

BEAST

out of the

EARTH

AN EXPEDITION DEEP
INTO ALASKA'S
REVELATION MOUNTAINS

WORDS AND PHOTOS
BY JIM HARRIS

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."—REVELATION 4:1

The bush plane bucked and swayed as our pilot fought to make headway. Flailing treetops below indicated a storm was moving inland. Wedged on the little bench between Andrew and me, Courtney tugged at the tail of his seatbelt, hoping it would save him from hitting his head on the ceiling again. I tightened my grip on the metal frame under my seat.

Because of the headwind, we'd already run low on fuel once. We were forced to land and bummed gas from a mining-exploration camp. We hung low over the forest, slowly making headway as the greens and yellows of spring whipped past. Suddenly the plane tipped sideways, standing on a wingtip as the sea of treetops filled the windows. My inner ears broadcast alarms as we fell towards the branches. The pilot leveled off from the hairpin just as sharply, squishing me into the foam bench. We were already below the forest canopy, bouncing down a grassy strip. The plane was out of gas. Again.

There were four of us on board—Noah Howell, Andrew McLean, Courtney Phillips and me—flying back from Alaska's Revelation Mountains, where we'd spent two weeks skiing couloirs few people had seen. The Revelations surge up at the junction of the Aleutian and Alaska Ranges and have a reputation for marathon-length storms. Located 140 miles northwest of Anchorage, the range is steep—broad rock-slab faces spike a vertical mile out of the glacier, with the range's highest peak, Mount Esperus, rising to 9,828 feet. From the air, the horizon looks like the electrocardiograph spikes of an arrhythmic heart rate.



In 1967, the Revelations were one of the last unnamed mountain ranges in North America. NASA had mapped and named prospective moon landing sites, but no one had been to these mountains.

Trapped by storms, granite walls, and swollen rivers, the first party of climbers to explore the Revelations waited tentbound, surviving storm after storm. With a Bible in hand, the 1967 expedition leader David Roberts wrote that, "The book that vividly matched the gloom and fury of our surroundings was, of course, Revelations." After reading verses aloud from their soggy sleeping bags, they began calling "the more fearsome peaks bordering our glacier such names as the Four Horsemen, Apocalypse and Golgotha." Despite not summiting any of those, the names stuck. Mapmakers began arcing the word "REVELATIONS" over the scrunched brown and blue contour lines.

Four decades later, enticed by a single photo that showed a couloir like a chalk line down a blackboard, Howell organized an expedition to the Revelations. Poor weather kept them grounded in Talkeetna 130 miles to the east, where they planted themselves on a bar stool for more than a week. With vacation days ticking away, they re-routed their itinerary, but Howell hung onto the idea. A few years later, he organized a second trip. This time we lucked out with flyable weather on the first day.

Even as the plane had helixed lower on the approach, I was fixated on the long ribbons of snow tucked into the seams of the towering walls. The lines were narrow, stark and looked vertical. The next morning, we edged skis up chalky snow, then clipped them to our packs as the angle steepened. Where most skiers are familiar with that plugged-into-the-universe flow experience when gliding downhill, this was one of those times I felt that while climbing. We kicked steps uphill for an hour and a half, which felt like six minutes, and all I can remember from that time is stubbornly ignoring my sweat-fogged sunglasses. Finally, more than 3,000 feet above the tent, I ascended the last pitch of snow-encrusted ice and onto the narrow fin of the col.

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As my ski bindings clicked around my boots, I was looking down the longest and steepest couloir I'd ever seen. It plunged at a 50-degree angle for more than 3,000 feet. It was the first line of the trip, my first time skiing in Alaska, and likely the first time the chute would get skied. The novelty of it didn't sink in until later. I was focused on staying perched on the little platform I'd carved, waiting my turn.

Sideslipping first down pebbled ice then into the security of dense powder, I began slashing turns down the fall line. Blond granite walls cropped the view to a vertical panoramic sliver. A few minutes later we were laughing down the sunny apron; my stomach butterflies left fluttering around the tracks of my first turns.

Steep-chute skiing on chalky snow is the inverse of floating hero powder. There is so much gravity and so little friction that turning is a means of dumping speed every bit as much as it is a way to change direction. Nothing feels easy about making little turns down a stone hallway under the perma-shade of unclimbed peaks. If anything, places such as this remind you that you are just a blood-filled skin-bag—soft, small, and fragile. In search of a rhythm, you ski slowly because you are delicate and the snow gets firmer below.

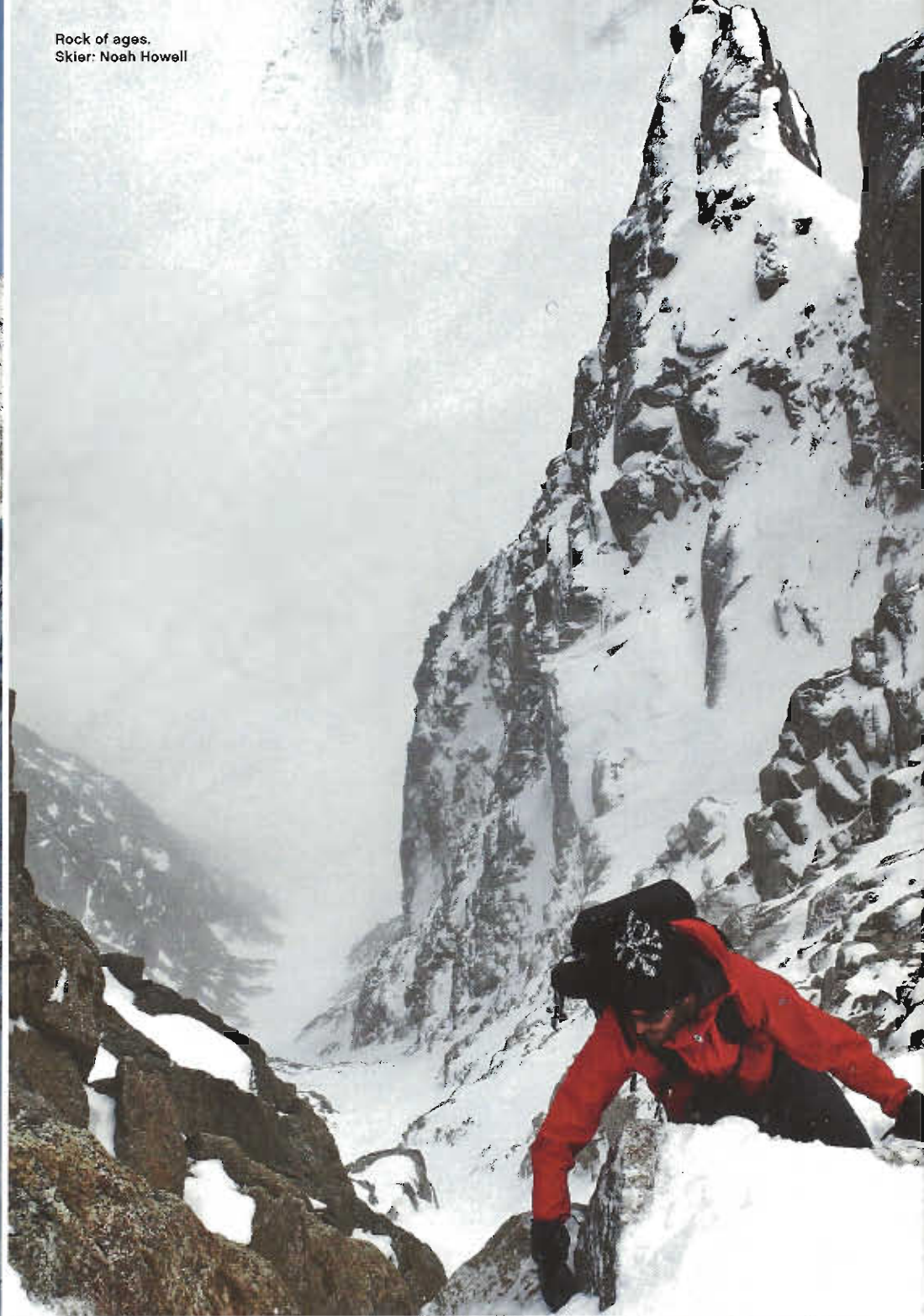
Ski movies don't bother much with this kind of footage—slow skiing is boring to watch. On the other hand, nobody is handing out style points, so any combination of falling-leaf sideslips, hop-n-chop turning, and window-rolling skids are fair game so long as you make it to the bottom upright.

It is a twisted version of fun when you are trying to make careful turns above big exposure on marginal snow. It is more fun to have done it than to be doing it. Somehow that raw vulnerability morphs from 'terrifying' to 'terrifyingly awesome' in the road-grimed rearview mirror of hindsight.

"Hey Andrew, have you ever been to the moon?"
"Only like a hundred times!"
Skiers: Noah Howell and Andrew McLean



Rock of ages.
Skier: Noah Howell





"Look, he is coming with the clouds..." Revelation 1:7
Skier: Noah Howell

We spent two weeks camped on the Revelation Glacier, skied every day but one, and ticked a dozen steep chutes in the process. The four of us left camp on the fifth morning as enaking fingers of fog crept up the glacier. The fingers interlocked and soon we were wrapped in the kind of dampness that bedazzles loose threads with tiny droplets. Our field of view shrank until boulders riding on the glacier's back were the only landmarks.

Were we in the spot we had scouted the day before? In the place we aimed for, the apron met shattered rock and splintered into chutes that zagged upward like cracks through concrete. With fog hanging like wet wool, we could not be sure we were in the right place. In a valley where dangling glaciers and rotting granite walls intermittently spat their broken teeth towards the valley floor, wandering blindly uphill left too much to chance. Instead we waited for the sun to burn off the misty clouds.

An hour passed, then two. McLean and Phillips decided to retrace our tracks back to camp. Howell and I stayed, waiting. Then, a glimpse upward. We caught sight of the rock towers that split the apron, confirmation that we were in the right spot. We climbed, reasoning that the tight couloir walls would lend some depth perception. The ribbon of snow bent up, pivoting first left then right between crumbling walls that rose hundreds of feet on either side. The chute constricted until I could touch both walls at the same time. After kicking steps through the choke, the gully flared wider and the fog began to disentangle. Half Dome-height slabs jutted above the cloud ceiling below. Above us, sunlight stenciled bright shapes across the ridgeline snowfield.

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Off my skis, I scampered up the wide ridge hoping to photograph Howell climbing to the sparkling crest. Suddenly my footing disappeared into a widening hole in the wind-scalloped snow. Instantly, I was hanging halfway into a narrow crevasse. One arm and a leg remained on solid snow, but my view was of blue dimming to black down the skinny and impossibly deep slot. Chicken-winged and afraid to move, I imagined my foot and arm hooking like a boat anchor above me. Careful not to collapse the snow around the lip, I stemmed and rolled out from a crevasse that was at once claustrophobic and vertigo-inducing. I missed the photo op. I was okay with that.

Noah and I were skiing the crooked couloir when snowflakes began falling. It was coming down thick when we slid back into camp that afternoon. Wet flakes fell unruffled by wind, and soon the tents were just white bumps on the rolling glacier. By the next day, the wind picked up, sculpting hefty drifts around the tents. On our one down day, we plowed through paperbacks, stopping to brew more tea and shovel out the tents.

That storm may have been one of the year's bigger ones because the snow in the Revelations was thin—only a few feet thick over ice in most places. Our pilot chalked it up to a bad year, guessing that the snowpack was perhaps half of normal. The ten-story tall bathtub ring of loose mountainside told of how much fatter the glacier was just a few years ago. Greg Collins, who in 1985 made first ascents of the Angel and Four Horsemen, later saw our photos and exclaimed, "Jeez, what happened to all the snow and ice? The ice mass is wildly abated." Whether the ugly glacial retreat in the Revelations is a result of burnt fossil fuels, the warm glow from Al Gore's PowerPoint projector or some process outside human influence, I cannot help but feel melancholy about it.

When the rising sun crested the incisor peaks, the fresh snow sparkled. Powder that had drifted onto steep rock faces during the night began to sluff, racing thousands of feet down, hitting the aprons and spitting powder clouds across the valley floor.

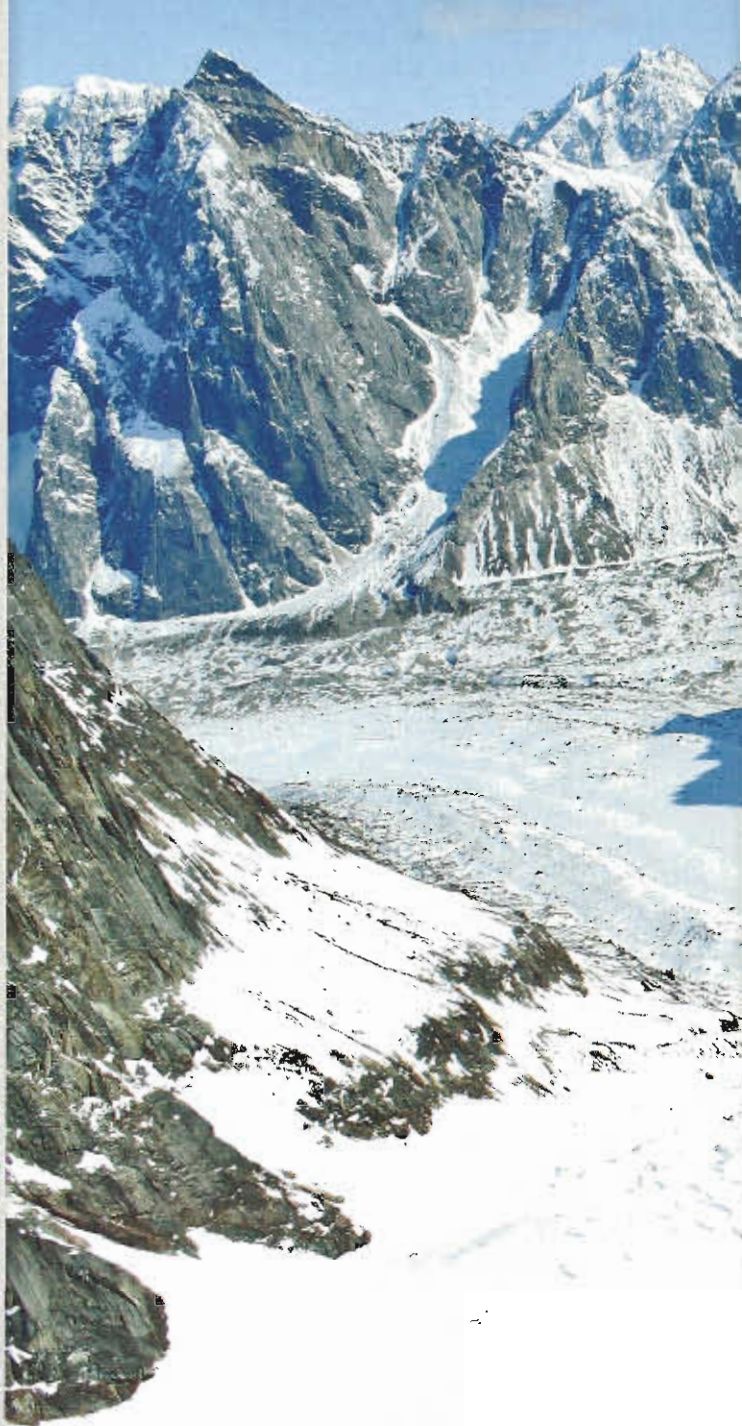
Having already cherry picked the best lines in the upper cirques and with the spike in avalanche hazard, it was an opportunity to move base camp. The foot and a half of new snow carpeted rocky moraines and made it possible to drag our gear-laden sleds without needing to portage. My sled submarined in the deep snow. Its dead weight was relentless when pulling uphill, then malicious going down when it came alive, overran my ski tails and went for my knees. After hours of wrangling, we positioned ourselves on a new lobe of the glacier. From that camp, we wandered outward, exploring routes into other valleys.

Skiing mountains named Four Horsemen and The Apocalypse, we didn't buck the biblical theme and labeled the couloirs we skied with names such as Jesus Crust Supergnar, The Boot of All Evil, Missionary Style, Babylon Bowl, Immaculate Deception, and Shroud of Turnin'.

Narrow, steep-sided couloirs are like dark alleyways between skyscrapers because, from an angle, they are invisible. The topographic maps suggested likely grooves, but the Christmas-morning excitement of shuffling around towering corners to discover a new line is a thrilling feeling. We pointed ski poles when we spotted another cone-shaped apron spilling onto the glacier but were often let down when we began to make out unskiable hanging seracs, polished ice and rock buttresses interrupting the snowy corridors. These moments of disappointment were usually followed by the sight of another chute nearby, often with lines crisper than IKEA furniture.

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Our take on biblical names was a good index of the fun we were having, which was about the same quality as a sleuth of brown bears swimming in a salmon run. The snow was stable, the sky clear, the routes striking, and our food supply plentiful. Unlike the soggy 1967 expedition, my sleeping bag was dry. When we raised our voices over the white noise of the cook stoves, our stories, rants, and improv flowed. Expeditions often do not feel like vacations, but this one did.



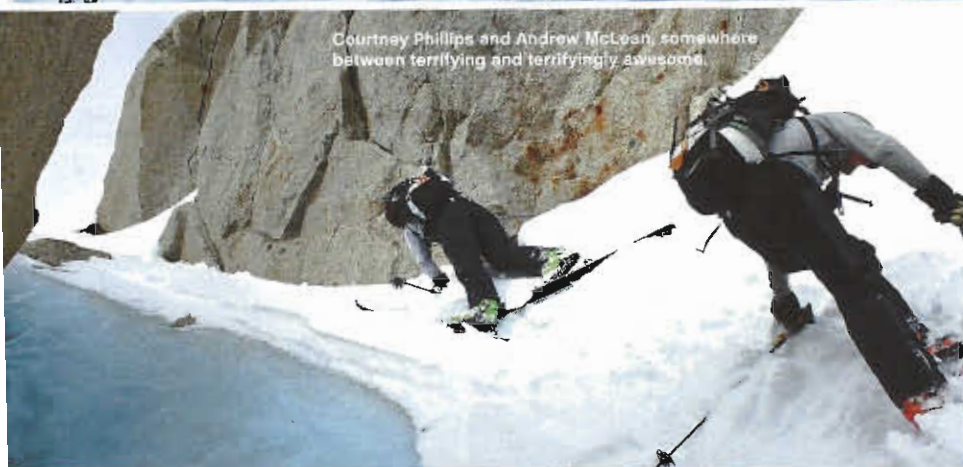
"His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire." Revelation 1:14.
Skier: Courtney Phillips



"Andrew? Yeah, he's right here... Hey, McLean. Waterbottle. It's for you."



Courtney Phillips and Andrew McLean, somewhere
between terrifying and terrifyingly awesome



The four of us descended magnificent chutes, skied over 'schrunds and snow bridges, and finally trekked out of the mountains along the bear-print-dotted banks of the Big River. Despite all of the moments when the trip could have turned epic, it had flown by without incident... gone almost too well, really.

Then we were making the run into that fierce headwind, the aeronautical equivalent of riding a bike in the sand. With groundspeed half that of the air pushing past the wings, we crawled up treeless valleys. The first time we ran out of gas, the pilot anticipated it and radioed ahead to a mining camp where muddy dogs ran to greet us when we set down. A man gunning a four-wheeler strapped with gas cans splashed down the dirt landing strip before making a discrete sale.

In the air again, the Beaver continued to swing and drop with stomach-flopping lurches. Then we were banking hard above the forest, lining up for touchdown on the first manmade clearing we'd seen in miles. The fuel gauge needles hung slack below the 0lbs mark. We wondered aloud where we'd come down as the plane vibrated across the mowed field. Jumping down from the high cockpit, we walked towards a single house near the river. Maybe they'd sell us gas? No dice. It was a little fishing lodge still closed up for the winter. Powering on a satellite phone, the pilot called a mobile mechanic—the bush plane equivalent of AAA roadside service—and gave our coordinates. An hour later, the mechanic landed his balloon-tired plane next to ours, and our pilot was pouring cans of 87 octane into the tank. Silhouettes of the peaks that flank Anchorage were visible on the horizon. ❄

