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Karsten Carlson, Manager of the Glacier Outdoor Center's Gear Shop, on a guided snowshoe tour

DIVERSIFYING WITH

By RYAN ALFORD

Snowshoeing

Snowshoeing is the fastest growing winter sport in the United States. In fact, it could be the fastest growing winter sport in North America. There is no way to cite these claims officially, but snowshoeing is an activity that has rejuvenated the guest offerings for many snow resorts and destinations.

Hearsay aside, WinterTrails.org says that approximately 1.4 million people identify themselves as snowshoers – a 60 percent increase in the last decade. That's not something to ignore, or merely offer a couple pairs of snowshoes to the occasional guest.

It's time to get serious about snowshoeing.

Resorts and other destinations that have either toyed with the idea of offering snowshoes to guests, or haven't thought about it all, are in a unique position to

expand their customer base. The benefits of snowshoeing are numerous: low-impact, safe aerobic workout, inexpensive, and simple to learn. WinterTrails.org reports that the calorie burn while snowshoeing is 45% more "than walking or running at the same speed."

Snowshoeing has come a long way since its wood-frame roots, maturing greatly over the past 20 years. The sport's appeal is not only related to its health benefits but also its versatility. Some people choose to snowshoe recreationally – enjoying the

winter surroundings and a casual hike. Others find satisfaction in competitive snowshoe races; it's the fastest growing, and undoubtedly the most exciting, segment of the sport.

Exploring the backcountry is another option. Some snowshoers are skilled enough to trudge through remote areas of the world in a search for pristine snow. In fact, some backcountry skiers and snowboarders use snowshoes to reach unscathed champagne powder.

Whatever the appeal and purpose,

snowshoeing has something to offer everybody.

Embrace the Shoer

Typically, snowshoers span a wide range of participants. From the affluent to the budget-conscious, the age range is vast as well. In fact, WinterTrails.org reports that 46% of snowshoers are women and 55% of snowshoers are below the age of 45.

Graham Gephart, global brand manager for Atlas Snow-Shoe Co. and Tubbs Snowshoes, understands the eccentricities of the snowshoe buying demographics:

"We have pretty equal groups when we look at our data: ages 25 to 35, 35 to 45 and 45 to 55. It's a little higher in the 35 to 55 range, but we have a really strong

during a vacation or outing, snowshoeing is a logical option – as opposed to shopping or dining.

Skiing and snowboarding often separate families all over the trail map. The more advanced skiers and riders will drift to one side of the mountain, leaving the less experienced to fend for themselves. It's

guided tours. It requires operations, maintenance and staffing for setting up the trail network, trail grooming and then managing rentals. For the most part, a snowshoe rental business is pretty easy compared to ski and snowboard rental. People have most of the stuff they need, in terms of clothing. All they have to do is choose between men's or women's snowshoes, and one of three sizes."

It's an easy-to-learn sport. Similar to hiking, snowshoeing doesn't require lessons and poses minimal risk. This can further decrease a resort's operational involvement and investment. Looking at it constructively, if a resort was to invite guests to participate solely in a snowshoeing program (guided tours, full moon treks, etc.) more of their discretionary income would be reserved for lodging, dining and retail.

"It's a lower cost alternative activity to offer, both from a wholesale and rental operations point of view," says Gephart. "We saw some good numbers from the rental operations that we work with. Last year, even in the economic downturn, people who took vacations chose to snowshoe instead of skiing every day."

Big Resort Success

Most resorts have anchored a majority of their assets to skiing and snowboarding. Once the cold weather returns, resorts are revived with the sounds of snow-making and the arrival of seasonal workers. While both sports won't see solid participants before the season formally starts, snowshoers can immediately take advantage of a low snow base. This can happen practically anywhere there's snow, resort or not.

In addition to the many investments a resort will pursue, Nordic centers are



Snowshoers on a guided tour in Glacier National Park

Snowshoeing



A backcountry snowboarder uses snowshoes to navigate uphill

"There is always somebody in the family that doesn't ski or ride. What is there to offer them besides shopping? Nordic sports."

percentage of snowshoers in the 25 to 35 age range as well. When looking at the resort demographics, snowshoers will skew a little older and the younger audience will participate in gravity sports. A lot of guest families will participate in all sports: Skiing, snowboarding and snowshoeing. It introduces variety while keeping families active in a resort's offerings."

Snowshoeing's popularity is difficult to overlook. Generally, as families become more active and want to "stick together"

a natural occurrence for the family unit.

"A lot of ski areas have embraced the need to reach a wider demographic," explains Gephart. "One of the ways to do that is to make sure there are plenty of fun, family-friendly opportunities. Snowshoeing is perfect for that."

Gephart continues: "Generally, snowshoeing is less infrastructure intensive compared to a ski and snowboard operation. Resorts that offer snowshoeing are running rental programs and possibly



Eileen Wysocki at Sunlight Mountain Resort's 24 Hours of Sunlight race

quickly becoming the going standard. This offers some guests the variety they crave when visiting.

Nordic centers can be standalone locations – such as the historic Viking Nordic Center in Vermont. During the summer, the Vail Nordic Center is better known for 18 holes of golf. Once the snow falls, Nordic sports have the advantage in the Vail Valley.

Resort-goers often find Nordic centers placed side-by-side with gravity sports. This is ideal for the growth and exposure of snowshoeing to a larger, captive audience.

“Most of the places that have integrated snowshoeing and downhill skiing have, at least, neighboring areas so there aren’t many trails weaving back and forth between the two,” explains Gephart. “Some resorts have snowshoeing areas off to the side or at the base of the mountain. In the case of Beaver Creek Ski Resort in Colorado,

McCoy Park is reserved for Nordic sports at the top of the mountain.”

Focused primarily on cross-country skiing, most Nordic centers offer snowshoeing to guests as well. Both sports can either share the trail on multi-purpose track or have separate trails. With snowshoeing, groomed trails aren’t required throughout 100 percent of a property – they can include small footpaths through the woods on fresh powder.

“Snowshoeing has big revenue potential,” says Nathan Goldberg, product manager for the Beaver Creek Nordic Sports Center. “There is always somebody in the family that doesn’t ski or ride. What is there to offer them besides shopping? Nordic sports. People are a six-minute lift ride from a unique backcountry snowshoeing experience at Beaver Creek, with views of three different mountain ranges. We also have trails that

don’t require lift access. We have a lot of options for snowshoers.”

To snowshoe at a resort like Beaver Creek, the prices are reasonable. The McCoy Park lift ticket price is \$26 for adults, \$16 for seniors 65 and over and kids 12 and under. In comparison, the all-day Beaver Creek lift ticket for skiers and riders, during the peak season, is \$99. In addition to the McCoy Park pass, renting a pair of snowshoes is \$18. The Beaver Creek Nordic Center also offers a snowshoe package, which includes insulated Salomon snowshoe boots and Leki snowshoe poles.

Additionally, the Resort offers unique snowshoeing programs to visitors. These authentic experiences invite new people to the sport. Families with younger children will enjoy guided nature tours, and families with older children will enjoy full-day and half-day private guided tours.

“Every Tuesday, we provide a complimentary family snowshoe tour, from 4 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.” explains Goldberg. “We provide complimentary Atlas snowshoes, hot chocolate and cookies. It’s geared towards families, but everybody is invited. We get about 1,000 snowshoers a winter taking advantage of that.”

To satisfy the competitive side of snowshoeing, the Resort hosts the Beaver Creek Snowshoe Adventure Series. Each year, during three separate events, snowshoers from around the world compete in snowshoe races at McCoy Park. The final race, called the Jeremy Wright North American Snowshoe Championships, attracts some of the top athletes in the world.

It’s not an avalanche yet, but the growing interest in snowshoeing suggests it may be time for both resorts and clubs to consider ways of falling in step and offering snowshoeing activities as a way to increase on-property participation. **R+R**

About the author:

Ryan Alford is the owner and founder of Snowshoe Magazine (SnowshoeMag.com), the world’s foremost online publication for the sport of snowshoeing. He lives in Denver with his wife, Emily, and two children.