

## **Timberline Side-Country**

- by Emilio Trampuz -

Side-country skiing has become increasingly popular in recent years. Just see how criss-crossed the terrain is just west of the Timberline and slightly out of bounds. As compared to true back-country skiing, where you venture into the wilderness, side-country skiing is done just off to the side of a ski area but within reach of the lifts. In fact, the uphill transportation is usually provided by lifts, followed by some traversing or even a bit of additional climbing, and then skiing or riding in ungroomed and out-of-bounds areas, but with the ultimate goal of returning to the lifts or to other signs of civilization, such as when skiing down to Government Camp.

The scenery can change quite dramatically as you explore the side-country. The views themselves are worth seeing. Even if you decide not to ski any of it, it can be rewarding to simply traverse westward from the top of the Palmer chair just to see the views, and then you can simply traverse right back. The change of scenery can happen so suddenly as you approach the Zig Zag canyon rim that it can be startling.

Some people like to keep their favorite stashes secret, but I prefer to share them with anyone who is interested. And I like to take the opportunity to insert a few safety tips and pointers. For example:

1. Don't go out of bounds alone. A buddy can help you if something unexpected happens.
2. Register in the climbers' room at the entrance to the day lodge at Timberline. Get a free Wilderness permit there, and leave a form there stating your intended route.
3. Carry a cell-phone and a 2-way radio, just in case, but know that reception might not be available everywhere.
4. Carry a whistle. It can be heard from a greater distance than yelling.
5. Use Mt. Jefferson as a landmark guide. When you are west of Timberline, Mt. Jefferson will always guide you back to the ski area, or at least back toward Government Camp - if you are at a lower elevation.
6. Exit Zig Zag canyon after just a few turns. Exit Little Zig Zag canyon before you reach the tree line. Don't go into Sand canyon unless you want to ski down to Government Camp. There is no easy return from Sand Canyon to the lifts.
7. Your first excursion out of bounds should preferably be with someone who knows the terrain and who can tell you where the safety boundaries are.

The south side of Mt. Hood has a rich history of what we would today call "out-of-bounds" skiing, but that early Oregonians simply called Trail skiing, and the main trails they established over the years were the Blossom, Glade, and

Alpine trails. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was common practice to climb up from Government Camp on skis equipped with skins to the tree-line and then ski back again.

A small cabin was built for the hikers and skiers near the intersection of present day Timberline trail (which at this point coincides with the Pacific Crest Trail) and the Mountaineer trail. The location is out of bounds, just slightly west of the upper part of the Kruser trail. It's the only natural flat spot for miles around. It was known simply as the **Timberline Cabin**. All that remains of it today is some crumbling foundations, remnants of the chimney, and a historic marker indicating the spot. The marker and the foundations are visible in the summer months, but in winter, they are both buried under several feet of snow.

Timberline's side-country is best visited in the Spring, when the snow settles into a firm base, and when the sun has softened up the top layer, providing a nice carpet of soft snow to ski on. Any intermediate skier can do it.

Depending on the time of year, the snow conditions, and the available lifts, it is possible to explore three distinct regions: Lower, Middle, and Upper.

## LOWER REGION

The lower region consists of the three historic trails all of which end up in Government Camp, so you need to have transportation back to Timberline.



1. **Blossom Trail** is perhaps the oldest, dating to 1888 or earlier. It started at the old Timberline cabin and then meandered through the forest down to Government Camp, ending at what is today known as Meldrum Street, which is the same place where the Glade Tail ends. A large part of the Blossom trail is located in the trees between the Glade and Alpine trails, but lower down the Blossom and Glade trails get closer and closer and merge in places.

On a 1941 Forest Service map of Mt. Hood, the Blossom trail was marked "For expert skiers only". The oldest trail markers on this trail were triangular and relatively small (less than a foot wide). Over the years, these markers have largely disappeared (only a very few remain), and the trail was almost forgotten.

Interestingly, the name survived better than the trail. The slow 2-seater chairlift that preceded the Stormin' Norman Express was called the Blossom



chairlift. The trail today known as the Paintbrush trail was called the Blossom trail. And the street in Government Camp where this trail finally ends up is still called the Blossom Trail Road.

Around 2008 - 2010, Mike Cullen (a Timberline Ski Host) and his wife Holly (daughter of famous ski patroller Corky Kosko) spent a couple of summers reviving the Blossom trail. They carried a ladder all along the trail in the summer climbed up about 15 - 20 feet (to make sure it is above the snow level), and placed small metal violet-colored rectangular signs with the letter B cut out of the metal.

Since 2010, Mike Cullen has led people down this trail, and there are several people who have continued skiing this trail every chance they get.







2. **Glade Trail** is the most famous one. It was built by the US Forest Service in 1937 as part of the Timberline Lodge ski complex. The trail is marked with large orange signs with the letter G for "Glade". It starts at the top of the Jeff Flood express and stretches diagonally down in a straight line, crosses the Kruser trail (going out of bounds there) and continues toward Government

Camp, emerging onto Blossom Trail Road, which then turns into Meldrum Road, between Huckleberry Inn and Cascade Lodge, and right next to the General Store. This is the easiest of the 3 trails.



In an effort to continue the old tradition of Trail skiing, the Mt. Hood Museum in Government Camp organizes the annual "Ski the Glade Trail Day" the first Saturday in March. That is the only day of the year when the glade trail is groomed and ski patrollers are present to provide assistance if needed. Shuttle buses are also provided between Government Camp and Timberline, so everyone who signs up for the event can ski the Glade Trail multiple times.

Also, there is nothing to stop the more adventurous and more advanced skiers from trying the Blossom trail on this same day, keeping in mind that the Blossom trail is never groomed and is not patrolled.

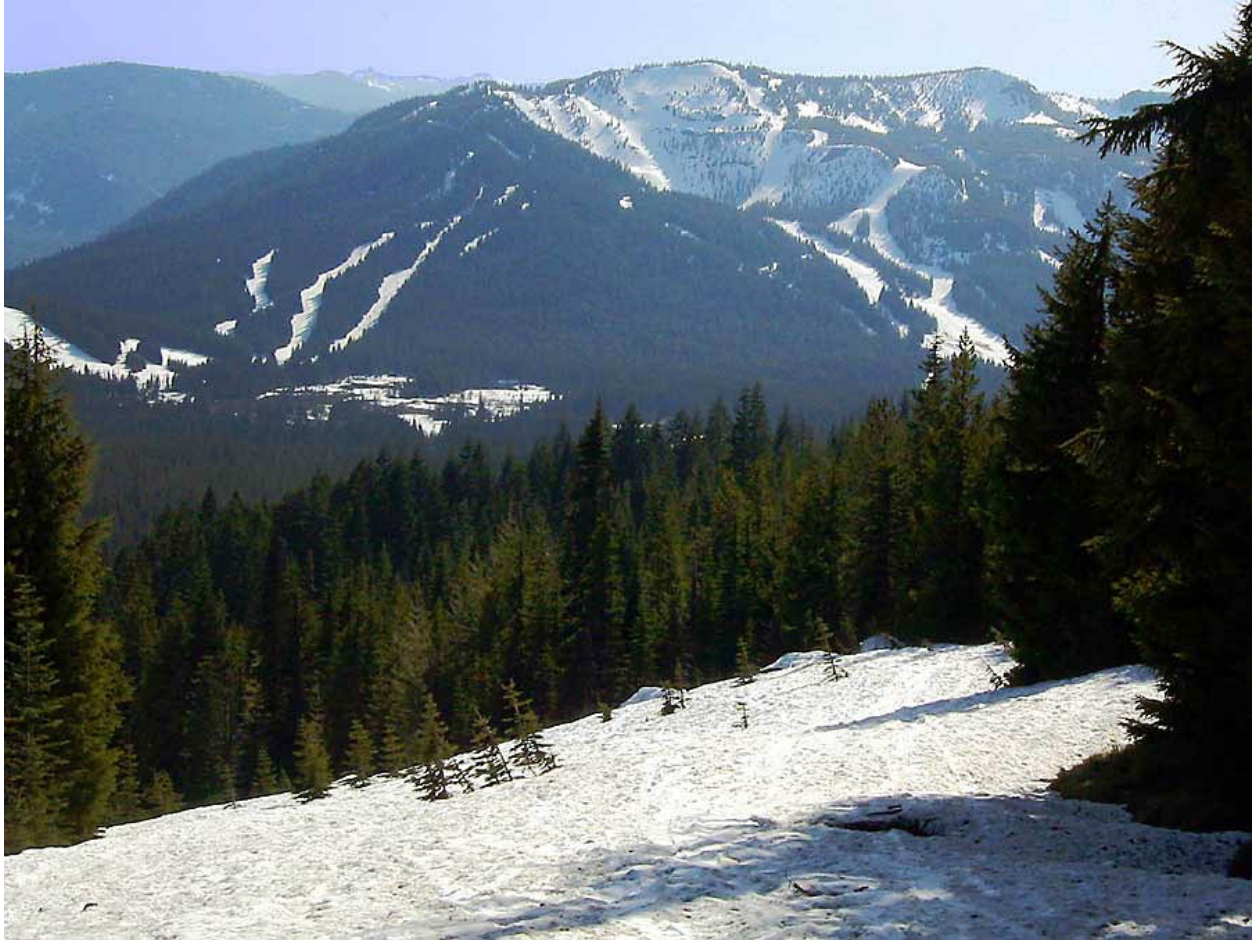


3. **Alpine Trail** starts at Timberline Lodge. Start by heading diagonally down and westward on the Thunder trail, and when the Thunder trail turns left, exit it on the right side and continue in the same direction. At the point where you leave the Thunder trail, you will notice the first official sign marking the trail as the Alpine trail.



Follow the trail to the bottom of the Stormin' Norman lift. Before Timberline expanded its terrain with the addition of the Jeff Flood Express, the bottom of the Stormin' Norman lift was the end of the ski area. Locals would duck under the rope here at the end of the day in order to ski the Alpine Trail all the way home to Government Camp.

Today, there is no rope, and you can ski on a groomed trail down to the Kruser trail. As soon as you merge with the Kruser trail, look for an exit on the right side of the trail. You'll find one of the official gates, warning you that you are now leaving the ski area. From here, simply follow the wide open trail on ungroomed snow all the way down to the Summit ski area on the upper end of Government Camp. Along the way, you might see large orange signs with the letter A for "Alpine" showing you the way.



The Alpine trail is more interesting and more challenging than the Glade Trail. It offers some good riding until you get close to the level of the Summit Ski area. At that point, there is a long flat area, maybe about a quarter of a mile, where you will barely crawl along and perhaps need a push every now and then, until you emerge onto the Summit ski area, where you can ski down on an easy intermediate groomed run.

### **MIDDLE REGION**

The Middle region of Timberline's side country lies just west of the Magic Mile and the Stormin' Norman lifts. The skiable areas here are:

1. **The Kruser ridge.** This is not an official name. It's just a nickname for the slightly higher ground immediately west of the Kruser trail. As soon as you leave the Kruser trail, you are out of bounds. This is where most of us have made our first tentative steps out of bounds, keeping within reach of the Kruser trail -- or what used to be called the Blossom trail before the trails were renamed into Kruser and Paintbrush. Don't go very far west. Ski parallel to the Kruser trail and pretty soon start turning left, reconnecting with the Kruser



trail. This is just a short excursion, but surprisingly it is less skied these days than slopes a bit farther west.

2. **The Mountaineer trail / Timberline Cabin.** There are no visible trail markings here, but all you have to do is traverse westward from the top of Stormin' Norman, past just a few trees until you get to a wide open meadow with a canyon-like depression on skier's left. Enjoy skiing that meadow down toward a solitary dead tree in the middle of a relatively flat area. The remnants of the old Timberline cabin are located under the snow just a few yards east (left) of that dead tree. Remember that the original Blossom trail actually started from this spot, from the cabin.

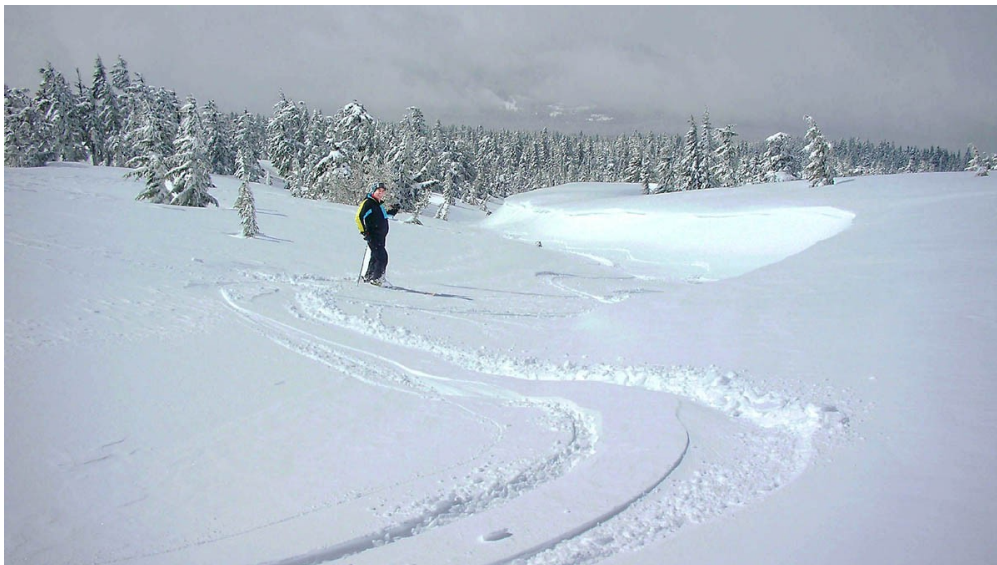


Skiing down from there, you should soon start noticing yellow ribbons on trees, and other yellow markings. These are all reminders that you have reached the safety boundary, your last chance to get back to the lifts. Start turning left and traversing at this point, following the yellow ribbons. Even if you lose sight of the yellow markings, keep traversing left, back to the lifts. If you go any lower than those markings, you will not be able to easily get back to the lifts without climbing. Go lower down only if you intend to eventually connect with the Glade trail and ski to Government Camp.



If you follow the yellow signs and ribbons, you will emerge onto the Kruser trail. You can then simply follow Kruser to the bottom of the Jeff Flood Express. But, if the Jeff Flood lift is closed (as it tends to be in late Spring, after the Palmer lifts starts running regularly), simply continue traversing and you will eventually get to the bottom of the Stormin' Norman lift.

3. **Sand Canyon** begins as 2 separate branches which soon merge into one. Both branches start off very gently. At first they don't even look like canyons at all. If you have learned to recognize the location of the Mountaineer trail meadows and the dead tree on flat terrain marking the vicinity of the old Timberline cabin ruins, then Sand canyon is the first depression in the ground west of that.





Unfortunately, there is no way to ski into Sand canyon and return to the lifts. Sand canyon starts too low on the mountain, so by the time you are fully in it, you just don't have enough elevation to bring you back to the lifts without some climbing.

But Sand Canyon is an interesting way to ski down to Government Camp. It's not perfect, but it's interesting. Don't go there if there is a foot of fresh snow on the ground. The slope is simply not steep enough to push you forward, so you would have to work hard to make progress. But in the Spring, when the snow has settled into a firm base, you can get just enough speed to playfully go up and down the sidewalls of the canyon.



Sand canyon is the safest of the 3 canyons to ski, because it is the only one that has an informative safety sign suspended above the canyon on a cable strung between two trees. The large orange sign says in white letters: "Leave canyon here for Glade Trail."

Unfortunately, the white lettering on this sign has been rapidly fading in the last couple of years. The last two words "Glade Trail" are almost impossible to read any more. On top of that, some irresponsible vandals have partially

covered up the sign by throwing sneakers over it and also some sort of sheet or blanket that now partially obscures the sign.

So, the sign might not be self-explanatory any more. But just know that if you find an orange colored board suspended above the canyon, that is the place to get out of it, climbing up a slope on your left.

When you exit Sand canyon, simply follow a diagonal clearing in the forest. Notice that this clearing heads almost directly toward Mt. Jefferson - your guide to safety. After about a mile (or less), you will emerge onto the Glade Trail, at a point almost exactly half way between Timberline Lodge and Government Camp, and marked by a wooden trail sign. Follow the Glade Trail from there, and you will end up safely in the middle of Government Camp.

For enhanced safety, and for the sake of those who are not coming out of Sand canyon but are skiing through the trees in the area between Sand canyon and the Glade trail, there is also a series of red and pink markings alerting you to the RED boundary, the place to turn left in order to get to Government Camp. Going beyond the red markings in a definite no-no. It will result in a very long hike down the mountain. If you just keep going downhill, you will eventually emerge somewhere onto Kiwanis Camp Road (Road 39), but it will take you

several hours to get there, and you will need to cross a fairly wide stream several times. If you get lost in that area in the afternoon, chances are you will not make it out of the forest before nightfall. So, observe the RED boundary.



Unfortunately, many of the red and pink ribbons in that area have faded away over the years. A few painted markings on tree trunks remain, but they are not bright red and might be hard to spot. So, until those safety markings are improved, it might be safest to ski down Sand canyon down to the suspended orange EXIT sign, and then familiarize yourself with the diagonal cut through the forest heading toward the Glade trail, so you can recognize it if you later arrive there from a different direction.



#### 4. **Little Zig Zag canyon.**

This is accessible from the top of the Magic Mile. It's easier to get here from the Palmer lift. But, if the Palmer lift is closed, you can traverse to Little Zig Zag canyon from the top of the Magic Mile. The entrance to the canyon is almost at the same level as the upper station of the Magic Mile. So, don't lose

any vertical. If possible, as you traverse west, try to climb up a step each time to push forward and side-step slightly uphill.



Due to prevailing winds coming from the West, the western side of Little Zig Zag canyon is almost always heavily corniced, and you cannot exit the canyon in that direction. But the east side of the canyon is swept clean by the wind and you can easily exit almost anywhere. The problem arises only when the snow gets blown away or melted away, exposing the rocks. At that point, you need to pick your exit carefully, to avoid the rocks.



Skiing Little Zig Zag is usually quite easy. The snow at the bottom of the canyon is protected from the wind, so it is usually smooth, even when everything else around it is wind-blown. The only potential obstacles might be chunks of the corniced lip that fell down and rolled to the bottom.

Exiting the canyon is easy. Simply point your boards toward the left edge of the canyon and you will gradually traverse out of it.

Exit before you reach the tree-line and immediately start traversing diagonally eastward, back toward the ski area. If you traverse straight east, you can get back to the lower end of the Magic Mile lift. But if the lower lifts are still open (Stormin' Norman or Jeff Flood), you can continue sliding down the Mountaineer trail meadow, past the dead tree and the Timberline cabin location, and emerge onto the middle of the Kruser trail, as described above.

## **UPPER REGION**

The upper region is only accessible if the Palmer Lift is open, unless you are prepared to spend a couple of hours climbing to the 8,500' level.

From the top of Palmer, you need to traverse directly to the west (toward Portland). There have been times in past years, when the Timberline crew helpfully dug out a passage under the Palmer lift right next to the upper station. But, this has not happened in recent years.

It seems Timberline would prefer that people climb up and over the top station of the Palmer lift. This is doable, but it is also quite a lot of work, and at that altitude you will be catching your breath. This climbing is also time-consuming and not really necessary. It could potentially also be dangerous if you slip and lose your balance when you are right above the lift building. You might lose your footing, slide down, and fall onto a solid flat surface from a potentially life-threatening height.

So, the easiest way is to ski down the main Palmer run, close to the lift, for just a few turns, until you see an opening on your right where you can cross over to the other side under the lift.



Once on the west side of the lift, you are already out of bounds. The terrain there is basically the same as on the inbounds side, same steepness, but the snow is ungroomed. Depending on the conditions, sometimes the ungroomed snow is actually easier to ski than the groomed but icy or slushy snow. So, you



can easily play in the ungroomed snow for a while, always within sight of the lift, and you can always traverse back to the groomed slope if the snow turns heavy.

### **Zig Zag canyon**

From the top of the Palmer lift, keep traversing westward, toward an imaginary point a below Illumination Rock, until the natural curvature of the terrain takes you just out of sight of the Palmer lift. This traverse doesn't have to be totally horizontal (as is needed to get from the Magic Mile to Little Zig Zag canyon). Here, you can actually trade some vertical to get some speed and make the traverse faster and easier.

Eventually, you will reach Zig Zag canyon. Depending on how much vertical you lost during the traverse, the canyon might be right in front of you, or slightly below you.

Zig Zag canyon actually starts with two branches (the east and the west branch) that eventually merge into one. The west branch starts just a bit higher up on the mountain, so that is the one you will encounter first when approaching it from above or from the Palmer snowfield.



Don't go there on a foggy day with low visibility. The entrance to Zig Zag canyon is surprisingly steep and not very visible from a distance, until you are almost at the canyon's edge. Zig Zag is also the largest of the 3 main canyons mentioned above. The proportions can be a bit intimidating. If anyone claims that Timberline doesn't offer enough challenge, they haven't visited Zig Zag canyon yet.

Zig Zag canyon is Oregon's answer to Jackson Hole's Corbet's Couloir, in the sense that it is a place to prove you manhood!!!

Attention intermediate folks! Don't feel too intimidated. There is also a big difference. Corbet's Couloir is an all or nothing proposition. But, the beauty of Zig Zag canyon is that you can choose your level of difficulty by simply selecting the place you enter it. The farther west you go, the steeper the entry to the canyon. The easiest way to enter the canyon is from the east side.



It gets even easier if you choose not to enter the canyon at the very top, but to ski a bit further down along one of its eastern flanks that gradually enters the canyon.

Have a camera ready to take a photo of yourself and your friend(s) in front of Mississippi Head, the spectacular rock face on the west side of Zig Zag canyon a little lower down from the place you should be exiting the canyon. Did you know that a World War II bomber plane crashed into Mississippi Head on a practice mission in 1949? There is a plaque commemorating the event inside the climbers' registration room at Timberline's day lodge.





The most important thing about Zig Zag canyon is knowing where to exit. On most days, you will see tracks of people who have been there before you, so simply follow those. There are 3 ways to handle the exit:

a) **The smart way.** Make just a very few turns at the top and exit sharply left, hugging the relatively steep side wall of the canyon. Then immediately cross the east branch of the canyon in a similar fashion, by making just a few quick turns and exiting eastward toward the ski lifts.



b) **The risky way.** Exit the west branch quickly, as above, but then enter the east branch and make many turns in it, finally exiting it at a point slightly lower than Mississppi Head, but still long before the tree line. Yes, it's possible to ski that much into the east branch, and at this point you are still

safe. The danger comes when you traverse farther east and come across Little Zig Zag canyon. The only way to cross Little Zig Zag is to first enter it, and that means jumping into it over the sometimes overhanging cornice. Will you have the guts to do that? There is no easy way around it, because that whole western edge of Little Zig Zag is corniced for what seems to be miles. Climbing up to the start of the canyon is too much work and climbing down seems like

the cornice never ends. It does, but way too low to get back to the lifts. There are times when it's not so bad, but why risk it?

c) **The suicidal way.** Do not ever even think of attempting this. You will regret it. If you ski too low into the west branch of Zig Zag canyon, the ridge separating it from the east branch won't let you exit the canyon in time, as you can do from the east branch. Besides, regardless of which branch you enter, resist the temptation to continue skiing this canyon. The snow is great and the slope is wide open and inviting. But, if you go too far down, there is no easy way out. Zig Zag canyon is like the roach motel. You can check in, but you can't check out. The wide open slope eventually narrows down to a narrow canyon with extremely steep walls on both sides. You cannot possibly climb out of it, and the bottom of the canyon eventually becomes a raging river, the Zig Zag river, which in principle should take you back to civilization, if only there was a way to safely and comfortably ski or walk down its banks.

If you want to find out firsthand what it might be like to follow the path of Zig Zag river downhill, try it the relatively safe way by hiking it in the summer. Start from below and work your way up. From highway 26, just before the big curves heading to Government Camp, turn left onto Kiwanis Camp Road (Road 39) and within the next mile or so park the car somewhere near the Paradise Park trailhead. The noisy river you'll find there is the Zig Zag river. Try hiking upstream, and you will soon discover why it's not a good idea to try to ski that way in the winter.

So, back to skiing it from the top. You first dip into the west branch, then you dip into the east branch, making just 3 or 4 turns in each. What next? Continue diagonally in a south-east direction, back toward the lifts. Always remember to look toward Mt. Jefferson in the distance. Don't follow the fall line. Follow Mt. Jefferson.

Pretty soon, you will see the building that houses the upper end of the Magic Mile lift. If you look down the slope, you will see another, smaller canyon below. That is Little Zig Zag canyon. At some point, you will need to make a decision as to what you want to do next:

- a) Traverse to the top of the Magic Mile, and you can catch Palmer chair.
- b) Turn down toward Little Zig Zag canyon and ski it for a while. If you exit it before the tree line, you will then again have two choices: either ski back to the lower end of the Magic Mile lift, or hit the Mountaineer trail meadow (slightly before the Stormin' Norman lift) and then ski past the invisible Timberline Cabin and follow the yellow markers back to the Stormin' Norman or Jeff Flood lifts.

## **VARIATIONS**



On top of the basic trails and canyons mentioned above, there are many more ways to ski this terrain, like:

- a) **The trees** between the Glade Trail and Sand Canyon, but beware of tree wells!
- b) **A few shortcuts** here and there, such as the one connecting the Alpine and Glade trails.

There are also a few other small canyons within the ski area itself (inbounds), such as:

- a) **The Bone Zone**. Relatively well known place at the eastern edge of the terrain served by the Stormin' Norman lift.
- b) **Corkscrew canyon**, which starts at the bottom of Stormin' Norman and continues almost to the bottom of the Jeff Flood lift.

Also, there are some regular trails that seem to be under the radar and are rarely skied, such as:

- a) **The Wy'east trail** from Molly's ridge dropping toward the bottom of Pucci.
- b) **The un-named but beautiful trail** that starts from the same spot as the Wy'east trail but then drops southward almost parallel to Molly's chairlift but west of it.

## OUT OF BOUNDS ISSUES



Timberline's policy is that they don't encourage people to go out of bounds, but if you do decide to go there anyway, they just want you to know that you are on your own, taking full responsibility for yourself, that rescue might not be possible, and that you or your heirs will be responsible for the cost of any search and rescue operation.

If you do go out of bounds, Timberline asks that you leave the area through one of the established gates, and that you read the sign posted at the gate.

Make your side-country excursion legal by registering and picking up a wilderness permit, and make it safe by observing all the safety issues mentioned above.

## A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

With all the emphasis on the safety issues, many people might be intimidated or discouraged. So I would like to add a word of encouragement.

These adventures can be both fun and safe. There is really nothing too difficult, with the possible exception of the entry into Zig Zag canyon, which you can easily avoid and ski around if you find it too challenging.

A lot depends on the snow conditions. There are days when the snow is heavy, or wet, or too icy, or too windblown, when I won't venture into the ungroomed at all. On such days, let's give thanks for grooming machines and the people who spend most of the night making the slopes skiable for us.

But, when the snow is good, it is very good! There are days when the ungroomed snow is easier to ski than the groomed. It depends on the time of day too. The magic time is usually between 10 am and 12 (noon), when the snow softens up just enough but not too much.

I would encourage any good intermediate skier, anyone who can make a parallel turn, to not be intimidated by any of the safety warnings. Yes, observe the warnings, but don't be intimidated by them. Don't let that stop you from having a wonderful day on the slopes exploring the side-country. Remember that in many ways skiing the quiet side-country is a lot safer than skiing the crowded groomed slopes where speeding skiers and riders often get perilously close to you and occasionally even collide with you.

One of the safety points is to go on your first tour with someone who knows the terrain. In that spirit, for the sake of safety, I am offering myself as a guide. Please feel free to join me **any and every Saturday in May at 9 am** at the **Timberline day lodge**. It's best to meet me while I am filling out the paperwork in the climber's room at the entrance to the day lodge, around 8:45 am, or inside the day lodge during the next 15 minutes. I will need your name on the form.

There is no charge for the guided tour. This is all just for fun. There is also no guarantee of anything. Where we'll go and what we'll do depends entirely on the snow conditions. But nobody will be left behind.

Have all your equipment ready, and let's plan on starting to ski by about 9 am at the rear exit, next to the ski check. Even better, please let me know your plans to join me by emailing me at [Emilio2000@earthlink.net](mailto:Emilio2000@earthlink.net).

See you up there. Let the adventure begin!