

Skiing as it was before chairlifts

By Kelly Dinardo, New York Times

Beads of sweat trickled down my back, forming an icy pool where my thermal top had ridden up. My heart, drumming a furious, hard-rock beat, accompanied the loud gasping of my breath. Reaching forward with one arm, I stabbed my pole into the snow-covered ground, slid the opposite leg forward and continued to ski up the mountain at La Fouly, a small, four-lift resort in the Valais region of Switzerland.

Known as ski mountaineering, Alpine touring or skinning, this is skiing much as it was before chairlifts: you propel yourself up the mountain before swooshing back down.

For years, skinning remained primarily the domain of backcountry skiers, those adventurous athletes who ventured off slope to ungroomed, unmarked, unpatrolled terrain. Today, people skin to reach isolated sections of a mountain, to search out fresh, deep powder or for the calorie-torching workout. And, it's no longer limited to off-piste ground.

"It's taking over at resorts," said Tyler Cohen, managing editor of Backcountry Magazine. "It's a good way to get in shape before the conditions are ready for backcountry skiing. It's a great way to squeeze in a run and a workout before or after work. And, it's a different way to experience skiing."

An enthusiastic downhill skier, I spotted my first skimmers battling uphill a year before my own huffing-and-puffing attempt. From the comfort of a gondola, I would pull up my neck warmer or yank on my mittens and study a man dripping with sweat or a woman in just short sleeves, working his or her way up the slopes of the Swiss Alps below.

Curious, I grilled all the people I met who mentioned they skinned until, in late January, my friend Greg Stewart said, "I'll take you tomorrow."

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