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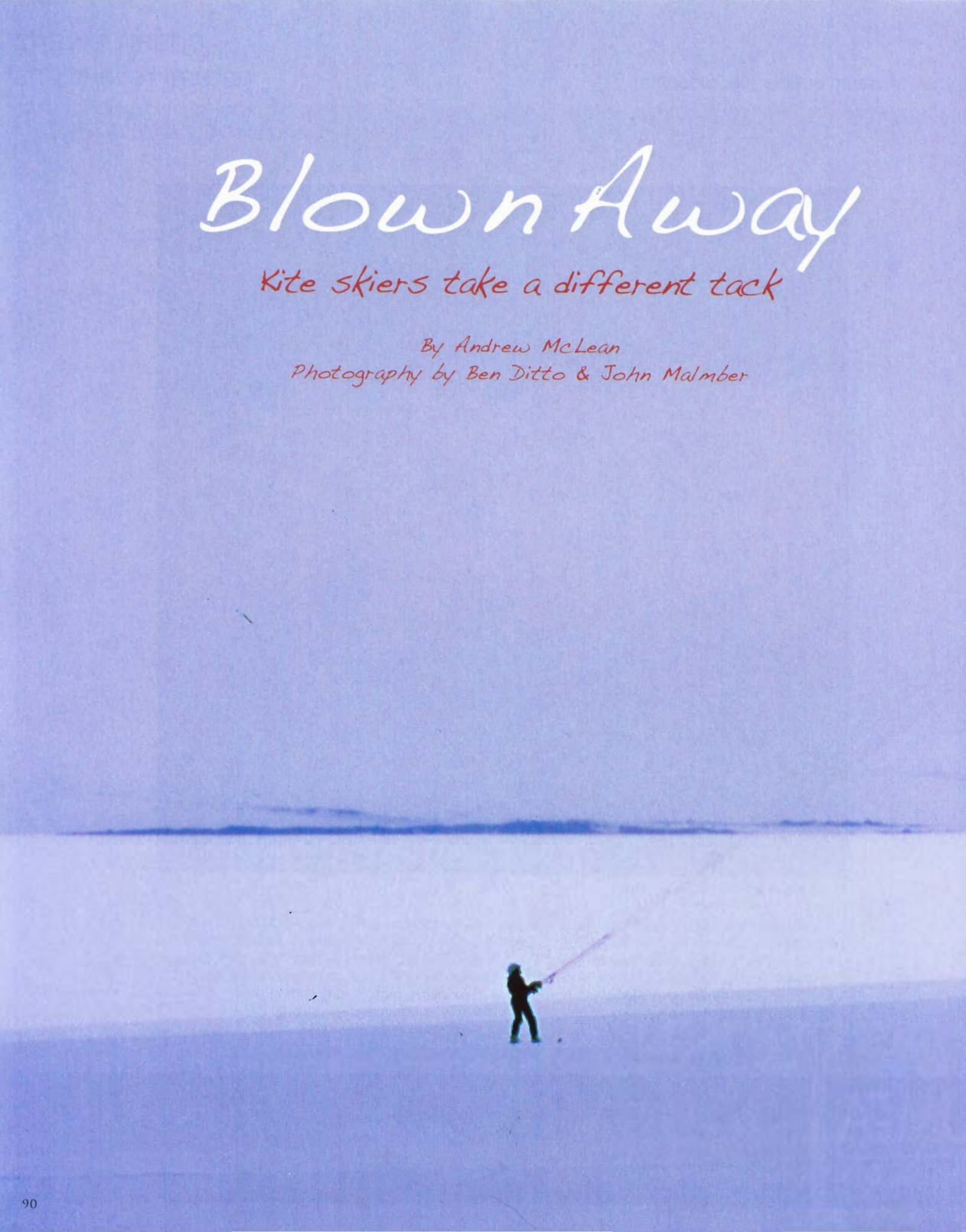
Blown Away

Kite skiers take a different tack

By Andrew McLean
Photography by Ben Ditto & John Malmber



MY FIRST SNOW-KITING EXPERIENCE yanked me out of my boots, inflicted an instant addiction, and redefined my idea of skiable terrain. This eventful moment occurred at the Patriot Hills base camp in western Antarctica when two Dutch explorers arrived fresh and smiling after covering the 1,000-mile trek from the South Pole in just 16 days—instead of 60.

Marc Cornelissen and Wilco van Rooijen showed up at base camp behind kites about as big as one side of a family-size tent. "We were being lifted in the air with our sleds at times and going very fast," Cornelissen told me. Did I want to try?

After laying the kite out and getting a five-minute tutorial, I envisioned my childhood kite flying experiences—a slight tug, the kite spins in circles, it crashes, and then you throw it away. Instead, popping the snow kite in the air was more akin to performing a dry-dock waterskiing start. The acceleration was instant, and I was immediately blasting across the frozen landscape, wishing I had buckled my boots, put on my goggles, and zipped up my jacket. I was flying out of control across Antarctica but having too much fun to stop. Eventually I crashed the kite. I tightened up my act, relaunched the kite, and raged back to camp under a full head of steam.

"Do you want to sell this?" I shouted to Cornelissen above the wind. He shook his head "No" with a big grin. Thus began my seven-year quest to build and test snow kites, and to find places to combine kiting and skiing on my own.

One of the more intriguing aspects of kite skiing is that you don't need mountains to do it. Suddenly, any place with snow and wind, such as South Dakota, becomes skiable terrain. To highlight the experience: Instead of getting powder face shots just once per turn, you get a sustained nonstop blast for as long as your legs can hold out in one direction, and then the same thing on the way back. The short learning curve and immense exhilaration almost always lead to the same first-time question: "Where do I get one of these things?"

Andrew McLean catches the wind in Patagonia.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN DITTO

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One of the prime sources of kites in North America is the husband-and-wife team of Brian and Heather Schenck, who own and run Windzup in Mount Pleasant, Utah, population 2,800. Though the town is better known as a mining community, the Schencks have unearthed Mount Pleasant as, according to Brian, "home to some of the country's best snow-kiting and power-kiting opportunities." More specifically, the Utah Skyline Drive Snowkiting Area is right in the Schencks' backyard.

Considered one of Utah's most scenic highways, Skyline Drive winds along the 9,000-foot-high crest of central Utah's Wasatch Plateau and is accessible year-round. The kiting area's south side provides a long, gentle slope that keeps winds smooth and steady as they climb up to the summit, where the north side drops away dramatically into shady slopes that keep the snow fresh and soft. "The winds blow between 5 and 15 miles per hour five days out of the week," says Brian Schenck. It is an important consideration for a wind-powered sport.

Two years ago when the Schencks decided to make a full-time business out of kiting, they looked all over the United States for suitable locations. They chose Utah, Brian Schenck said, "because it has the three key elements you need for kiting: wind, mountains, and, as the license plates say, the greatest snow on earth." They also considered parts of Alaska and Montana, but the immediate access to the mountains and Utah's central location made it an ideal place for them and their warehouse of toys. Along with Skyline Drive, Strawberry Reservoir near Heber and Powder Mountain Ski Area in Ogden form the top three kiting areas in Utah.

For backcountry enthusiasts, the idea of kiting up a mountain and then skiing down is an elusive goal because mountain winds are notoriously fickle and turbulent. Dubbed "kite mountaineering" by Salt Lake City resident Lorne Glick, the experience is often a matter of extreme frustration or extreme terror. Two years ago, after struggling with barely enough wind to move, Glick latched onto an updraft that carried him almost up and over the top of Red Baldy peak in Little Cottonwood Canyon in a matter of seconds. "It was sobering. Things happen fast, and you can be lifted before you know it and then be too high to let go," recalls Glick.

KITING HAS A SHORT HISTORY and a mixed pedigree. In the 1980s, people began experimenting with hybrid parachutes to pull them uphill and went as far as to attempt the 14,163-foot Mount Wrangell in Alaska entirely by wind power. On flatter ground, Arctic travelers used their tent flies as makeshift kites to help pull them across the vast distances before realizing that small, dedicated "sails" worked even better—as proven by Reinhold Messner's 1989 crossing of Antarctica. Though early kites had power, they lacked effective methods of steering and left the user at the mercy of the wind direction.

In 1997, Belgians Alain Hubert and Dixie Dansercoer set a new world record for the longest crossing ever made on foot and skis when they covered 2,438 miles in 99 days across Antarctica with the help of innovative power kites. The kites were known as "NASA wings," because they had been developed by NASA as steerable parachutes for the reentry of Gemini space capsules. As products of a government-funded company, the NASA designs were available free to the public and soon found their way over to Dutch kiting enthusiasts, who modified them into versions of steerable, controllable personal kites.

Meanwhile, in the mid-1980s, the Legaignoux brothers from France had designed and patented a kite for kite surfing that used inflatable spars to help give it a more rigid, aerodynamic shape, as well as to keep it from sinking. This style of kite has been refined to an amazing degree of control, power, and safety and is the most popular type of traction kite in use today.

Around the same time, adventurers in England were developing a kite that was halfway between the NASA wing and the inflatables. Known as a "foil kite," these were soft kites that took on an

Kites typically can propel skiers 80–100 miles a day—with the current record at 275 miles in 24 hours. Here, McLean cranks up the speed across Patagonia.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN DITTO

PHOTOGRAPH JOHN MALMBER

Mountain winds are notoriously fickle and turbulent. Dubbed "kite mountaineering" by Salt Lake City resident Lorne Glick, the experience is often a matter of extreme frustration or extreme terror.

aerodynamic shape as the wind filled up individual cells. These kites were developed for pulling three-wheeled buggies but became popular with snow kiters because they had more control than a NASA wing and didn't pop when they hit the firm snow like inflatable kites. The foil kites are similar in design and shape to today's paragliders.

As designs evolved, sport kites in general became known as "power kites" or "traction kites" and were viewed as engines capable of pulling enthusiasts around on skis, snowboards, wheeled buggies, surfboards, and even rollerblades.

AS KITE DESIGNS PROGRESSED, so did the skills and ambitions of the riders. Twenty years ago, just getting pulled around was enough, but for today's riders, even the sky is not the limit. In what is called a "power stroke," by timing the sweep of a kite with a jumping off of a wave or berm of snow, kiters can extended their airborne hang time for hundreds of feet or more. As Pascal Bouglakow, a top French kiter, says, "Sometimes it is nice to go out for a big jump, or perhaps a small flight." On level ground, kites will eventually sink and return to earth, but in mountainous terrain, contact with the earth is becoming optional: Kiters skim over slopes, touching down only occasionally. For supremely talented and bold kiters, terrain has almost become a nonissue: They float over 100-foot cliffs, glide across road cuts, and casually fly over crevasses.

Cross-country snow-kiting feats are equally impressive. In 1888, Fridtjof Nansen crossed the Greenland ice cap on skis from east to west over a distance of 294 miles in 43 days. In July 2005, three young Norwegians using kites traversed Greenland south to north, covering three times Nansen's distance in less than half his time. On the last nine days of their trip, they averaged 130 miles per day and set a kiting world-record distance of 275 miles in 24 hours. Using kites and prevailing wind patterns, Arctic travel has become a matter of sailing, rather than trudging, across the Earth's frozen regions.

There's nothing slow about taking off with a kite ski. It's like a dry-dock waterskiing start. Brian Schenck, co-owner of Windzup in Mount Pleasant, rides near Skyline Drive on the Wasatch Plateau, just by Highway 31.

In its early years, kiting went from obscurity to infamy by being listed at the top of the most-dangerous-sports list. In a sport with very few participants, there were a relatively high number of accidents and fatalities. At the time, kiting was learned by trial and error, and in the case of kite surfing, numerous accidents happened when people launched oversized kites into onshore winds and were immediately lifted up into power lines, smashed into buildings, or dragged through trees.

"Education has been essential, and people are learning how and when to fly nowadays," says Brian Schenck, who also runs a kiting school. "Nobody has been killed snow kiting yet, and the kites are becoming more forgiving. The brake systems are improving, the safety leashes are more intuitive, and there is a big emphasis on education now."

KITING IS SIMPLE TO LEARN but not without its perils. Getting the kite inflated and moving forward is easy—going in the direction you want and avoiding trees, roads, and fences is not. Looking back at my early kiting experiences, I'm surprised that I didn't get hurt and that I kept at it. Although I don't wear a helmet for downhill skiing, I always do when kiting.

Like golf, kiting is a quiver sport. You can get by with just one golf club or one kite, but the more, the merrier. It helps to have small, medium, and large kites for different wind conditions. The ideal is to be "powered up," which can happen in high winds with a small kite, such as a 2.3-meter kite, or in light winds with a large kite, such as a 15-meter kite. The end result is the same: getting pulled.

The basic components of a kiting setup are the kite, control lines, a control bar, and a harness with a hook-in point. The kite flies about 100 feet away from the user, who is connected to it by control lines, which are generally Spectra cord with a 300-pound breaking strength. The control lines are connected to a control bar, which is similar in size and operation to a bicycle handlebar—steer

"Nobody has been killed snow kiting yet, and the kites are becoming more forgiving. The brake systems are improving, the safety leashes are more intuitive, and there is a big emphasis on education now." —Brian Schenck

right, and the kite goes to the right. Although it is possible to just hold onto the control bar, a better method is to clip it into a harness hook (windsurfing style) and transfer the pulling power to your torso. There are many variations on this theme, including brake lines, depowering bars, and individual handle grips, but the basic operation is all the same.

Ideally there will be enough wind for the user to lock the kite into one position and get pulled along. If not, it is possible to work the kite through a series of figure-eight loops which, like paddling a boat or pushing a skateboard, will generate extra power. Skis or snowboards work equally well for kite skiing, and choosing one or the other is a matter of personal preference. Once you are up and moving, kiting requires your full attention to navigate and control the kite, so your ride of choice needs to be second nature to you. Statistically, the average kiter is a 25- to 40-year-old male, but the sport is slowly morphing into a family affair, with kids from 7 to 80 years old getting into it.

Since first getting yanked off the snow in Antarctica, I now get as excited about skiing on a frozen lake as I do about descending down a big peak. Kiting adds a new dimension to skiing while reducing the need for the mountain's vertical dimension. As if it were a snowmobile that fits in your pocket and never runs out of gas, kiting has opened up remote areas like Baffin Island, the Southern Patagonia Ice Cap, and the vastness of Greenland to skiers and snowboarders in search of adventure. All you have to do is remember to tighten your helmet, buckle your boots, and hang on. WJ