

A black and white photograph of a snowy mountain range. In the foreground, a wide, snow-covered slope leads up towards a range of jagged, snow-capped peaks. Three small figures of hikers are visible in the middle ground, walking along a path that winds up the slope. The sky is dark and overcast, with some clouds visible. The overall mood is one of vastness and wilderness.

# CROSSING THE RANGE OF LIGHT

Sure, the Sierra High Route ski tour follows in the footsteps of John Muir, but did America's most famous wilderness writer miss the best part?

BY EVELYN SPENCE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE POWELL



Compared with John Muir, I'm a wimp. When Muir was in college, he subsisted on graham mush and the occasional potato. He wandered a thousand miles from Louisville, Kentucky, to the Gulf of Mexico—carrying only a waterproof bag with the *New Testament*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the poetry of Robert Burns, and a journal. Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, champion of national parks, America's most passionate voice for the religion of the wilderness, eventually ended up in California, where he spent some 40 years exploring the Sierra Nevada—the Range of Light, as he called it—with little more than an ice ax and a thick beard.

But compared with John Muir, I've got an edge. He didn't carry down booties into the mountains. He didn't have a guide to boil his water and set up ropes for rappelling into chutes. And he never fastened a pair of skis to his rucksack.

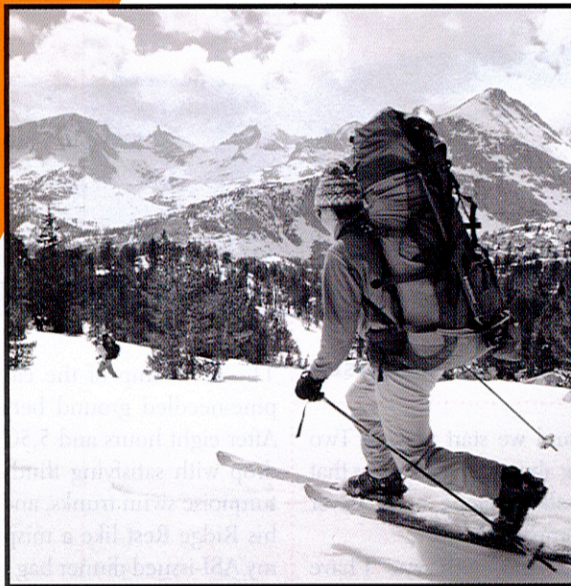
The Sierra High Route is (or should be) on every California backcountry skier's life list. And it's invariably tackled in the first week of May—the magical window. The traditional traverse, first skied by local ski-touring legend Dave Beck in 1975, goes from east to west, starting in the sagebrush and manzanita of the Owens Valley at 6,125 feet, four hours north of L.A. It crosses nine passes and gains some 20,000 feet along the border of California's Sequoia and King's Canyon National Parks, just north of the crested helmet of Mount Whitney. On the third of six days, you're in about as remote a location as you can get in the lower 48.

Those who prefer to leave the dehydrated-dinner rationing and the route finding to a guide go with Alpine Skills International (ASI). The outfit leads two groups per year, one traveling west to east and the other east to west. The guides coordinate car swaps between clients, and the groups cross paths in the middle of the mountains. My guide is blond-goateed Peter Leh, age 42, veteran of 20 High Routes, smiling the weathered smile of a perpetual Boy Scout. There's also Derek Yegian, an engineer from Oakland, who wears pants that unzip into shorts and a jester hat with a dozen tassels, and Mike Powell, a six-foot-four photographer who grew up in England and has spent years rock climbing in the Sierra. When we meet at the Pines Café in Independence, near the trailhead, it's four strangers, a basket of saltines, and a map.

There's no way to conjure up the motionless white ocean of the High Sierra while running a finger over a topo. A

squiggly patch of dense contours just doesn't translate into 12 hours of step, pole plant, exhale, step, inhale. On paper, Milestone Mountain, the trip's ubiquitous landmark, is a name and number (13,641); in life, it's a massive pillar that starts impossibly far away but somehow turns into hindsight. When I clambered to the 12,000-foot summit of Shepherd Pass and saw the trip's first craggy amphitheater of peaks, I felt like I grasped in a single glimpse what took Muir 40 years to discover. I'd been wasting my time *on* the world, not *in* it.

**But, leaving wheels and animals out of the question, the free mountaineer with a sack of bread on his shoulders and an ax to cut steps in ice and frozen snow can make his way across the range almost everywhere....—John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, 1894**



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the only way we'll get there. Powell's chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, carefully torn from the book to save weight? "No way," says Leh. "Not a chance." My down booties with thick rubber soles? "Red flag." (I stuff them in anyway.)

The entire first day is a dusty nine-mile hike—in telemark boots. The trail crisscrosses Symmes Creek a few times before switchbacking up from the desert of the Owens Valley. We're thirsty all day, so we dip our bottles straight into the water. "We don't use water filters up here—just drink," Leh slurps. "No one we know has ever got the runs." Our

A sack of bread? Try a large pesto and chicken pizza, extra cheese, divided into six foil-wrapped triangular packets. That's what Leh has planned for every lunch. "Protein. Fat. Carbs. It's the Zone," he says. "And it cuts down on the futz factor." Yegian—futz—counts macadamia nuts and cubes of asiago. Everyone pretends to tinker with beacons while sizing up everyone else's gear. It feels like the first day of summer camp; we don't know anything about each other, but we're about to become inseparable for a week.

On the morning of departure, Leh is pacing the dusty parking lot, prodding our piles of clothing, trying to enforce ASI's "high and light" ideal. High, because that's where we'll be,

and light, because that's the





**STEP, INHALE, POLE PLANT, EXHALE, STEP. REPEAT INDEFINITELY:  
18 MILES INTO THE TRIP, THE GROUP CROSSES MILESTONE BASIN.**

first-date awkwardness wears off, and we start playing Two Truths and a Lie. There's something about the wilderness that brings strangers together. Muir, walking alone, must never have felt the free thrill of instant companionship.

"My dad married a Swedish nursemaid," Leh says. "I have five sons. My parents eat dried corn."

"Dried corn? What the hell is that?" Powell asks.

"That's all I'm telling you." (Leh has two sons, not five.)

"I'm a logrolling champ," I try. "My mom lived in an abandoned Czech castle for seven years. And my dad was CU's football player of the century."

"Were you, like, a lumberjack?" Yegian asks. "Is that what kids do up in Seattle?" Pretty much. And my dad quit playing ball after high school.

**As the night advanced, the mighty rock walls of my mountain mansion seemed to come nearer, while the starry sky in glorious brightness stretched across like a ceiling...and fitted closely down into all the spiky irregularities of the summits. Then, after a long fireside rest...I fell into the clear, death-like sleep of the tired mountaineer.—J.M.**

The first camp of the east-west route, Anvil, is a spot of pine-needled ground between stubborn patches of slush. After eight hours and 5,500 feet of hiking, we let our packs drop with satisfying thuds. Powell, in a floppy white hat, turquoise swim trunks, and untied boot liners, leans against his Ridge Rest like a misplaced beach bum. I dig through my ASI-issued dinner bag for an appetizer—it's a big Ziploc filled with smaller Ziplocs of Potato Buds, Minute Rice curry, Ramen, powdered-milk Alfredo.

"I don't know what kind of soups are in there," Leh says. "They're left over from a trip we did in Europe last year."

"Last year?" Powell opens an eye.

"Come on, it's just powder."

*Bündner Gerstensuppe*. Sounds tasty. *Minestra d'orzo alla grigionese*. Who cares? It dissolves. As I walk around in my booties and Yegian stirs up a cup of Mexican Surprise, Leh stares up at the sky. "This is the fairest weather I've ever had at this camp," he says, adjusting his blue bandanna. His bare feet are sticky with sap.

It's the only time we have the luxury of sitting on dirt. The rest of the trip, we snow-camp, building a new shelter every night. We cut frozen blocks of snow to create an eight-by-eight square hole and a three-foot wall, using our skis to pin the edges of the tent down and our poles,



strapped together, to hold it up. Our floor is a square of Tyvek. There's enough room for two guys and a girl (Leh sleeps outside every night).

We hang the stove—a burner attached to a gas canister—from the ceiling. It's our version of Muir's campfire. It doesn't crackle, it doesn't exactly heat the tent, and it's about as romantic as Sterno on a buffet table, but it's our hearth.

For most of the traverse, it's just the four of us. On the third day, though, we rendezvous with the west-east ASI group. It's part cocktail party, part reunion; people sip from Nalgene and schmooze in fleece base layers. The other group is a ragtag crew of oversized glacier glasses and straight skis. "Loved the Audi—drove it in Sport mode," says Fred Reed. Powell looks nervous. (Powell had traded his Audi for Reed's gold Sable in a Denny's parking lot outside of L.A.). Inside the tent, we lean back against the nylon walls, passing around Cadbury's and raspberry-filled Lindt chocolates and sipping echinacea tea. Heads tilt from side to side to make eye contact through the hanging jungle of drying socks.

The next night, we're alone again in camp. The jagged ridges close in. The door of our tent opens out to the sunset and the silhouette of Shark Fin Peak. As soon as the light disappears, we rustle and fidget and settle into our bags, breathing out the frost that will snow from the ceiling in the morning.

**There are innumerable places where the careless step will be the last step; and a rock falling from the cliffs may crush without warning like lightning from the sky; but what then? Few places in this world are more dangerous than home. Fear not, therefore, to try the mountain-passes. They will kill care, save you from deadly apathy, set you free, and call forth every faculty into vigorous, enthusiastic action.—J.M.**

In the morning, before the sun hits, the steepest slopes are tray tables tipped to 45 degrees that drop off 50-foot cliffs; in the afternoon, the same slopes turn to a mush that leaves climbing skins as useless as Chuck Taylors on Rainier.

The steepest and most exposed pass is the dark obelisk of Milestone, part rock scramble, part high-angle traverse. Up

until now, we've mostly strolled in a zipper hiss across snowfields. At Milestone, we climb on hands and knees, with skis on our packs, trying to grip stone with the toes of our ski boots. To be safe, Leh short-ropes us—ties us all to him so his steadiness can offset our shaking knees. We kick steps into the hardpack, ice axes in hand. At the crux, Leh strings a hand line—a rope railing—so we can traverse the last 40 steps above an 80-foot rock drop.

Yegian takes a quivering step. He slips, his pack listing to the left. He corrects and regabs the rope.

"Ummmm..."

"You're good, you're good," Leh calls.

**NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH EUROPE'S HAUTE ROUTE: NO SOFT PILLOWS, NO VINO, AND NO HAUTE CUISINE.**



I'm next. Nothing but cord sliding through glove, boot sinking into slush, heart leaping into throat. One misstep, and a warm rush to the head. One solid foothold, and a wash of relief. It's just snow. It's just walking. And then I'm over the notch, and another rumple of Sierra unfolds.

There are those passes that call upon your basic faculties—the ones Muir wrote about—and there are those that call forth every last dried-

mango-Snickers-chocolate-covered-pretzel calorie you can burn, those that leave you breathing open-mouthed—enough to sunburn your tongue. Which I did. Even throwing haute couture to the wind—wearing a white Legionnaires' hat with foil lining, zinc oxide finger-painted on nose and cheeks, and glacier glasses—I still got griddled.

In one day, we cross three passes, starting with the snow-covered face that, back in the '70s, Dave Beck dubbed Not Quite As Steep As It Looks and traversing You've Got To Be Kidding. We fill our bottles with drips from rocks, then climb up to Triple Divide pass, leave our packs, and shoulder our skis to the summit of an unnamed 13,000-footer. We can see all the way to Yosemite, 100 miles north, and to the jagged Kaweahs in the south.

The downhill reward: a 40-plus-degree shot between rock bands, past our packs, down into a creamy open bowl. We hike back up to our gear, coast past Glacier Lake, and make 800 feet of turns into Cloud Canyon with packs on.

"I've never had time to ski down this far," Leh says. >>



"Never." Our group is moving fast.

As the fog rolls in, we skin over Glacier Ridge to the last obstacle of the day, Coppermine Couloir. "We gotta get down this," Leh says. The snow drops to vertical. It's too narrow to ski, too steep to step. "Time to bust out the protection."

"Cool." Yegian grins. I nod. Since Milestone, we've started to look forward to the exhilaration of rappelling down a vertical shaft of rock and ice. Muir was right: Even roped in, we're somehow freed.

**CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: GUIDE PETER LEH ON THE APPROACH TO MILESTONE MOUNTAIN; PACK-FREE AND DROPPING A KNEE; LEH SHORT-ROPING THE CLIENTS UP SHEPHERD PASS.**



**The snow on the ground also settles and thaws every bright day, and freezes at night, until it becomes coarsely granulated, and loses every trace of its rayed crystalline structure, and then a man may walk firmly over its frozen surface as if on ice.—J.M.**

That was Muir's take on corn. He scooped it up with his hands and examined it, walked on it. We carved through it in high-speed arcs, spraying the snow high in the air. The ultimate prize of skiing the High Route is to catch the cycle of melt-freeze metamorphism at the perfect moment. As spring days get longer, more solar energy reaches the snowpack and a daily cycle begins, loosening the breakable crust. The snow surface warms up and becomes wet during the day, then freezes at night. It happens again. The skiing improves. Then melt-water flows through the pack and coats grains of snow with water, which also freeze. The grains, coated over and over like



tiny Gobstoppers, grow until they're the size of grains of corn.

"It's better than powder," says Leh. "Trust me." For days, we have hiked, skinned, and coasted over corn, but it's not until after scaling Milestone that we actually *ski* the stuff. The first time I drop a knee, my pack threatens to drop me—but after a few flailing moves, the skiing is a revelation. Cured by the sun and untracked, the corn is so unpretentiously and naturally good that I chuck my load at the bottom of the slope, boot up a thousand feet, skis over my shoulder, and scatter the white ball-bearings all the way back down.

Is there a way to separate time from place from effort from state of mind to finally label something The Best Run I've Ever Had? It happens for me on May 8, 2002. We chop out camp in the vast bowl of Deadman Canyon on our fourth night, right over the big, meandering, fresh footprints of a bear. It's 5:30 P.M. after 10 hours of slogging, but the sky is flawless, the snow pristine.

"So, who wants to go skiing?" Leh asks.

One of my skis is already on. Powell is ogling the lolling meringue.

"I've only had time to ski this once before," Leh proclaims. "People are usually wiped and the sun is setting when we get here."

The bowl narrows, rolls and rolls into the canyon, as we ski to the sound of sandpaper and the feel of silk. I whoop. Powell yowls back. For 1,500 feet, we leapfrog into the shadows of Deadman, forgetting it will take us an hour to hike back up.

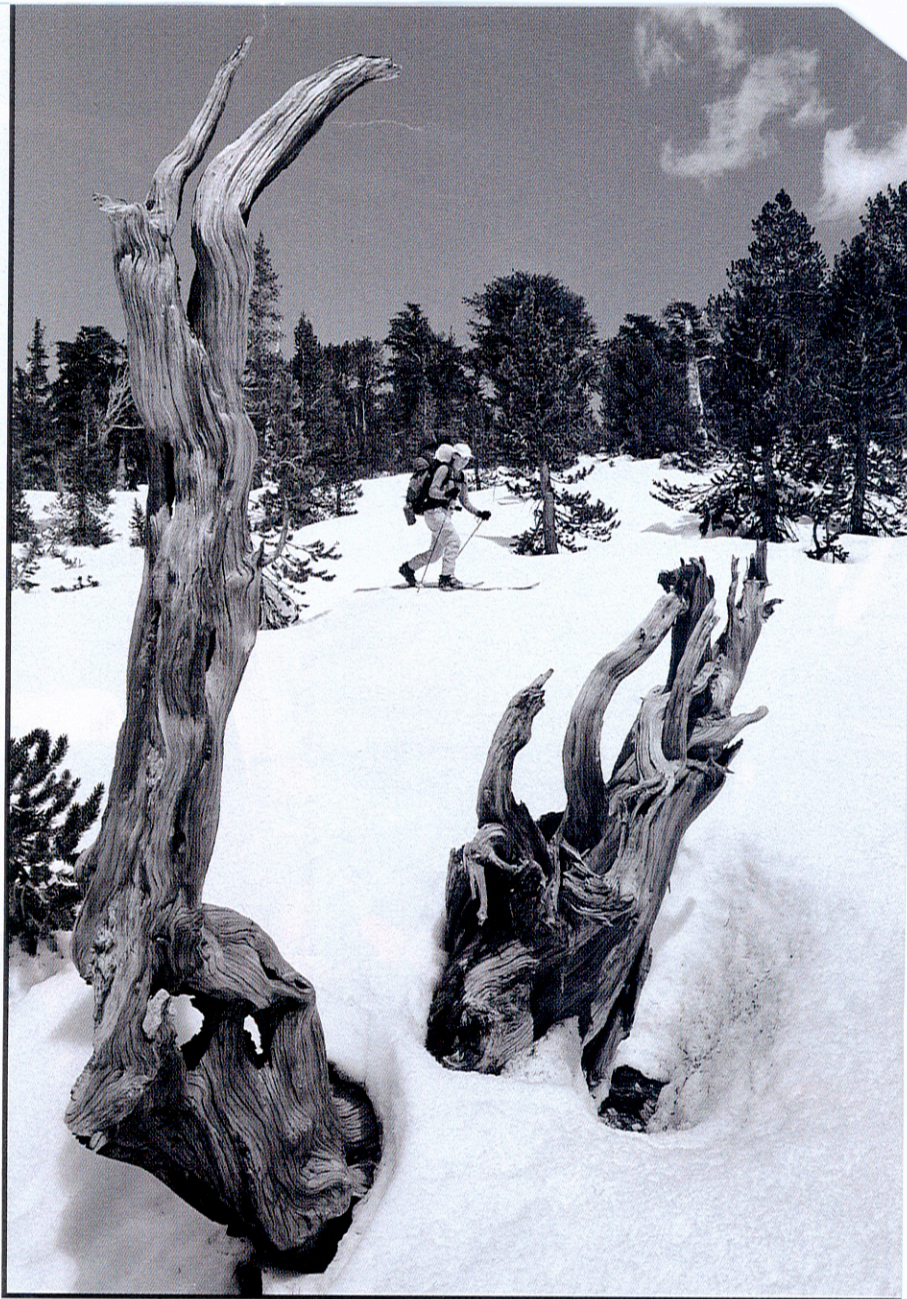
**Now came the solemn, silent evening. Long, blue, spiky shadows crept out across the snow-fields, while a rosy glow...gradually deepened and suffused every mountain-top, flushing the glaciers and the harsh crags above them. At the touch of this divine light, the mountains seemed to kindle to a rapt, religious consciousness, and stood hushed and waiting like devout worshippers.—J.M.**

"I'll trade you Potato Concoction for Indian," Powell says. Leh tosses him a Ziploc.

"What's this?" I dangle a bag his way.

"That's rice...and looks like mushrooms...wait, that's chicken? No, beans. Definitely Mexican."

It's the final night, in Table Meadows, a flat expanse four hours from Powell's Audi, and we're eating dinner early before going on a sunset ski. It's counterintuitive to jam on clammy boots and start skinning. Again. Camp is already dug out. Tea



WHAT JOHN MUIR WAS MISSING: DODGING DEADWOOD ON CORN SNOW. (THE AUTHOR, AFTER CROSSING TYNDALL PLATEAU.)

is already sipped. The shadows close in like ominous eyelids.

The cold side trip is worth it, if only to walk on snowfields that seem illuminated from beneath. Every day seems unbelievably long when it's measured by thousands of slow steps and marked by the sweaty scaling of passes at noon, but every heft of heavy pack is countered by the light of early morning, the euphoria of downhill.

Muir, a century ago, was here, somewhere, watching the alpenglow turn spiky black from his snowy altar. But what he missed was the feeling of speed in the rush of descent, the sound of slushy roostertails. He never stared down a pristine corn bowl and felt silly with anticipation, or plaited tracks through redwoods blurred by velocity. He had to *walk* downhill. We get to fly. ♦

#### INFO:

2003 Sierra High Route, Alpine Skills International:  
May 4-9; \$755; 530-426-9108, [alpinestskills.com](http://alpinestskills.com)