

[Photo] The violently craggy San Juan Mountains as seen from the road to Dallas Trailhead.



*Reconnoitering with Joe*

BAGGING PEAKS & BAGGED WINE

AT COLORADO'S SAN JUAN HUTS SYSTEM

*by Sean Prentiss - photos by Alex Fenlon*



[Photo] Joe Ryan stops to point out the Mongoose Couloir beneath Reconnoiter Peak.

**O**N THE DRIVE TOWARD DALLAS TRAILHEAD, Joe Ryan pulls his truck over. Standing in the muddy road, he points toward Colorado's San Juan Mountains. This wall of mountains that towers before us holds 25 percent of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks. They also hold the San Juan Hut System, owned by Joe, which includes five winter ski huts and 16 summer biking and hiking huts.

Joe, gray haired but shockingly sinewy for a 63-year-old man, points to a peak on the shoulder of Sneffels, a 14,150-foot summit. "That jut of rock is Reconnoiter Peak," he says. These peaks rise violently from the earth and tower 7,200 feet above nearby Ridgway.

"We'll ski the couloirs right below it, Mongoose and Cobra Couloirs," Joe says. When I ask why he decided to take us here—to Ridgway Hut and Reconnoiter, Joe says, "Because it's got the biggest terrain, biggest views from the ridge line, and the best skiing near one of my huts."

**AFTER SIX MILES OF SKINNING** toward the Ridgway Hut, my feet ache, my head hangs, my skins weigh heavy with sticky spring snow, and my lungs burn from being 6,500 feet higher



[Photo] Marla Bailey enjoys the San Juans' best views and best skiing below Reconnoiter Peak.







[Photo] Jay Prentiss goes cross eyed.



[Photo] Ridgway Hut, one of Joe's five wintertime shelters, by night.



than where I normally ski in Vermont.

With sweat and sunblock dripping into my eyes, I question why we didn't choose a hut closer to a trailhead or lower in elevation. Shaggy, a friend from Steamboat Springs who is much stronger than I, smiles over his shoulder. "I love this," he says. "A pack on your shoulders. Everything you need is in there. Just the necessities—eating, sleeping, skiing. Oh, and bags of wine." He then slows down to make sure I can keep cadence.

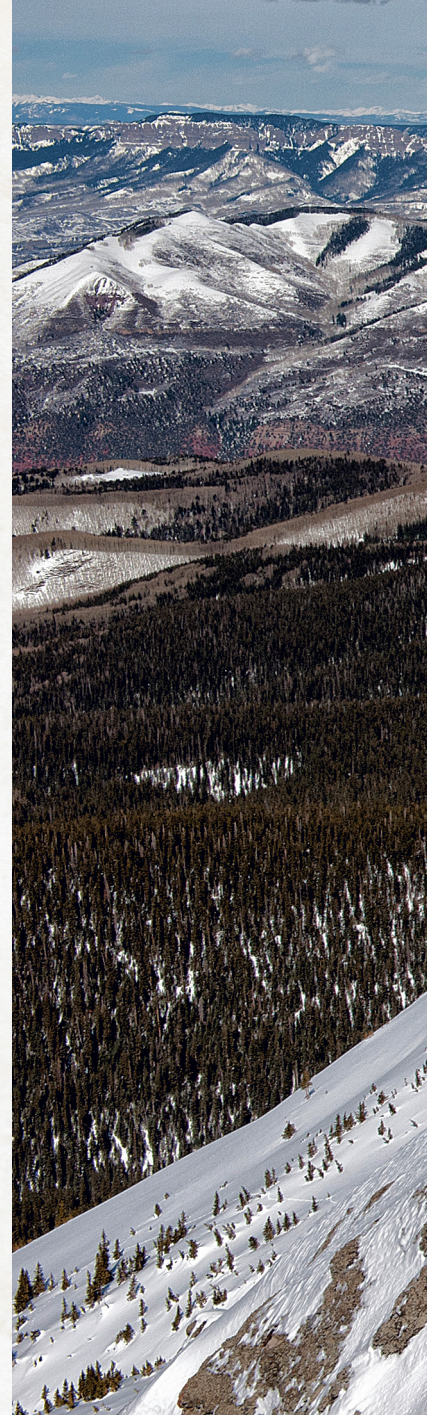
DESPITE THE HEAVY WEIGHT ON MY SHOULDERS, INCLUDING ONE OF THOSE BAGS OF WINE AND A BOTTLE OF SCHNAPPS, SHAGGY IS RIGHT. FOR THE NEXT FOUR DAYS WE'RE OUT OF THE TRAP.

**"Cabin," my brother Jay shouts** 20 minutes (or a lifetime of skinning) later. Tucked in a spruce thicket stands a green 16-by-16-foot cabin. I drop my pack and stumble into the Ridgway Hut.

The ceiling and walls are rough-hewn wood. The floor is painted plywood. A primitive kitchen offers a propane stove but no running water. A woodstove sits in the center. Eight bunks line two walls and will hold Joe, his daughter Kelly (who's in her late 20s and helps run San Juan Huts), her partner, Dan (a mountain guide) and my group of six—Jay and his girlfriend Crista, Shaggy and his wife Cookie, photographer Alex Fenlon and me.

"We had to haul everything here in," Joe says as I sit on a bunk. "Sometimes I did three trips a day with loads of supplies." Thirty-five total miles a day, I calculate. "Eighteen years ago I packed a 162-pound load of plywood in," Joe says as he tosses his pack on a bunk. "My heaviest pack this year was 120 pounds." That's only 20 pounds less than I weigh.

As night settles, Joe talks about how he ended up building the San Juan Huts. He tells me about his childhood: cardiac respiratory arrest from asthma as a 14-year-old, his teenage years spent in a Denver hospital far from his Missouri home. Once



[Photo] Joe Ryan knows a thing or two (or 162) about heavy lifting.





[Photo] Shaggy Bailey loving Reconnoiter's Mongoose Couloir.



[Photo] Nothing but the necessities...and bagged wine.

**"I LOVE THIS," SHAGGY SAYS. "A PACK ON YOUR SHOULDERS. EVERYTHING YOU NEED IS IN THERE. JUST THE NECESSITIES—EATING, SLEEPING, SKIING. OH, AND BAGS OF WINE."**



he healed enough, he spent his 20s mining, ranching and logging from Mexico to Canada. "When I say wandering," he adds, "I mean wandering. I once spent 32 of 36 months sleeping on the ground."

"How did you decide to build these huts?" I ask. He leans down and pets Rowdy, his border collie, and tells a story of living in Eldorado Canyon, Colorado in 1983. He and a friend, Bobby, made plans to start a hut system in the San Juans. One random day, Joe says, "Bobby called and asked if I wanted to ski Commando Run." Joe had to work. In a steady voice, he continues: "Bobby was killed in an avalanche that day. So Mary, my wife at the time, and I moved down here, found a place on the mesa, built a house, had a kid." Joe looks at Kelly, who is busy organizing the kitchen. Kelly is thin and strong, with long reddish-blond hair. Joe and Kelly like to joke that they both share the same Irish stubbornness. "Isn't that right, Daughter?" Joe asks. Kelly smiles: "Yup, Father."

"By 1987," Joe adds, "I had built the first hut."

Twenty-six years later, Joe and San Juan Huts have five ski shelters strung along the north face of the violently craggy Sneffels Range. Skiers use these huts as a base camp to traverse from hut to hut across the face of the Sneffels Range in the Uncompahgre National Forest, which offers a jumping-off point into the remote Sneffels Wilderness. During summer, Joe and Kelly transform their operation into a hiking and mountain biking system, which includes America's only destination, hut-to-hut mountain-bike network that spans between Durango and Telluride, Colo. and Moab, Utah.

**I WAKE TO KELLY** and Dan cooking bacon and eggs. By 9 a.m., we're skinning toward Reconnoiter Peak. The first three hours are a slog toward ridge line. Near noon, we break from the spruce. The world transforms to views of nearby Sneffels Peak and far-away lowlands that stretch to Utah's La Sal Mountains, the West Elks near Crested Butte, even the distant Collegiate Peaks.

Joe unclicks from his bindings and we begin post-holing up a 60-degree slope between two rock spines that create a beveled funnel that runs from the shoulder of Reconnoiter down 400 feet to a wall of firs. "I wouldn't fall here if I was you," Joe says quietly in one particularly tricky spot.

Next, with skis lashed to our packs, we free climb a 20-foot chimney of rock built into the spine of the ridge. I test each handhold on the crumbling pillar, and with each step, the skis lashed to my pack bang against rock, making me sway as if I've already tapped the bagged wine.

The nine of us stand atop Mongoose Couloir, one of the two that Joe pointed out yesterday. From here, we are surrounded by mountains that break free of the earth and rip into the sky. And the Mongoose waits below my skis as I peer over the edge and examine the rocky entrance. Below the crag, we'll enter an untracked, 30-foot-wide funnel hemmed in by towering, vertical walls that make this run look like an inclined tunnel. "Joe really understands terrain," Dan says as Joe analyzes Mongoose. "He memorizes all the storms. He pays attention to landscape. He might not talk much, but he knows his stuff."

Joe slides into Mongoose, laying tracks down the gut of the chute. Jay follows. Then Shaggy. They both arc beautiful turns that cast umbrellas of snow. Finally, I let my Völks lead me off Reconnoiter in wide turns that run from wall of rock to wall of rock. I smear tele turns, searching for untracked snow that rides high over my skis, spraying my face. With each turn, I gaze over western Colorado and Utah, a region I once called home for many years. I ski toward our area of safety at the bottom of Mongoose, captivated by the view below. The rock scramble to reach Mongoose. The friends surrounding me. The two ravens circling above. This is why I climb mountains.

**OUTSIDE THE HUT, WE SIT** on rounds of logs beneath a warm March afternoon sun. Cookie and Shaggy carry out a cutting board



filled with meats, cheeses and nuts and set it in the snow. Kelly and Dan break out potato chips. We pass around bags of red and white.

Jay and Crista talk about Crested Butte's backcountry. Kelly speaks of Denali. Shaggy makes off-colored jokes and Cookie merely smiles. As Rowdy lays at Joe's feet, Joe whispers to Rowdy, "I didn't forget you." The border collie was stuck guarding the hut today because of a bum leg. "I didn't forget you," Joe repeats. I think of yesterday's story of why Joe started the San Juan Huts, of his friend Bobby.

As we share wine, Kelly tells me that she recently quit guiding on Denali because, she says, "My dad was talking about selling the business. I said, 'Wait.' I knew I wanted to help run this place. I love to work outside, and this region is the best place to live."

**ON OUR FINAL MORNING**, we wake before dawn. In darkness, we drink tea and coffee. Then we click into bindings and, in spite of our seven-mile skin out from the Ridgway Hut, we head uphill into the dark forest. One last time toward Reconnoiter.

Like on each of our mornings, Joe leads the way. "This is his home," Jay nearly whispers to the morning air.

As I skin through the spruce, heading toward the top of our world, I think of the life Joe has built in these mountains. Twenty-five years in one mountain range. And now Kelly, too.

The two of them own the San Juan Hut system, but these mountains that claw at the sky seem just as much to own them. And how lucky they all are—the rugged mountains because they are shepherded by Joe and Kelly, and Joe and Kelly because they get to live within these violent, impressive peaks. And, of course, my group of skiers for getting to visit Joe and Kelly's humble hut in these riotous mountains. ■