

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY
BY DON BAUER

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going SOLO

"Never go skiing alone," advised George Weider in his historical account of the Blue Mountain avalanche in a recent issue of *Mountain Life*. I, too, would encourage all outdoor adventurers to pay heed to those words. But there are times when the planets align and going solo in the mountains can be an enormously rewarding experience.

So how does one find the point where the planets align? For *Mountain Life* readers like me who grew up skiing in southern Ontario, the road to learning to enjoy the winter mountain environment is a long one. Ski mountaineering is about being immersed in the winter wilderness, climbing peaks on skis and then skiing from the summit in what is often a seemingly endless descent in untouched, bottomless powder. Ski

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mountaineering is about managing the ever-present risks of avalanches, crevasse falls, accidents, severe weather and challenging navigation. Ski-mountaineering, whether alone or in a group, is about taking responsibility for everything you do, as any outside assistance may be days away. This constant learning process is not without reward: the winter mountain environment is one of the most beautiful on the planet.

My solo trip over the four-day Easter Weekend in 2004 will be etched in my memory forever. With the prospect of a four-day window of blue sky, high pressure, and low avalanche hazard, I left Calgary well before sunrise. The drive was a quick one to my starting point about 45 minutes north of Lake Louise on the Icefield Parkway. With a massive pack on my back I crossed Bow Lake and climbed to the far west side of the Wapta Icefield névé,

my base camp for the next two days of climbing, during which I would summit four peaks: Mounts Olive, Gordon, Thompson and Rhondda (all around 3,000 metres high). Conditions also allowed me to ski routes off those peaks that I had never before tackled—the western cirque from the summit ridge of Mount Olive, the northeast glacier tongue off Mount Gordon, and the huge south face of Mount Rhondda. Along with all the other equipment and photography gear, for the first time I hauled along my tripod to capture the true beauty of these blue sky days and brilliant sunsets. The tripod also allowed me to add my own image to some of the photos, giving more perspective to the wild landscape.

Going solo is an experience of pure freedom. It's also a brief instance of simplified life that is very difficult to achieve these days. Everything I needed for survival was on my back and in my head. By having

the right training and experience behind me, I was able to climb and ski at will, photograph, eat and sleep. There were no distractions, pressures or deadlines. No people, traffic, phone calls or emails. I was alone to enjoy the mountains on their terms. Certainly such a trip is not without risk, but what is in today's society? There must always be a balance of risk and reward to match one's comfort level.

Give soloing a try—maybe not in the mountains of B.C., but in your own neighbourhood. Let someone know where you're going and how long you'll be gone, and go out for a walk in the woods ... without your iPod. Go for a paddle or a cross-country ski. Spend a little time inside your own head; you just may find it very refreshing.

View additional images of this trip at www.adventureimaging.ca in the Ski Mountaineering Galleries. 