

**[photo]** All aboard the *Adventurer*:  
next stop Antarctic Peninsula.





# Boats, Boards & Bootpacks

*Antarctica: "Distant, uninhabited, scarcely ridden and full of wildlife"*

*by Michael Sudmeier | photos by Jim Harris*

**For those fortunate enough to ride Antarctica, the adventure begins long before dropping chutes.**

**A flight to Argentina, a journey by ship through the Drake Passage, a Zodiac ride to shore, and a solid bootpack are all prerequisites for laying down lines.**

**Doug Stoup**, founder/operator of Ice Axe Expeditions, first came to Antarctica in 1999. He convinced Doug Coombs, Mark Newcomb and Stephen Koch to join him on a ski and snowboard descent of Vinson Massif (16,050 feet), the continent's highest peak. "We had a successful expedition, and I fell in love with the continent," Stoup explains. Two months later, he chartered a research vessel and returned to lay down other first descents in the Antarctic Peninsula.

In just over a decade, Stoup has racked up 27 expeditions to Antarctica and introduced the continent to some of snowboarding's leading freeriders like Jeremy Jones, Xavier de Le Rue and Ralph Backstrom, as well as

snowboard-cross specialist Seth Wescott, a two-time Olympic gold medalist. The company caters to everyone from dirtbags to doctors. Regardless of their background, visitors tend to share Backstrom's fascination with "riding somewhere so distant, uninhabited, scarcely ridden and full of wildlife."

Ice Axe currently offers two trips to Antarctica. This November, the company will guide a 23-day trip aboard the *Australis*, a small sailboat, which provides an intimate experience for eight clients. Ice Axe's signature Antarctic journey—a 13-day trip aboard the clipper *Adventurer* (pictured)—accommodates 100 skiers and riders. That expedition leaves port in November 2013.



As part of each expedition, clients and guides first meet in Ushuaia, Argentina for a day of skiing and riding so the guides can assess abilities and assign crews accordingly. The following day, their ship begins the several-day journey to Antarctica, from the Beagle Channel to the Drake Passage. Best known for its rough seas, the Drake Passage also affords plenty of opportunities to spot sperm, fin and humpback whales, as well as skies speckled with seabirds.

"The crossing provided a very tangible sense of how far removed you are from the rest of the world," says Seth Wescott.

When the ship reaches the South Shetland Islands, the games begin. Groups of eight clients partner with two guides. "The clients can really rule the roost, as long as they have the skills," notes Stoup. "It's everybody's dream trip and we want to make sure we fulfill that dream." After the ship drops anchor, groups head to shore aboard Zodiacs (smaller, inflatable boats). Much of the terrain is accessed via bootpack right from the water's edge. Groups with more advanced skills may embark on glacier travel and extended splitboard tours.

After a day of riding, everyone enjoys a gourmet dinner and a good night's sleep while

the ship travels to the next day's jumping-off point. According to Stoup, regardless of where the ship is moored, clients return to the boat and say, "This was the best day of my life." Wescott was one such client. He reveals that his time in Antarctica may have been "the most transformative seven days on snow in my life." He says each day was filled with "knowing somehow that the moments I was living on the trip would be highlights as long as I live. That feeling of truly not knowing what was around the next bend or over the next ridge made it impossible to not be fully in the moment."

Stoup emphasizes that, in the Antarctic Peninsula, each group feels like it's alone on

the continent. He has a network of areas from which he can radiate a hundred people out on the snow where they won't see anybody else. "[There are] hundreds and hundreds of lines," Stoup explains, "so you're not crossing others tracks. There are open bowls, couloirs, and great faces. There's a little bit of everything for every ability level."

Ice Axe's Antarctic trips tend to take place in November, affording spring conditions in the Southern Hemisphere. The coastal regions offer mild temperatures ranging from 20° to 50° Fahrenheit. Throughout each trip, the maritime snow conditions vary significantly with elevation, storm cycles and latitude.

With lines that drop right into the water and crowds of penguins to bear witness to first descents, Antarctica leaves an impression on those who grace its slopes. Although skiers and riders come for the lines, Stoup explains, "It becomes more about the wildlife and the beauty that Antarctica really holds." Backstrom adds, "Being there is awesome. Riding there is the icing on the cake."



**[top]** Seth Wescott descends to Gold Medal waters. **[left]** Wescott splits upon a seal.