



McLEANINGS

COULOIR LOVE

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When my friend came back from Baffin Island, I couldn't wait to ask her what she thought. Baffin is a virtual feeding frenzy of couloirs, with more splitters per square kilometer than you can swing a harp seal club at, yet her response stunned me: "It was okay, but a lot of the same thing—boot straight up a 3,000-foot couloir, then ski back down. There wasn't a lot of variety." What! You mean to say that couloir love is not universal?

When it comes to couloirs, variety is not the spice of life, but life itself. Couloirs are like spy novels set in exotic locations with twisting, turning plots and protagonists that skirt danger and thwart villains before ending up reclined on a fluffy down comforter in the embrace of...well, you see where I'm headed.

To succeed, you have to put in many vertical feet of hard work to claw your way to the top. But then you get to float back down on a pair of Sofa King phat skis, immersed in the spoils of your toil. What could be better? Climb up; ski down; repeat 'til death do us part. Who needs variety?

The best couloirs are tall, dark and stunning. You can hide in their curves, cling to their sides, and if things get too hairy, you can drive a pin into one of their cracks and dangle from it. Try that in an aspen glade. Cynics who describe couloirs as mere trash collectors of the mountains are the same envious types who complain about bikini models posing with power tools. Pfffft.

It's best to approach couloirs respectfully from the bottom up, although that approach poses the immediate question: "Aren't you more likely to get whacked by an avalanche or rock and ice fall if you spend hours booting up a chute?" It depends.

Couloirs often broadcast their mood ahead of time by sending down smaller rocks, ice, and sluffs before they let loose with The Big One, and these little hints should be heeded. For example, starting up a couloir in waist deep snow is generally a bad idea, since the snow often gets deeper higher up the line. If for no other reason, it is anecdotally safer to climb couloirs before skiing them: it's rare to hear of people being hurt or killed during couloir ascents, but fairly common to hear of skiers getting flushed down them when they enter blindly from the top. Grovel at their feet, and *then* get in their faces—not the other way around.

Avalanche-wise, the tighter and steeper a couloir, the better. Tight chutes have less snow volume than a huge open bowl, the walls provide a bit of extra grip to hold the snow, and the snowpack tends to be deeper. Statistically, a 50° slope has about the same chance of sliding as a 20-25° slope, but then again, just as steepness comes with dangers, so do huge open starting zones and 38° aprons.

Couloirs have always had an irrational effect on me. One of my earliest chutings involved getting cliffed-out after entering a blind couloir from the top. I lowered off of a tree branch, which promptly snapped out of reach and left me *couloirus interruptus* and committed. Four tree branches later, after I finally made it to the bottom, I was sold on couloirs—and the idea of carrying a rope.

The cult of couloirs has spawned guidebooks, a magazine, centerfolds and legions of devotees. Humans cannot survive on chocolate and couloirs alone, but every year, I fight the temptation to try. If variety is the spice of life, hold the salt and pepper. I'll take a couloir straight up (and down) any day.

Andrew McLean lives in Park City, Utah with his trophy wife, two red-headed daughters, one good dog and one bad dog. He's racked up first descents all over the world and laid arcs on all seven continents. In a past life he was an outdoor gear designer, and his current favorite color is amarantine. Photo: Chris Figenshaw