

WORDS // RACHAEL OAKES-ASH ALL PHOTOS // FRANK SHINE

# SKIING with the STARS

**BE WARNED**, read on at your own risk, because after you have read this I shall have to kill you. Some secrets, like Portillo's Ski with the Superstars Camp, need to remain just that. If you've been to Portillo in Chile's Andes mountains then you'll know what I am talking about. If you haven't and you're still reading then clearly you have a death wish.

Chris Davenport slices up a piece of Portillo heaven.



The scenery here sucks.

“A STORM WAS BREWING IN SOUTH AMERICA AND I WAS TO DITCH THE TWO-DAY LAYOVER AND GET MY BUTT UP TO PORTILLO BEFORE THE WEATHER CAME IN AND PREVENTED ANYONE FROM GETTING IN OR OUT.”

**I GOT THE CALL TWO HOURS BEFORE DEPARTING FOR SANTIAGO.** A storm was brewing in South America and I was to ditch the two-day layover and get my butt up to Portillo before the weather came in and prevented anyone from getting in or out. Better to be twiddling my thumbs in Portillo's lodge hotel when the storm cleared than salivating at the bottom of the world's scariest switchback road wanting to get up.

The Portillo Hotel rises from the top of the road like a giant, yellow, Lego building, resembling a mix of *The Shining* meets *The Love Boat* with its basement corridors that go on for miles leading to gymnasiums more suited to jolly hockey stick mistresses than mountain-climbing men. The hotel houses 400

beds and is the only place to stay, meaning the ski resort has no lift lines and plenty of fresh tracks to be had days after a storm. It's all very retro circa 1965, but I'm happy to be stuck in the time warp.

It even comes with a cruise director, Felipe, who dons a different Hawaiian shirt each day, the glare only matched by his toothy grin. Add a bar, a disco, a gym, an outside pool, hot tub, a mid-mountain den of iniquity known as Tio Bob's and the lambada-fueled La Pasada bar for the local staff and you've got a setting for mayhem.

I'm here with Chris "Dav" Davenport, Shane McConkey and their photographer, Frank Shine. Not that I'm name dropping. If I was I'd mention Chris Anthony, Mike Doug-

las and Wendy Fisher, who were no doubt salivating at the bottom of that now closed switchback road while me and "Dav" waited out the storm.

Dav has been running his Ski with the Superstars Camp for six years, bringing his big-mountain prowess to punters who pay the big bucks to be in his presence, although from where I was sitting, which incidentally was next to Shane McConkey, it is clearly an excuse for these long-time friends to get together for some turns and a good laugh. Hey, I'm far from complaining. If I can masquerade as a "friend" without appearing like a groupie for a week then I may be upgraded to Facebook status.▷



Chris Davenport and crew making good use of the in-house entertainment.



The Portillo Hotel. "The Shining meets The Love Boat".



“SKIING WITH [THE GUIDES] MAKES YOU A BETTER SKIER SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY FORCE YOU TO RAISE YOUR GAME. I IMAGINE THEM DISCUSSING MY SKIING SKILLS POST SKI DAY, PRAISING MY SUPER-SLEEK TURNS, MY GRACE, MY SPEED... THAT'S WHERE IT ENDS, IN MY IMAGINATION.

RACHAEL LETS HER IMAGINATION RUN WILD.

Mike Douglas still likes to put in a few turns on his original 1080s every season, just not on a powder day.

**DAV IS THE MAN. HE WON HIS FIRST WORLD EXTREME SKIING CHAMPIONSHIP IN 1996**, was on the podium in every Freeskiing World Tour event he entered in 2000, then won his second World championship in 2001. He's in 20 odd films from Warren Miller and Matchstick Productions, including his most recent film, *Claim*. If that's not enough in 2007 he climbed all 54 of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks and skied them all in one year.

Translated, the man is an animal, a "type A" style animal. McConkey? He's Peter Pan, a kid in men's clothing who likes to don a wing suit at every opportunity, happiest when throwing himself off iconic buildings, or Whistler's Peak to Peak Gondola or Norway's fiordlands. The man likes to fly, and when he lands, he lands on skis. Mike Douglas is the guy who gave birth to twin tips in 1997 with the Salomon 1080, Chris Anthony is in every Warren Miller film of note and Wendy Fisher is a numerous-times, World Extreme freeskiing champion. Clearly I'm in good company.

To be honest I am a little nervous. The only cliff I huck is the bar I am dancing on and these guys spend more time in the air than on the ground. I had heard about the Super C, a thousand vertical metre couloirs with a 35-47 degree slope that takes two hours to hike to and minutes to get down, with a no-fall zone 15-30 metres wide. Of course if you ragdoll from top to bottom, which had previously been done, then you're likely to shave a good minute or two off the ride down. I knew about the Australian snowboarder who died here two weeks prior in a cliff zone and I knew we too would be hiking it to get to the good stuff, which is why I had spent the past three months pounding the gym.

The Andes mountain range forms an amphitheatre of big-mountain skiing above the tree line around the hotel, which overlooks the lake that, when frozen, is possible to traverse. These soaring peaks reach an average height of 4000 metres and serve up some wicked rock-lined chutes, couloirs and super-steep pitches.

There's no hiking on day one when the storm clears on the Sunday. The 40 guests left in the hotel have the mountain and two metres of fresh snow all to ourselves with direct access from the lifts. The road is predictably closed, and apart from three other campers who also made the earlier trek, I'm skiing with McConkey and Dav on my own.

I don't claim to be worthy of a Matchstick Production, but it's obvious within two turns why McConkey and Dav have the reputation they do. Skiing with them makes you a better skier simply because they force you to raise your game. I imagine them discussing my skiing skills post ski day, praising my super-sleek turns, my grace, my speed, marvelling about this undiscovered talent from the land Down Under. That's where it ends, in my imagination. Truth is, they're begging to let it rip and I am no doubt holding them back.

Skiing bonds people; a shared love of snow turns strangers into mates within a few turns. The road doesn't open for days so the hotel starts flying up helicopter loads of folks dying to get the powder we've claimed for ourselves. Come Monday night the entire 20 campers and the rest of the "Superstars" are present and accounted for and talking it up in the bar. ▷



Shane McConkey stays grounded just long enough for the photographer to get the shot.



Chris Davenport. Doing his best to make you a better skier.

SKIING WITH THE STARS



Mike Douglas doesn't realise some structures are made for walking on, not skiing off.

**STAYING IN PORTILLO IS LIKE JOINING A PARTY.**

Breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner are served at the same time daily and you share the same table with your same group at every meal. It's likely the waiters who serve you will be dancing with you in La Pasada five hours after dinner when the hilarity, or Pisco Sour, truly kicks in.

The camp is mainly made up with Americans, some of them returning for their fourth or fifth time. There's a handful of ex-pat folks from Hong Kong and one Aussie who has come back for seconds. We're split into five groups and given a different "Superstar" to ski with each day. The Superstars give us tips on how to improve our skiing and how to conquer big-mountain terrain, but mostly we hike to pristine powder on steep gradients and inhale the greatness of the guide ahead of us.

Every skier has a "moment", a memory of a ski run that stays with them for ever. Hiking a 47-degree pitch with Chris Davenport, who makes it look like a walk in the

park, skis strapped to my backpack and five hulky male campers on my tail, we make it to the top, take some time to click into our bindings and look down. Below us is a powder face lined on the left with a rock band and endless to our right. Looking up we're guarded by the jagged Andes.

There's enough snow for all and we descend one at a time, whooping and hollering under the blue sky. Regrouping at the lowest rock band we high five in American style before Dav offers up the next face, less steep, wider and filled with ego-style snow. You can't look bad skiing this stuff, it practically skies itself. Just as we traverse at speed back to the empty piste a condor swoops down from the sky, as if on cue. It doesn't get better than this as we head straight to Tio Bob's sun-deck for a cerveza.

Come night-time there's a presentation from one of the Superstars about their own lives and career and then the mischief begins. Douglas and Mcconkey make a

good pair of practical jokers, stealing my camera to take snapshots of their nether regions with gymnastic prowess. I have the images on my hard drive, holding them as fodder for next year. It's cracking good fun and come midweek our group of 30 take over the mid-mountain restaurant for some seriously debauched time. Ski hard, party hard, that's the motto.

We don't make the Super C, or I don't anyway. A fall on day four has me spending more time in the medical clinic than on the slopes and Mike Douglas dubs me "the lodge flower". It's murder looking outside at the snow and sun knowing my crutches and my blown knee prevent me from getting among it, but it's not every day a girl can say she's had Chris Davenport, Chris Anthony, Shane Mcconkey and Mike Douglas on her bed. True, they came in to ask me to stay the remaining days for my drinking prowess alone. True, I had hoped it would be my skiing that would impress them the most. True, I will come back, it's just too good not to. >



Chris Davenport is king of the "turn and smile" manoeuvre.



Mike Douglas contemplates jumping off a bridge.

**“IT'S NOT EVERY DAY A GIRL CAN SAY SHE'S HAD CHRIS DAVENPORT, CHRIS ANTHONY, SHANE MCCONKEY AND MIKE DOUGLAS ON HER BED”**

RACHAEL CONSIDERS THE BRIGHT SIDE OF A KNEE INJURY.

**WHAT:** Ski with the Superstars  
**WHERE:** Portillo, Chile.  
[www.skiportillo.com](http://www.skiportillo.com)  
**WHEN:** August  
**HOW:** LAN Chile flies from Sydney to Santiago via Auckland daily with full flat beds in Premium Business, a full selection of Chilean wines in Business and ergonomically designed seats in economy. Call 1800 558 129. Travelplan have packages to Chile including flights with LAN, accommodation in Santiago and full ski weeks in Portillo with side trips to Valle Nevado. Call 1300 130 754  
**HOW MUCH:** \$US1950



SKIING WITH THE **stars**



“I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A RISK MANAGER, NOT A RISK-TAKER. SOMETIMES I HAVE PUSHED BEYOND AND OTHER TIMES I HAVE HELD BACK”.

CHRIS DAVENPORT



WITH THE SKIING☆☆☆STARS

RIDER // CHRIS DAVENPORT. LOCATION // PORTILLO, CHILLE. PHOTO // FRANK SHINE

POWDERHOUND PUTS CHRIS DAVENPORT UNDER THE MICROSCOPE.



PORTRAIT // CHRIS PONDELLA

**HOW DID YOU GET TO THE TOP?** My success as a pro skier is not because I'm the best, but because I am the best businessman who is a pro skier. I create opportunities. I now have four corporations. Ski product distribution, publishing, real estate and mountain sports.

I come from a family of ski racers. Both my sisters were in the US ski team. I worked my arse off, but could never break through to this level. So I partied like a rock star at Boulder College and forgot about it. I had a season ski pass at Vail and just went freeskiing.

I got a job as ski coach at Snowmass and just kept working, not thinking more than six months ahead. I get a call from Shane and he says you have to come down to the X Treme ski thing in Crested Butte in 1994. It was new, so I got a week off and went and entered. I am a competitor, it's in my blood and I made the finals.

Went to Las Lenas in 1995 for the South American Extreme ski championships. I won the finals on the final day, came from behind. If I can win one run I can win an event. So I sold my pick-up truck in 1996 and bought tickets to Alaska and Europe.

**WHAT WAS YOUR TURNING POINT?** I got invited to Valdez World Extremes with Shane McConkey, Dean Cummings and Dave Swanwick and this is where I first met Doug Coombs. It was my first time in a helicopter, first time heli skiing, first time in Alaska. I was nervous. When we were there it was hard pack, super cold and brutal. Over

three days I skied game plan. The second day I won and I was in the lead and third day I had a good run. They didn't announce the results and we're in the Valdez convention centre at this banquet dinner and they announce the top five and it was Shane, Dean, Grant and Kent, so I thought I must have got sixth place, but then they said "first place Aspen, Colorado." It was the most emotional moment up to that point of my. I called my wife, Jesse, bawling on the phone.

I had no sponsors so I flew back on the airplane and wrote a business plan of how I was going to turn this into a profession, how I will turn it into something so that I don't have to have a real job for a long time. What's the ultimate list of sponsors – what are the skills that one needs to have to make it as a pro?

When I got to the peaks of Alaska I thought this is what I have been looking for my entire life as a skier. I went from a two-dimensional skier to a three-dimensional skier. I stepped up my game, did avalanche courses.

**IT'S A RISKY BUSINESS FOR A MAN WITH KIDS?** People say now you have kids you have to be more careful, but I have always been a risk manager, not a risk-taker. Sometimes I have pushed beyond and other times I have held back. I'm more knowledgeable now. People perceive what I do as extremely risky. It's a roll of the dice, you're making that choice. You can have a PHD in snow science but, 100 days in the backcountry you are upping your

chances. It's a numbers game.

**HAVE YOU EVER BEEN SCARED?** I haven't had terrifying moments, I have had sad moments. In 2006 when I was climbing and skiing the 14,000-foot peaks of Colorado I came back to my truck with my cell phone lit up. Doug Coombs had died. He was an inspiration and mentor for me. I learnt a lot from him. He was super careful, smarter than everyone else. When he was killed I had to look inside myself and ask if I should be doing it. He was going in to save a friend I had been with Doug filming *Steep* and six days later he was dead.

**WHAT'S NEXT OUTSIDE OF SKIING?** In 2005 I had an epiphany, I had done everything – I had won everything I wanted, been in all the movies and wondering what else is out there. I came up with the idea to climb and ski the Colorado 14ers and I put together a budget, this is what I am doing. I am going to write a book about it and do a film about it.

It spawned my "adventuretainment" speaking career. I talk about risk management and how it pertains to business. First you must eliminate the risk. Don't ski the line that if you fall it will be your end. Then tolerate the risk. I understand the conditions for this couloir, this could slide, but I will tolerate that because there is a way out. Then mitigate the risk – ski patrol throw bombs to spread the risk out. So I take this knowledge and apply it to business solutions with big corporate. It's another way I have evolved from skier to MC to mountaineer to businessman. **PH**