



The Fairweather business model: always close up shop on a powder day.
PHOTO: TOM WINTER

A Cut Above

How a Haines duo turned a wood obsession into Alaska's ski company

BY KADE KRICHKO

WHEN MOM TOLD YOU NOT TO PICK UP HITCHHIKERS, she probably figured starting companies with hitchhikers was out of the question as well. But when skier Ian Seward pulled over for Graham Kraft and his wife on a stormy November drive into Haines, Alaska, he found a business opportunity that he couldn't pass up. Kraft, 30, a former BC racer that fell in love with the Alaskan mountains (and an Alaskan girl), had been designing and building his own skis for half a decade, while Seward, 44, a master woodworker, was looking for his next project. Over 15 minutes of coastal road, the duo cooked up Fairweather Ski Works, establishing craft ski building along the Last Frontier.

Sourcing their materials directly from Haines' plentiful backyard of Sitka spruce and paper birch, Seward and Kraft boast a five-ski quiver that ranges from ultra-light touring to big Alaskan descents. Since that fateful evening in 2012, the fortuitous partnership has pressed hundreds of planks, relying on the weekly barge for epoxy and fiberglass deliveries (FedEx hasn't made it that far up the Alaska Marine Line) and foregoing comforts to establish Alaska's only commercial ski-building operation (and all the weird that goes with it) where the mountains meet the sea.

KADE: How did you guys turn a car ride idea into reality?

GRAHAM: Ian had woodworking tools and I had ski building equipment, so we ran a couple of ski building classes to get initial startup money. Then we built a new press, bought the grinder, and moved on from there.

Built a press?

Yeah, Ian built a wooden ski press using some massive timber frames. He is such a believer in the strength of good quality wood. I was a little skeptical, but it's just as sturdy as the steel ones.

What does your factory look like?

Well, a boat was there first, and then walls sprung up around the boat. It turned into a workshop, but when Ian decided he didn't want to work on boats anymore, he cut the wall out, moved the boat to a friend's, and framed it so he could never fit another boat in there again. Then came skis.

Haines isn't your typical ski town.

What do people think of what you're doing?

It depends how the people feel about the ski industry in town. Sometimes it comes with a middle finger, sometimes it comes with a high-five. But we're definitely the 'ski guys.'

Your wood is all locally sourced, so where's the weirdest spot you've grabbed material from?

My wife and I woke up to a chainsaw running right behind our house one morning and found our old, senile neighbor chopping down a gigantic spruce tree on our property. I guess he wanted to knock it out of the way because it was in his view—he didn't even know we were living there. So that was kind of weird. But, there was a ton of nice wood in it so we ended up being kind of psyched.

Does he know that wood went into building skis?

Oh no, he's lost his mind. But we can get hundreds of skis out of something like that.

How has the terrain up in Haines shaped the way you guys approach

Fairweather?

There's a lot of dirtbag skiers out there that are hard on their equipment. Just with the weather and the terrain you have to travel in to get to skiing up here, you can get into situations that are hard on everything. When you're out there, you can't have anything fail on you.

And you build your skis accordingly?

Oh yeah. We put them through the ringer in some weird circumstances. Like when we paddle somewhere, they're soaked in seawater for days, or when we travel through glacier and moraine—that can really tear stuff apart.

What is it about working with wood that makes ski building different for you?

To take a tree that's down in the valley bottom that has had a good life and blown over, to give it a second chance and go up and ski above all the other trees. There's something cool about that.

Getting pretty spiritual over here...

Yeah, I might need to take a bong rip before I get on that topic any further.

Alaska doesn't have the best weather, so why the name Fairweather?

We're named after Mount Fairweather, which is a misnomer in itself because it's never nice there. It's the local big mountain around here. Fairweather is also a useful name for being in Haines because when the weather is actually fair, we're definitely not working on skis. It's more of a great rainy day activity. When we post the hours on our shop it will always be 'weather dependent'—'Fair weather dependent.'