

## Backcountry Babes Rip It Up on Silverton's Extreme Ski Terrain

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by Jessica Newens  
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Twelve women are gathered inside the Silverton Movement Center on a late spring morning doing yoga. Guided by their instructor, they stretch into each pose, becoming centered and balanced and tuned into their bodies.

The women are participating in Babes in the Backcountry's annual Sisters in the Steeps clinic and, within the hour, they will convene on Silverton Mountain for an avalanche beacon orientation and mountain overview before meeting their guides, heading for the lift, and setting off on day one of their two-day extreme skiing adventure.



Since 1998, Breckenridge-based Babes in the Backcountry has been empowering women through backcountry skiing-and-riding workshops under the direction of founder and executive director Leslie Ross, a certified Level III telemark instructor, free skiing champion and avalanche educator.



Ross' own experience as she became a backcountry skiing professional is what ultimately led her to found an outdoor guiding company. "The bliss of powder, and especially powder in the backcountry, was a feeling I wanted others to celebrate and experience," says Ross. "I was inspired to open doors for others to experience the freedom of exploration and the incredible community development."

Ross was also inspired to get more women into the backcountry on their own terms. "The more time I spent in the backcountry, the more I noticed



several missing components. The male/female ratio was way out of balance, and the avalanche education available was directed at the professional rather than towards myself and my friends – the weekend warriors,” she says.

Fast forward to 2011, and a lot has changed for female outdoor adventurers – from the gear and educational resources to the sheer

numbers of women now participating in extreme outdoor activities. It is organizations like BIB that have helped even out the playing field by providing women a safe, inspirational environment in which to learn new skills, build confidence and become self-reliant in the outdoors, whether they’re seeking a professional ski career or simply a fun weekend out with friends. “Babes is for anyone seeking to explore, experience and further educate themselves on how we walk in this world,” says Ross.

The Silverton Sisters in the Steeps clinic has been a part of BIB programming for almost 10 years, as long as Silverton Mountain has been open, says Ross, and it just keeps on growing.

“Last year we had our highest participation ever, with 24 students,” says Ross. Typically the maximum group size is 12.

With a 6:1 student-to-teacher ratio, students have plenty of one-on-one time with their female instructors as they learn how to navigate Silverton’s steep, narrow chutes and fall lines. Geared toward advanced-intermediate and advanced alpine and telemark skiers, the clinic is meant to boost confidence while teaching how to pick lines, maintain control, and negotiate challenging terrain in variable conditions.

Silverton is a premier backcountry-type ski experience for BIB students, with its partially lift-served terrain providing convenient, yet still strenuous, access to what would elsewhere be considered out of bounds skiing. Read: no groomed slopes, no moguls, no cut trails (aside from those created naturally by avalanches).

For Ridgway resident Erin Brittain, 34, last spring’s Sisters in the Steeps clinic provided the mental breakthrough she needed to feel comfortable navigating extreme mountain terrain.

“A couple of girlfriends and I wanted to ski Silverton, but we didn’t want to do it with our husbands and boyfriends. We wanted to do it our own way.”

After traveling almost 2,000 feet up the mountain, BIB students disembark Silverton’s vintage two-person chair and break off into their small groups.

“I was so nervous going up the lift,” says Brittain, “but our first run was really cool. We could jump in, literally, from the top or go around, picking our way in. It was a great starting run and a beautiful, sunny day.”

Throughout the day, a BIB instructor works with students to provide skiing tips, while a Silverton Mountain guide shows the group where to go, what to watch out for, and explains the terrain, which might include trees, cliff bands and open bowls.

From the top of the lift, skiers typically hike anywhere from five to 45 minutes and ski as many as five runs, depending on the combined skill level of the group.

“It takes a lot longer to complete a run at Silverton” than at a typical ski resort, says Brittain, whose group completed four runs. “We were very proud of ourselves, because we were the last ones off the mountain that day.”

According to Ross, aside from an occasional snowboarder or two, Sisters in the Steeps participants typically include a mix of skiers on either alpine or telemark boards. She notes that more and more women are taking advantage of the latest fat boards and AT gear that have helped make powder skiing more accessible. The annual clinic features use of demo equipment, including a beacon, shovel, probe, backpack, poles, and alpine or telemark skis – all available at the Quonset warming hut, where students meet at day’s end for a beer and a recap of their experience. Both mornings start with guided yoga, and evenings are spent wining and dining together at one or several of Silverton’s restaurants.

“There’s a lot we pack in to a little bit of time, because we’re trying to get everyone up there skiing,” says Ross.

“Some girls like to dress up” that first night, she continues. “We give them scarves and hats” in a goody bag, along with socks, herbal body products, Clif Bars, and discount coupons from BIB sponsors.

By day two, the girls are feeling like true backcountry babes; having gotten over their initial jitters, they’re starting to rip it up on their skis.

“It’s really amazing seeing all the women progress and get over their fears,” Ross says, noting that a turning point for some participants is a challenging (and optional) section of the mountain where they navigate a frozen waterfall with a rope. “It’s a real confidence builder. It’s amazing to watch their faces change” by the end of the day. “That’s the gift that I get from this.”

When it comes to extreme skiing, “for me,” says Brittain, “a big piece is in my own mind, the fear factor. Almost every girl I’ve met feels exactly the same way.” After skiing Silverton with Sisters in the Steeps, “it’s no longer this big scary thing that I was always afraid of... It helped me realize I’m not alone and we (girls) can all bond together and start to really enjoy these mountains.”

As Brittain considers future ski trips with her husband, whether it’s Silverton, Telluride’s Gold Hill chutes, or a hut trip in the backcountry, she now feels more

empowered to speak up when she's not comfortable.

"I'm still very nervous to go into the backcountry," but "I know now you don't have to" jump cliffs and ski the gnarliest line just to keep up with the guys. In Silverton, "you have to be able to ski your hardest black run, but not every run in Silverton is like that."

According to Telluride ski mountaineer and 2008 Sisters in the Steeps instructor Kim Havell, it is programs like BIB that are opening doors for women to explore backcountry skiing.

"A lot of it with women is confidence," she says. "I think men are a little more willing to go for it. But we've got a safety-minded mindset that works well in the backcountry. Because the backcountry is dangerous, people have a really kind, familial [way of behaving toward each other]. Everyone is looking after each other," and women have something to contribute to that mix.

For Havell, it was rewarding being a Sisters in the Steeps instructor, and seeing women's confidence improve as they realized, "Wait a second, yeah, I can get out there. Maybe I need another avalanche course, but if I take things one step at a time, I can do this."

Back in the early 90s, when Havell first started backcountry skiing in Telluride, there weren't many other women doing it. "Most of the time, I was calling up a lot of dudes to go skiing. Now it's not so hard."

Had there been a program like BIB's Sisters in the Steeps back when she was learning, Havell said, she would have jumped on it.

Ross estimates about 25 percent of BIB's students return, with many women going on to take three or four clinics. She recalls one woman whose first backcountry experience was with BIB: "She got so inspired she started doing her own stuff, became a rock climber, and then a mountaineer."

Erin Brittain became involved with Babes in the Backcountry when she lived in Golden and volunteered for one of Ross' mountain biking clinics in Breckenridge. She and her husband also did one of BIB's co-ed, Level I Avalanche courses at Francie's Cabin, near Breckenridge.

Silverton Sisters in the Steeps 2012 is scheduled for April 6-8. Other Babes in the Backcountry ski and outdoor adventure workshops for winter 2012 include avalanche clinics, telemark clinics, hut trips, and steep-skiing clinics. For a complete schedule and more information, visit [babesinthebackcountry.com](http://babesinthebackcountry.com).

*Editor's Note:*

*In October 2011, Leslie Ross sold Babes in the Backcountry to Jenna Boisvert, a seasoned BIB alumna who lives in Anchorage, Alaska and has strong ties to Colorado. A biologist by day, Jenna moonlights as an avalanche instructor and runs several American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education women's*

*avalanche classes out of Anchorage. Sisters in the Steeps was Boisvert's first all-women's ski course.*

*"I got hooked and went on to try out one of Babes' week-long Canada hut trips. I kept having so much fun, that here I am now...owner of Babes in the Backcountry!"*

*Boisvert plans to keep BIB's established programs and expand to include backpacking and rafting this summer. Ross is now the owner of Meta Yoga Studios in Breckenridge, but will continue to teach and coach for BIB.*

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