

Want to explore the high peaks of Colorado's San Juan Mountains? Let gritty guide Joe Ryan take your trip over the top.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRUCE KIRKBY

# ROAM ON THE RANGE

**JOE RYAN WAITS ON THE SIDE** of Highway 62, leaning against a mud-splattered pickup. It's high noon in Ridgway, a windswept town perched beneath southwestern Colorado's staggeringly picturesque San Juan Mountains. This is cowboy country, home to working ranches, blood-red sandstone and John Wayne's 1969 classic *True Grit*. Butch Cassidy's first bank heist took place a stone's throw away.

As weathered and gritty as this town and his truck are, Joe has sparkling eyes and a narrow waist, which belies his 61 years. Despite nearly four decades and more than a thousand trips in these mountains, Joe remains seriously stoked about the journey we're about to take: a 50-kilometre ski traverse along

the entire length of the Sneffels Range, with the network of rudimentary backcountry huts he has built in the nearby peaks providing shelter at night. "We've got everything!" he had hollered into the phone the first time we talked. "Gentle trails! Glades! Advanced terrain! And lots of really, really steep stuff! And you'll never see another set of tracks."

The San Juans, and the Sneffels in particular, have a reputation for unstable, avalanche-prone snow, which tends to keep some folks away. Safety-conscious skiers who do explore the area enjoy a rare combination: big wilderness and utter solitude half a day's ski (or hike) from an interstate highway.

"Check that out!" Joe points west to a precipitous peak,



Although the valleys in southwestern Colorado's cowboy country are bare and brown in spring, there's still plenty of snow in the Sneffels Range (LEFT) for adventurers who want to explore the alpine backcountry. Visitors can travel on their own, or they can hire colourful guides such as Joe Ryan (ABOVE).



After rendezvousing with his guide and stocking up on supplies in the mud-splattered mountain town of Ridgway, the author heads into the high country. People who venture into the area, he writes, enjoy a rare combination: big wilderness and utter solitude half a day's ski (or hike) from an interstate highway.

spindrift billowing from its summit. "That's Hayden. We'll stand on top tomorrow." He might as well be telling me that we're going to the moon, but before I can ask how the heck we are going to get up the intimidating mountain, Joe trots off toward Ridgway's only market. We need to hit the trail, but first, we need food. A seemingly random mix of rice, pasta and tea bags is quickly piling up in our wobbly shopping cart.

"I like to cook bacon and eggs for breakfast," Joe announces abruptly, in an unusually loud voice. He has spotted an immaculate couple standing beside the gourmet coffee display. They could have stepped out of a Ralph Lauren advertisement, and perhaps they did — the fashion designer owns 8,000 hectares in the foothills behind town. "But without mutts on the trip to lick things clean," Joe continues, "we'll have to do our own dishes. I hate that. Better get granola."

Not sure whether to laugh or be appalled, the couple shuffles away nervously. Joe is already grabbing fistfuls of smoked sausage from the cooler.

**THE HIGH PEAKS** of the Sneffels Range rise straight up from the rolling ranchland beyond Last Dollar Ranch on the outskirts of Ridgway. We park at the end of a dirt road and affix climbing skins to our skis.

"Got a first-aid kit?" I ask as we shoulder our packs.

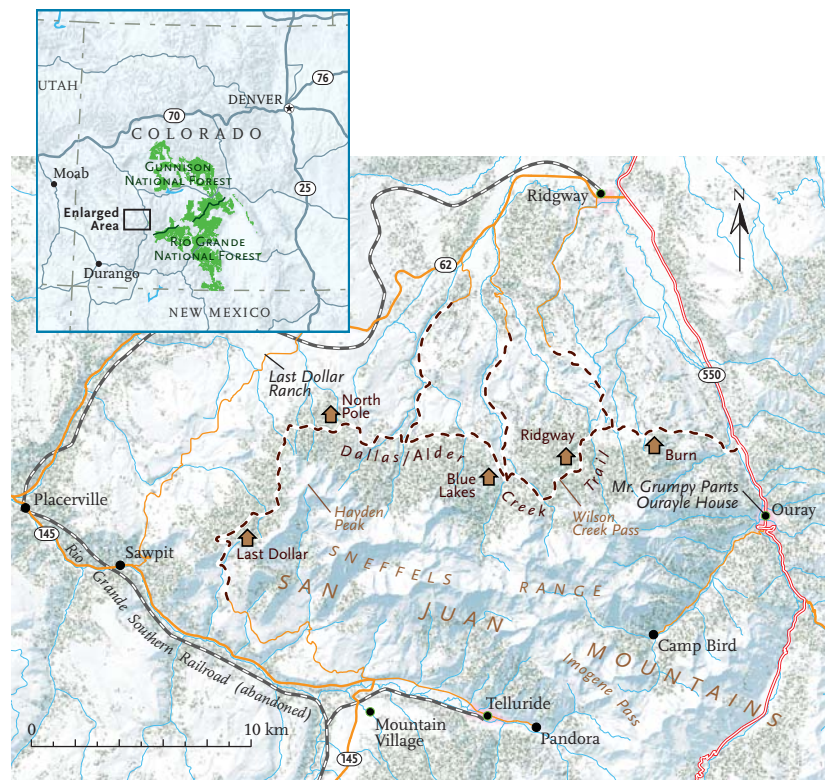
"Duct tape and thumb," Joe smiles — and then we are off.

Following snake-rail fences past aging barns, we enter great stands of aspen. The pale tan bark of their endlessly repeating trunks is luminous, reminiscent of a snake's belly. The front country we ski through is rapidly being subdivided and colonized by the wealthy owners of extravagant vacation homes. For an hour, we pass one vaulted timber structure

after another, their grand glass windows all dark and empty.

The trail winds along the base of the peaks, crusty and fast in the late spring. Blazes and occasional blue diamonds mark the way through groves of weathered spruce. Our packs are light, containing only sleeping bags, clothing and food for five days; everything else can be found in the huts. It takes us five relatively effortless hours to reach the first.

Like all five of Joe's ski huts, the North Pole is a simple five-metre-by-five-metre green plywood structure, designed to come apart into "backpack-able" loads. For the first decade of their existence, starting in 1987, Joe was required to remove some of his huts every spring from the U.S. Forest Service land where they stand, only to carry them back in and rebuild them on the same spot come fall. This herculean task was per-



MAP: CHRIS BRACKLEY/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC



A trip with Joe Ryan will take you along wide-open ridges (ABOVE) and through aspen groves (BELOW) where trees are carved with messages dating back more than 100 years.

formed by Joe and a partner, under bent back. Today, he has permission to leave them standing year round. Inside we find bunks, mattresses for eight, a woodstove, propane burners for cooking, lamps, pots and utensils.

A 1983 skiing trip on Banff National Park's Wapta Icefield, where he enjoyed travelling light between the Alpine Club of Canada's huts, inspired Joe to create his own system in the San Juans. At that time, there were only a handful of commercial backcountry ski huts in Colorado. The last decade has seen an explosion, and roughly 75 huts now dot the state. Most are located in the north. The famous 10th Mountain Division system, with 29 huts stretching between Aspen and Vail, is so popular that some reservations are now made via annual lottery. "Those are half-million-dollar chalets built on concrete foundations," Joe laughs. "We operate in the Third World down here."

"HOW MANY TIMES have you climbed Hayden?" I ask the next morning as Joe weaves up a forested ridge.

"Not enough," he grunts, although I am sure the number must be north of 50.





‘I like to cook bacon and eggs for breakfast. But without mutts on the trip to lick things clean we’ll have to do our own dishes. I hate that. Better get granola.’

Joe’s 27-year-old daughter Kelly arrived during the night and will travel with us for the rest of the trip. She’s a chip off the old block: a seasoned mountain guide, a veteran of serious expeditions and, like her father, desperately understated. Reaching the treeline, we strap our skis to our packs and climb, kicking steps up gullies and clambering over bands of rock. Ferocious winds make balance difficult.

“Polished white marble,” Joe yells, pointing to the wind-scoured snow at our feet. “Don’t worry. On the other side, we’ll find powder.”

And indeed he is right. After reaching the top — “just a ski pole above 13,000 feet,” Joe says — we drop onto a massive and quiet snowfield. Swooping downward through billowing snow, we skirt cliffs, descend treed chutes and drop more than 900 metres. Two hours later, we’re back at the door of the North Pole, where we spend a second night.

Joe’s huts are on the Dallas and Alder Creek trails, which connect the gold rush towns of Ouray and Telluride. Originally stamped down by the Utes (southern Indians from whom the name Utah is derived), this relatively gentle and winding route was often passable months before the shorter but higher Imogene Pass. The Dallas and Alder Creek trails saw heavy use



Even without dish-duty dogs on the trip, Kelly Ryan snuck some bacon in her pack for breakfast (LEFT) at the North Pole hut (ABOVE). Her dad built the rustic shelters in the San Juan Hut System nearly 25 years ago, inspired by a ski trip to Banff National Park and the pleasure of travelling light between the Alpine Club of Canada’s backcountry huts.



The route's tame start at the Last Dollar Ranch (BELOW) belies the climb up the Mongoose (ABOVE), a 600-metre ski run pinched between house-high rock walls.

until the early 1900s, when the Rio Grande Southern Railroad took over the business of carrying supplies into the frontier towns and carting out gold and silver.

Aspen along the trail are engraved with the land's history, their bark a historical message board. I had first assumed the carvings to be the handiwork of beer-packing youth, but Joe explains otherwise. Many date back a century or more. Some are practical messages: "taking horses home" or "bull in summer pasture." We pass a tree used to record the snow depth every April for nearly 100 years. A series of notches soars above the trail, the highest three metres overhead. "This has been a very, very low snow year so far," Joe says.

The trees are also adorned with the touching odes of forlorn shepherds. "Basque farmers were brought across the ocean and sent up to these isolated forests for six months at a time," Joe explains, "to watch the flocks of wealthy landlords." It must have been desperately lonely, and rumour has it that some shepherds eventually lost the ability to talk. One missed his sweetheart so dreadfully that he carved her delicate naked likenesses into a string of aspen across the range, with her name and the date, Rose 1890, visible in cursive script below.

After the Second World War, these mesas and highlands were deserted as farmers migrated en masse to cities. Few people trekked around here until the mid-1970s, around the time Joe arrived, a wandering guide, miner and logger drawn by the big peaks and thick snow pack. He built a home on the mesa below the Sneffles Range and spent every spare minute exploring the mountains.

From North Pole we ski on to the Blue Lakes hut, enjoying panoramic views of the entire range en route. Overnight, an unexpected dump revitalizes the waning winter. The next morning, under sparkling blue skies, we press on toward the Ridgway hut, past

snow-laden conifers, down trackless white trails. The corn snow and exposed rocks that were once underfoot are forgotten. Our minds are now on one thing: fresh tracks.

**ON OUR FIFTH AND FINAL DAY**, Joe, Kelly and I ascend Wilson Creek Pass and climb into the open alpine, following a narrowing ridge. The surrounding peaks, plastered with rime from the recent storm, appear Himalayan in stature. During a pause for lunch, I ask where we are headed. Joe pioneered nearly all the ski descents from this particular ridge and named each steep gulley after a poisonous snake, to remind people of the lurking danger. He points out the Cobra (named for a wide





Joe Ryan swooshes down from Hayden Peak. Despite “polished white marble” at the top, most of the runs in the Sneffels Range are all powder when skiers drop down into the gullies and snowfields below. “That was damn near religious,” Joe said after one such descent.

upper bowl, reminiscent of a hood), the Black Mamba, the White Mamba and the Sidewinder. Last but not least comes the Mongoose, a 600-metre drop pinched between house-high rock walls just 10 metres apart. “That, my friend,” he smiles, “is where we’re headed.”

Although not particularly difficult when viewed through the lens of today’s couloir skiing, I have never attempted anything like it before. Any concern must be tossed aside, however, because Joe and Kelly are climbing again. We ascend a steep gully, clinging to holds in the rock. After scrambling up an exposed chimney — “this part always scares me,” Joe says, a rare, solemn expression on his face — we reach the top of the Mongoose.

“This is going to be great!” he says. “Great!” Joe is giddy as we edge our way into the chute. His exuberance is confusing. The snow underfoot is bulletproof. I delicately click into my skies, cautious of the yawning drop below.

“Don’t worry,” Joe says, as if reading my mind. “One or two turns and it’ll get softer. Trust me. You ready?”

I nod. We check our avalanche beacons and then Joe is off, skis skittering across the hard surface. He makes one heaving jump turn near the rock wall and then *woooooomph* — powder billows over his shoulders. Down and down Joe drops, turn after turn, until he is nothing but a speck. Hoots of joy echo upwards. He keeps going, out of the chute and into the huge snow bowl below, stopping at last by the edge of the trees.

Kelly nods. “You’re next!”

As I float through thigh-deep powder, each turn effortless, my

concerns are instantly forgotten. Time slows. A gentle river of snow surrounds me, flows with me, released with every turn. Rock walls float past. Then suddenly I am out, into the sun, and my turns open up. I follow Joe’s tracks until I stand beside him.

“That was the best run of year!” he gushes. “Possibly the best ever.” I feel drunk. Giddy. Then Kelly is beside us and together we launch downward again, through open glades, crisscrossing tracks, soaring faster and faster, until the ground finally flattens.

Six hours later, with dusk descending, we clomp down a dirt road in hard plastic boots, skis over shoulders. Joe’s truck and the lights of Ridgway lie ahead. “That was damn near religious,” Joe whispers, still overcome.

I turn back for one final look. The entire range thrusts up from aspen groves, flaming in the last rays of sun. My eyes drift to a white slash — the Mongoose — cutting down a black but-tress. Looking closely, I think I can see three tiny tracks down its throat. Then the dying rays fade, the scent of Ponderosa washes over us and our thoughts turn to showers and a hot meal.

*Bruce Kirkby is the author of Sand Dance: By Camel Across Arabia’s Great Southern Desert and The Dolphin’s Tooth: A Decade in Search of Adventure. He is a regular contributor to Canadian Geographic Travel and lives in Kimberley, B.C. [www.brucekirkby.com](http://www.brucekirkby.com)*



To comment, please e-mail [editor@canadiangeographic.ca](mailto:editor@canadiangeographic.ca) or visit [www.canadiangeographic.ca](http://www.canadiangeographic.ca).

## COLORADO DREAMIN’

**Getting there** Ridgway is in the southwest corner of Colorado, a five-and-a-half-hour drive from Denver through an array of stunning mountainous national forests, such as Gunnison and Rio Grande. Denver’s airport is served by Air Canada and a range of American carriers.

**Staying there** Reservations are required to stay in Joe Ryan’s San Juan Hut System, whose

mission is to “provide low impact, human powered, light-weight backcountry travel opportunities for the independent health conscious adventurer at a practical price.” Ryan or one of his staff will help plan a suitable route (<http://sanjuanhuts.com>, 970-626-3033).

**Playing there** If backcountry travel in the snow isn’t your thing, it’s worth noting that Ryan

has also built two mountain bike hut routes — Durango to Moab and Telluride to Moab. The bike huts are kept fully stocked, with everything from food to ibuprofen and beer, meaning all you need for a week-long adventure is the clothing on your back. Winter visitors should consider hiring a guide from an operator such as San Juan Mountain Guides ([www.ourayclimbing.com](http://www.ourayclimbing.com)); they’ll

take you places that you’d never visit alone. For general information, go to [www.colorado.com](http://www.colorado.com) and follow the links to everything from ice fishing to outdoor ice rinks throughout the state. And after skiing in the San Juans, be sure to hit this hidden gem, Mr. Grumpy Pants Ourayle House in the town of Ouray, for a post-journey celebration with great beer that’s brewed on site.