

KING OF THE MOUNTAIN

Dave Hahn has summited Mount Everest 15 times, more than any other Westerner. Stephanie Pearson joins the modest mountaineering legend on his day job: patrolling the slopes of Taos, New Mexico

TOUGH AT THE TOP

Dave Hahn scales Mount Everest in Nepal, the world's highest mountain in terms of altitude — and the ultimate challenge for climbers.

DAN CHEHAYL

“I can come back from the Himalayas or Antarctica and think I’m a big deal — but I can still get my ass kicked at Taos on any given day,” Dave Hahn says.

It’s a good day for an ass-kicking. The sky above Taos Ski Valley is brilliant blue and the snow on the ground is deep. I’m surprised to find Hahn, a veteran ski patroller and world-famous mountain guide, on duty at the top of Chair 2. At age 55, Hahn has reached the summit of Mount Everest 15 times — more than any non-Sherpa climber. He’s also guided clients to the summit of Mount Rainier “somewhere between 270 and 275 times,” he guesses, Antarctica’s Vinson Massif 35 times, Denali 22 times, Kilimanjaro five times, Cho Oyu twice and a handful of the major peaks in the Swiss and French Alps.

Hahn is such a legend that it’s hard to fathom how he still has time to hold down a day job. But every winter between guide gigs for the past 26 years, Hahn has risen before the sun to bomb avalanche-prone slopes, rescue injured skiers and patrol alongside a crew of 50 experts, some of whom have worked at this famously steep and challenging Southern Rockies resort at least a decade longer than he has.

“We have a nice relationship, me and the ski patrol,” Hahn tells me as passing locals give him a subtle, yet reverential, bro nod. Six-foot-two and bareheaded with a shock of wavy hair, he’s easy to recognize. “Even if I return from guiding in Antarctica the day before, the patrol knows they can call on me and I’ll be up at 5 a.m.,” he says. “There’s a lot of pride on the line. If you don’t finish your avalanche route to everybody’s satisfaction, you get roasted for it.”

Since there are no imminent emergencies, Hahn agrees to take a run with me. Part of his job, after all, is to make sure skiers like me don’t get buried in a tree well. We boot-pack up through pines, into the piercing sunshine and across Highline Ridge, pausing to grasp the 360-degree view of the Rio Grande Valley to the west and deep bowls of powder to the north and east. Hahn passes skied-off runs like Juarez before we drop into Tresckow, a steep, treed glade that Taos Ski Valley’s founder Ernie Blake, who escaped Germany in 1938, named after Henning von Tresckow, a German Army officer who tried to assassinate Hitler.

“My patrol buddies love making fun of the way I

ski,” says Hahn before he slices through a tight line of trees. “I’m the most uncoordinated climber and skier you’ve ever met.”

I’m not buying Hahn’s humility. The man was part of the team that found George Mallory’s body on Mount Everest. Among his many accolades is a Citizen’s Award for Bravery from the U.S. Department of the Interior for a heroic rescue he performed on Mount Rainier — even after the rescue helicopter crashed into the mountain. There’s got to be some good reason Hahn is still alive after everything he’s survived. So I ask a co-worker what makes him so good at what he does.

“Dave has done enough in his life to warrant an ego, but he doesn’t have one at all,” says Malia Reeves, who has worked alongside Hahn at Taos for three years. “He takes his job seriously, but he doesn’t take himself seriously. Other patrollers joke about his celebrity,” she adds, “but he handles it in a funny, self-deprecating way.” As for expertise, “Dave is someone you want along on a difficult mission.”

When pressed, Hahn does admit that he has honed a few crucial guiding skills while working in dangerous, high-pressure situations. “I think it’s my empathy for what novices are going through in these environments,” he tells me. “I remember just what it was like coming new into these worlds of big mountains and skiing.”

Hahn’s own introduction to the mountains came through his father, Ronald Hahn, a former Yosemite



MOUNTAIN MAN
From top: Hahn on patrol at Taos Ski Valley in New Mexico; summiting Denali in Alaska, a feat he has accomplished 22 times.

rock climber from the Bay Area who started him out as a kid hiking in the Sierras. “I always remember crying,” Hahn laughs. “We’d go hiking, and he’d make me go uphill and then downhill. What a bastard!”

The father-son outings became more epic by the year — Hahn’s first two Denali trips were with his dad. As recently as 2011, Hahn returned to California with his then-78-year-old partner to thru-hike Tenaya Canyon, known as the Bermuda Triangle of Yosemite. He wrote about the experience in 2012 in an *Outside* magazine story aptly titled *How I Nearly Killed my Father*.

Hahn’s love for New Mexico, however, came from his mother’s side of the family. They’d settled in Albuquerque in the 1930s. “Some of my earliest memories are these road trips to New Mexico,” Hahn tells me as we ride Lift 4 to the base of Kachina, a steep peak formerly accessible only by a 45-minute boot-packing slog. Last year, however, Taos’ new owner, Louis Bacon, built a chairlift up the side that reaches 12,481 feet, the highest elevation of any triple chair in North America.

“Even from my earliest years, I remember being fascinated by this state. I was blown away by the mountains, the physical beauty of the area, and the long history of the Spanish and the Indians,” Hahn says. “When I got out of college I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to go to New Mexico.”

Hahn moved from upstate New York to Albuquerque, then quickly migrated north to teach skiing at Angel Fire Resort. But he spent all of his days off work skiing at Taos. In 1985 Ernie Blake hired him as a ski instructor. In 1991 Hahn earned a coveted spot on ski patrol. Three decades later he’s just another patroller, even if he does live in a renovated adobe house on the same road as Julia Roberts and Donald Rumsfeld.

“A continually cool thing about patrolling is that when I come across someone on the mountain who’s in trouble, they don’t care about my resume,” Hahn tells me before he skis off to deal with a distress call. “They are focused on whether I can help them then and there. That’s a good grounding for me.” ☀

