



ADVENTURE

Edited by Jonathan Thompson & Joe Mackle

PUSHING YOUR LIMITS

MACHINES OF AWE

Join *MH's* Jonathan Thompson as he speeds across the vast snowy wilderness of Alaska – The USA's 'Last Frontier State' – on a three-day snowmobile adventure

Photography James Burns



Words Jonathan Thompson

Last time JT was on ice for *MH* he fractured his coccyx attempting a 45m ski jump

"The bears are always hungry when they wake up," says Tony, staring through his binoculars at a big, hulking shape moving just behind the treeline. Without shifting his gaze, he gestures to a photograph propped up on one of the cabin's shelves: "Look what happened this time last year." The picture, taken in front of this self same cabin, shows a young black bear hungrily tearing one of Tony's boots to shreds.

Welcome to Alaska – the Last Frontier State. To be precise, welcome to Tony's place, the Kenny Creek Lodge: a small wooden

building more than an hour's hike from the nearest road, where the only way in or out (other than bear back) is snowmobile.

This is the second morning of our snowmobile 'safari' – a high speed, almost cinematic journey through the deep powderfields and echoing white forests of Mid-Alaska – to the base of the highest mountain on the entire continent, the majestic Mount McKinley.

The over-sized, almost extraterrestrial scenery out here, combined with my faceless, helmeted companions, and the enormous low sun, have all contributed to a powerful feeling of speeding across the surface of another planet. I don't think that I could feel further from my desk back on planet earth if I tried.

Our journey had begun the previous morning in Anchorage, Alaska's biggest city, where I was tasked with helping Chris Maynard – owner of Alaska Snow Safaris and our guide for the next three days – to load our state-of-the-art rides onto the back of his flat-top trailer.

"We don't call them snowmobiles here – that's how you can spot a real Alaskan," he says. "Everyone has one, and everyone calls it a snow-machine."

Later that morning, I begin to appreciate why every Alaskan has one of these things. After a 90-minute drive north of the city – and some brief instructions from Chris – we unload our machines in an isolated car park and clatter off down an uneven path into the unknown. A few minutes later, we're spat out into a huge white snow meadow and Chris ►

It's a man's world
Approximately 88%
of the world's active
snowmobilers are male

Full power
High-performance
snowmobiles will beat
most stock cars in a
0-60mph drag race



THE LOWDOWN

UK to Anchorage
Flight: Approx. 13hrs



True wilderness
The state of Alaska is 586,400
square miles of largely
wilderness. If New York City had
the same population density,
only 16 people would be
living in Manhattan

What? A 200-mile snowmobile odyssey through the heart of Alaska, America's wildest state

Where? The Denali State Park, home of Mount McKinley: the tallest mountain in North America

Why? The sense of freedom as you speed over a frozen world at the tip of the western world

When? November-April, when the powder is deep and reliable – and the bears are (hopefully) asleep

How? Visit blacktomato.co.uk. An all-inclusive 5-day trip costs from £1,799 per person, including flights, transfers, a day's skiing and a three-day snowmobile trip, guide and meals included. For more on the Anchorage region visit anchorage.net

SNOW RIDERS

◀ signals with a raised, clenched fist for us to speed up and follow him. I squeeze the throttle under the base of my right palm and shoot off, accelerating swiftly to 60mph as the wind whips past me. There's a powerful, elemental sensation of exhilaration and release as I ricochet through the fresh powder, feeling the spare rib sandwich and pepper fries I had for lunch eagerly bouncing inside my stomach.

The challenge of riding a snow-machine is different – and considerably harder – than I had anticipated. It's nothing like riding a quad bike through British woodland, as I had naively assumed. It's more like a high speed compound of motocross and windsurfing, with the exaggerated distribution of bodyweight all-important as you swing and carve your way through the snow.

I learn this lesson the hard way, within a few miles of setting off. Overconfident, I attack a small hill at speed – and an angle – and am unceremoniously dumped onto my backside as my ride shoots out from underneath me. It races down the incline on its own, where it finally stops, growling quietly to itself – almost laughing – at the bottom.

I pull myself out of the deep snow, nursing a bruised knee, while Chris dismounts and trudges over to my machine with a shovel. "This first one's free," he shouts, as he digs out the partially-buried wheelbase. "But after that, each one'll cost you a beer."

Chris leads us through untouched, powder-filled bowls, and up onto high ridges, from where we can see hundreds of miles of beautiful, pristine white wilderness. The steeper gradients are hard to conquer at first – gravity consistently trying to punish us for our disrespect, but we soon learn how to throw our bodies to the uphill side to compensate, simultaneously being as fearless as possible with the throttle. When we cut our engines, it's like pressing a giant mute button on the whole world. The silence is so absolute, so complete, that you can almost hear it.



Jan prays that's not a bear crossing

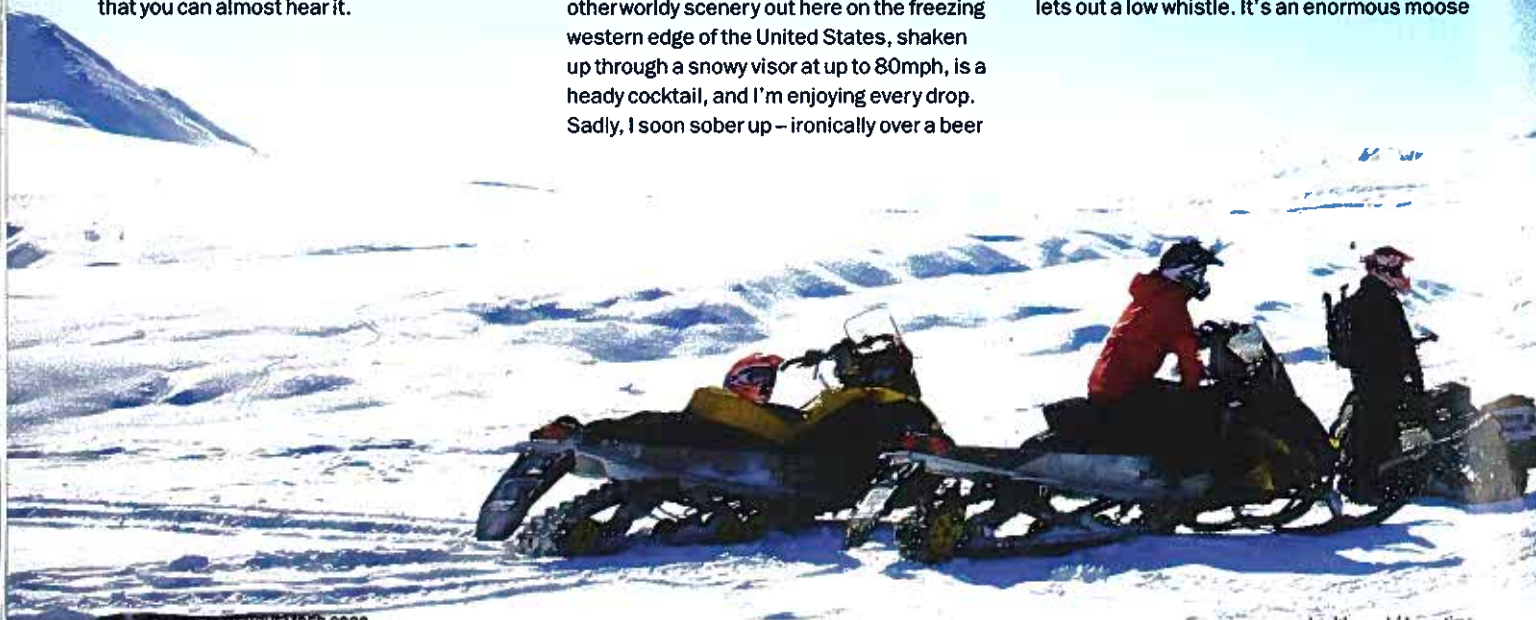
As the sun starts to sink, we push on towards the Kenny Creek Lodge – a wooden oasis in the wilderness that serves as part B&B, part bar and part petrol station for wandering snow-machiners. The final 20 minutes, as we zip between the trees after Chris, feel a bit like the speeder-bike chase in *Return of the Jedi*. Except this time – thankfully – the bear-faced inhabitants of the forest don't have any nasty surprises planned.

WHEN WE CUT OUR ENGINES IT'S LIKE PRESSING A GIANT MUTE BUTTON

My confidence and competence on the 600cc snow machine have grown considerably during the first day – along with an odd egg-shaped lump on my right knee. The unique, otherworldly scenery out here on the freezing western edge of the United States, shaken up through a snowy visor at up to 80mph, is a heady cocktail, and I'm enjoying every drop. Sadly, I soon sober up – ironically over a beer

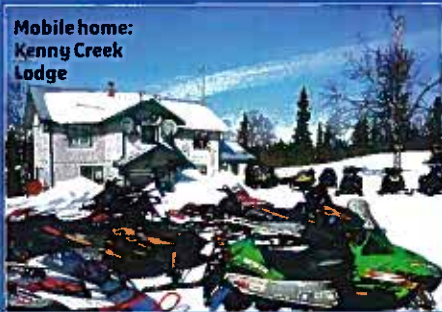
at the Lodge with its well-connected manager, Tony Radej. If there was ever any doubt that this was a dangerous sport, it is shattered into several pieces by the news that five snow-machiners have just been airlifted out of the same area as us, all with extremely serious injuries. They'd been higher than us, and when the clouds had closed in, they'd unwittingly followed each other off a sheer drop. The last we hear is that at least two have broken backs, and the rest have fared little better.

The next morning, we rise from our bunks to find Tony scanning the treeline with his binoculars. Everyone in these parts seems to have a bear story – which isn't a major surprise considering Alaska is home to more than 98% of the US's brown bears, plus large black and polar bear populations. But this morning wasn't going to be another one. As we crowd around the window, the shadowy form breaks cover, crashing out of the trees. Somebody lets out a low whistle. It's an enormous moose





Preparing the caterpillar steeds for action



Mobile home: Kenny Creek Lodge



Alaskan guide Chris Maynard leads the way

Jon power-wheelies across the powder



— thankfully not the hungry bear coming back for Tony's other boot.

As we layer up, check our avalanche beacons and slip into our huge, stormtrooper-like snow boots, a calf appears, following its mother out into the clearing. "If the plural of goose is geese, what's the plural of moose?" asks Tony as we say our goodbyes and head out for another day in the wilderness.

We push on through Denali State Park, freeriding through the backcountry towards the redoubtable Mt McKinley (Denali, meaning 'Great One', is the Inuit name for the mountain).

The scenery is even more extraterrestrial now, with muscular, twisted dunes and seemingly endless gargantuan plains, wrapped in an all-enveloping white blanket. Accelerating through the heart of the Last Frontier state this morning feels like appearing in a planet episode of *Star Trek*, viewed on fast forward. I keep this observation to myself — I'm

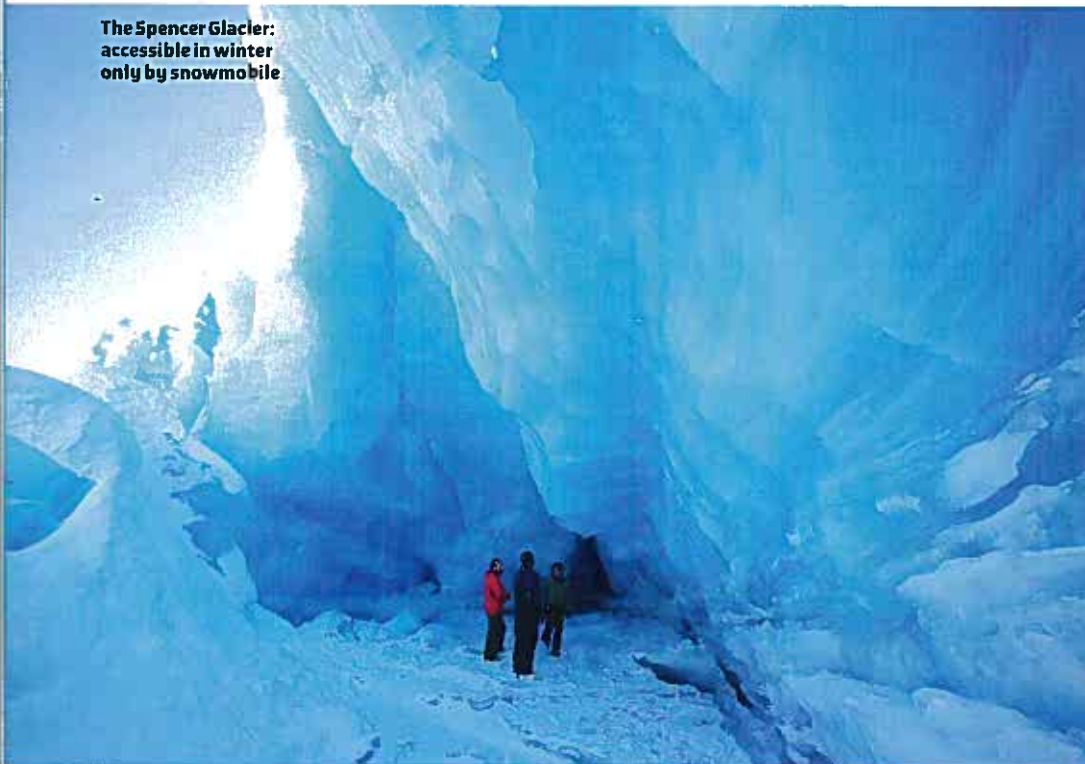
wearing a red top and bringing up the rear. And everyone knows what that means in planet episodes.

Racing over another rise, sugary snow flying out behind us like smoke, we suddenly find ourselves at the edge of the park, and bask in the shadow of the mighty Mt McKinley. We can't go any further: snow machines aren't permitted outside the limits of the State Park. (It's one of the hottest environmental debates in these parts — second only to the State-sanctioned aerial culling of wolves).

From here, after taking a raft of pictures of the colossal peak, we turn back towards civilisation, riding through an abandoned gold-prospecting hamlet on the way. There's a real sense of the Wild West in this part of the Park — the old, half-buried settlements, the wide-open prairies, the awe-inspiring, encircling mountains. Even the rare road signs are riddled with bullet holes as we ▶



The Spencer Glacier:
accessible in winter
only by snowmobile



◀ ride through, posse like, on our powerful, snorting metal steeds.

After stopping at the Kenny Creek Lodge for another pint of Alaskan Ale with Tony (the plural of moose *is* moose it turns out), we pick up Chris's 4x4 and head south again, for our final day in the saddle.

On our third morning, we ride out south of Anchorage, near Alaska's biggest ski resort, Alyeska. Accompanied by Chris's right hand man, John McGinnis, our objective for the day is the magnificent Spencer Glacier – an immense cathedral of ice only accessible during the winter by snow machine. The journey takes us across completely different terrain, beneath

MY FOREARMS ARE THROBBING AFTER THREE DAYS OF SOLID SNOWMOBILING

an old railway bridge and across a partially thawed river, under the watchful eye of a hulking bald eagle in the branches of a naked tree. I'm becoming increasingly self-assured with my machine – particularly with using my bodyweight as a riding tool, to the extent that I even manage to pull off a decent jump. We race across the tundra, relishing every second, until we reach the vast, dazzlingly beautiful glacier. We dismount and wander through its luminescent blue chambers, a stunning end to an unforgettable trip.

My body – particularly my forearms, shoulders and thighs – are throbbing after

When Hells Angels freeze over...



Making tracks, Jon throttles it back to base



three full days of riding, but it's only as we hit the town in Anchorage that night (where the bar snacks appear to be pickled turkey gizzards) that I realise how much I already miss the great white outdoors, and the homely welcome of Kenny Creek Lodge. I make myself two promises right there and then: firstly, that I'm not going eat the bar snacks. And secondly, like the moose (plural) and the boot-loving bear, it's only a matter of time before I make another visit to Alaska. When Chris finally drops us back at our hotel in his 4x4, I notice his number plate for the first time. "I'd rather be snow machining" it says. So would I. **M.H.**

KEY SKILL

SIDE-HILLING

Chris Maynard of Alaska Snow Safaris on the perfect 'side-hill'



1 MOVE YOUR BODY HIGHER

No hill is ever straight up: the fall line will be all over the place and if you're not careful, it'll throw you straight back down. As you attack the gradient, lean your body to the uphill side as far as you can (above).

2 TAME THE BEAST

As the hill gets steeper, nail the throttle. Momentum is your friend: it's what's keeping gravity from grabbing you by the seat of your pants. Get as much weight as you can over the handlebars.

3 HEAD FOR HOME

When you're ready to turn into a downward curve, swing your weight back to the centre and rear of the machine, letting off the throttle slightly as you go around the apex.



4 PUMP IT DOWN

"On your way back down, pump the brake gently (above) rather than locking it – otherwise your rear end can start fishtailing, which can get nasty." A satisfied whoop is normal.