's still enough wind to go. We load the sleds with gear and ski down to the ice field excitedly. First we cinch ourselves into our harnesses, which resemble giant padded diapers, and [continued on page 114]

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SNOWKITING *continued from page 68*

then lay our kites out, making sure to weight them with snow so they don't take off prematurely. I hook my harness to a kite with a large plastic protuberance known as a "donkey dick." When the right gust comes along I jerk the kite upward so the foils begin to inflate; it rises slowly to about two o'clock and then it yanks me completely off my feet. I'm shooting forward, accelerating as if tied to a piano that somebody just tossed off a 30-story building.

It takes a minute or two before I'm relaxed enough to carve huge, snaking turns through the powder, leaning back against the harness like a sailor. It would be a cinch to run the whole 120-plus-mile ice field like this, I think.

We all decide to head upwind, toward the Canadian border, some 10 miles due east. Andrew and Eric shoot ahead, on their own separate kites, while Ken and I bring up the rear. But my enthusiasm dims when I realize how difficult it is to tack into the wind. Often I have to stop and rest, my arms and chest aching from the exertion of heaving the enormous kite back and forth in figure eights.

Inside half an hour I've lost sight of everyone, and I'm alone in the vast, snowy wilderness. We had planned to meet at the border, so I decide to press on, breaking trail rather than turning back. Since I don't have a radio I have no idea that Andrew and Eric have long since given up and headed downwind, back to camp.

Then it dawns on me that I really should be roped up out here. There's no doubt I'm skiing over dozens of unseen crevasses that drop hundreds of feet into the ice below my feet. I suddenly become paranoid and lower the kite to the ground. Stuffing it into my pack, I begin to walk carefully, scanning the snow for signs of a crevasse.

Suddenly I hear a concussive *whump* in the silence. A few more steps and there's another rumbling thunder crack. I stop, dead still, and realize that it's the sound of snow settling — tumbling down into crevasses, I imagine. It's terrifying, but I have no choice but to go on, testing the snow carefully before trusting it with my weight. After two more hours of walking, my GPS blinks, showing that I have crossed into Canada. I have no passport with me. Not

wanting to take any more chances, I collapse and lie in the snow, my face upturned to the blazing sun.

After an hour or so I spot Ken's kite in the distance as he slaloms up the ice field. He skids to a stop and gives me a high five, but his good cheer proves short-lived as he realizes where we are. "There's crevasses everywhere underneath us!" he shouts from beneath those huge goggles. "We could die here, man! This is serious shit. Oh, my God!"

He copes with this terrible truth by whipping out a Clif Bar and chomping on it ruminatively. Ken is sponsored by Clif Bar and eats 20 a day. The problem, he admits, is that they make him flatulent. "It's just — *fart* — you and — *fart* — me now," he says. Oh, great, I think to myself.

When no one else appears we decide to go back. With the wind behind us we blast off effortlessly. Now, heading downwind, I let the kite whisk me along at a steady 40 mph, the snow flashing under my skis and the mountains sliding past. Ken is still shouting instructions, but I pull the kite tighter, and he fades into the distance, the wind beneficently swallowing his bellowing and cussing. I jump small hillocks, sitting back in the harness as the wind launches me into the peach-colored sunset light. The crevasses are probably still there, but I'm braver now. This wouldn't be such a bad way to go.

Ten miles later, abruptly and all too soon, the wind dies and my kite falls to the ground. Ken has long since disappeared, zooming back to camp using his superior skills and leaving me to fend for myself. Angry that my fun is over before it even started, I stuff the kite into my pack again and begin the hour-long walk back to camp in thigh-deep snow.

At 5 AM the next day we hear Claus's plane buzzing, a day later than planned. When he lands on his second pass we all clap and cheer with relief. After takeoff, Claus turns to me. "Still think they'll all be wanting to snowkite the Bagley at home?"

Perhaps, I think. But if I ever come back here, I'll bring a pack of huskies rather than an unreliable snowkite. Man's best friend does much better upwind, can spot crevasses using only canine sense, and is far warmer to sleep with in a blizzard. They also don't need to bullshit about their experience the way some humans do, and if bad came to worse, as it almost did on the Bagley, I could eat them. ☺

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