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# Skiing Up the Slopes, Powered by the Wind

SEARCH 1



Tom Smart for The New York Times

Harnessing the force of the mountain wind, a skier glides over Central Utah. The relatively new sport of snowkiting uses canopy-shaped airfoils to pull and lift skiers and boarders over the snow.

By **DAVID ARNOLD**

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THE early-season blizzard had unleashed near-whiteout conditions along Skyline Drive some 9,800 oxygen-thin feet above sea level. The wind had flags in the straight-out jitters. Single-digit temperatures had fingers struggling to tie a simple knot.



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But did these folks care?

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Some on skis, others on snowboards - all 100 or so devotees who had come here to Sanpete County, Utah - were propelled by giant multicolored kites. And none of them

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Tom Smart for The New York Times  
Ken Lucas, 48, plans to snowkite up Mount St. Helens this spring.

were about to let a little weather get in the way of winter's newest extreme sport.

"It's an addiction," said Salvador Jeronimo of Salt Lake City. "I'll be out here till it's dark."

Snowkiters, they call themselves. They can cross plains and ascend and descend steep hills. They can plod at a jogger's pace or accelerate to 50 miles an hour or better, depending on the kite's size and the wind. They can go upwind or downwind, jump almost 100 feet in the air, slip in a spread eagle, land with a pirouette and then carry on.

The sport has dispensed with the need for gravity - and the ski-lift ticket for that matter - creating what may be winter's ultimate free ride.

To promote snowkiting, several organizations are holding free clinics this winter throughout snow country. The sessions include instruction, the use of small training kites and demonstrations by some of the veterans - as much as anyone can be called a veteran of something just a half-dozen years old.

The genie behind the power is a highly directional, canopy-shaped airfoil borrowed directly from kiteboarding, the sport's waterborne older sibling. How fast is snowkiting growing? Five years ago, Ozone Kites, a leading, French-based manufacturer of snowkites, sold about 400 to Americans, according to Robert Whittall, one of the company's designers. Last year, annual sales reached 2,000. By the end of this year, Mr. Whittall expects American sales to double.

"Until now," he said, "what else could folks on the Great Plains do for fun except burn gas in snowmobiles? We are sitting on what may be the biggest revolution in winter sport."

Benjamin Franklin did not start this revolution, but he may have been the first to express kiting's potential for an adrenaline rush. "I found, that, lying on my back and holding the stick in my hands, I was drawn along the surface of the water in a very agreeable manner," Franklin wrote in 1773 to Barbeu Dubourg, who translated his works into French, about a childhood memory of kiting on a pond. Franklin went but one way: downwind like an umbrella. The kite developed for paragliding and introduced to kiteboarding in the late 80's can take a rider upwind to within about 60 degrees of the oncoming wind direction.

It is not clear exactly when the kiteboarder emerged from the water to explore snow. Most industry representatives point to the French in 1999. The advantages became apparent

quickly, according to Bill Myers, a resident of Wilson, N.Y., a town outside Buffalo, and a snowkite board designer.

"On the water, if you stop, you sink," Mr. Myers explained. "You need much more power from a bigger kite. And that can be unnerving." Generally, kiteboarding takes a week to learn; snowkiting for someone already comfortable on skis or a board takes just a few hours.

Mr. Myers was one of the devotees (there were first-timers as well) who came to Utah on a December weekend to attend the first of several events this season sponsored by Ozone Kites USA and Windzup, a product distributor. The playground was open, hilly terrain on a pass in the Wasatch Mountains.

Utah was in the midst of a marathon snow dump. The weather was so hostile at almost two miles above sea level that one snowplow driver predicted no one would show up. Wrong.

At 9 a.m. Saturday, more than 20 cars had parked at the top of Skyline Drive. With heaters cranking, debates raged over whether to proceed. Was there enough visibility to see kites 90 feet overhead? Was there enough visibility to avoid collisions? The only people moving were smoke-breathing members of the Windzup crew creating a small base camp of tents.

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