



To Build a Ski

Kirk Kardashian gets in touch with his inner Taiga fur trapper.

My infatuation with custom ski building

started with *Happy People: A Year in the Taiga*, a Werner Herzog documentary about Siberian fur trappers. The main character is grizzled trapper Gennady Soloviev, who spends long, frigid winters in the wilderness setting traps and collecting his quarry of sable. Come summer, Soloviev makes the next winter's skis while swatting mosquitoes in the air around him. Herzog narrates in the spare, humorless Austrian accent you probably know from *Grizzly Man*. I watched, transfixed, as Soloviev hewed and honed his planks out of an evergreen he felled in the spring. Predictably, given the title of the film, Soloviev enjoys the work. "A good craftsman will make good skis out of good wood," he says. "Getting around in these is sheer pleasure."

Intrigued by Soloviev's self-sufficiency, I looked up the nearest custom ski builder and found Lars Whitman of Silo Skis, in Richmond, Vermont. Whitman, 43,

makes skis to order, but also offers a two-and-a-half day ski building workshop. A carpenter and guitar maker, Whitman builds skis in a modified trailer in the driveway of his off-the-grid home. Wanting something close to that fur trapper's sense of satisfaction, I signed up. The goal was to build a pair of backcountry touring skis for Vermont powder and the occasional trip out west.

Boutique ski manufacturing is nothing new—exoticskis.com lists 414 makers around the world—but building yourself a set of skis under supervision is a relatively new spinoff that's catching on. Community Skis out of California also offers workshops in various locations from its mobile trailer on the West Coast. And Boston's Parlor Skis lets customers make their own boards, albeit in a more traditional factory setting. Prices run between \$850 and \$1,500 for a class—and the set of skis you made. Parlor sees 30 to 50 people taking its course each summer. "It was really the customer

wanting to become more involved that sparked the class," says Mark Wallace, a Parlor co-founder, "and our desire to share our knowledge and get more people excited about the sport."

During my half-week stint as a ski builder, I developed an appreciation for how many steps are involved, from cutting the wood core to shaping the base material, gluing the edges, laying it all up with epoxy and fiberglass, and then filing down the edges so the bases are flat. I didn't need to know any of this when I clicked into them in early December, after skinning to the top of Pico to enjoy the first big snowfall of the season. But those first few turns felt more momentous than usual. Sinking into 20 inches of blower powder on the steep rollovers of KA, a classically crooked New England run, the skis returned my energy and happily drove down the fall line. It was heady proof of concept. Getting around in these is sheer pleasure.