

# Clocks are Useless Here

SURVIVING AREA 241

*Words and Photos DAN MILNER*



01 \* The bathroom facilities at Area 241 are primitive to say the least, but Mike has seen to it that you don't have to squat anymore. The seat is welded to a neat frame complete with a roll-holder. Just place the seat where you fancy passing a few special minutes and watch the snow fall around you. Life doesn't get much simpler.

“Mike Basich is always full of surprises; he simply has a knack of turning the simple and mundane into something amazing.”

I'm trying to duck down as low as possible behind the sled's tiny windshield, trying to protect my face from the 50-mph blast of cold air that's coming our way. Riding shotgun, I'm at the mercy of Mike's handling prowess; half of me wants him to slow down, the other half loves the experience. It's not everyday you get to sled full speed along the highway, weaving in and out of traffic and drifting around bends, the snowmobile's skids chattering on the icy asphalt below as they try to regain traction to steer away from the enormous snowbanks that loom all too fast toward us.

The storm only rolled in a day prior, but the three feet of fresh it has already deposited persuades Mike to, somewhat diplomatically, suggest that sledding the steep pitches near his cabin might just be a little more than I can swallow on my first day back in Tahoe. Being from Europe, a place where the word “sled” is associated more with reindeer than four-strokes, I have scant experience save hanging on for dear life during previous forays into the petrol-driven world of backcountry access. Instead, we'd warm up by heading over to Sugar Bowl to ride the resort.

Hanging out with Mike Basich is always full of surprises; he simply has a knack of turning the simple and mundane into something amazing. Usually it involves some homemade, Willy Wonka-looking contraption. Awhile ago he persuaded me to spend five days camping in a teepee on a snowy mountain lot he'd bought near Truckee. I still bear the scars. But now, four years later, with my frost-nipped extremities almost fully recovered, it is time to return to the secretive hideout of Mr Basich, where he has replaced the teepee with a nice, cosy cabin. The last time I visited Mike's place, I landed square in the middle of the biggest storm Tahoe had experienced in 40 years. The Weather Channel is predicting a similar system. It's deja vu.

By the time I land at Reno and climb into Mike's grease-fuelled F350, the I-80 is shut down. We pass the night holed up in the tower of chintz that is the Casino Casino Hotel before continuing the formidable task of reaching Area 241. Tucked five miles off the interstate, this landscape of forested slopes and rocky outcrops serves as the testing ground for Mike's clothing label, 241. There are no signs announcing its whereabouts, no mailbox at the end of the drive; he likes to keep it hush for good reason. Dotted about the terrain are hundreds of cliffs and short, sweet chutes, all accessible by sled or snowshoes if you know where to go. As we reach the parking lot and break out the shovels to dig out his buried sled, the snow is coming down so heavily I get the feeling the mere act of strolling to the corner shop for a pint of milk would be a good enough test for any technical attire. I'm eager to see the cabin he's built, but with a good two feet of fresh, going two-up with Mike's dog Summit on a single machine with a home-made luggage trailer in tow proves too much of a challenge. Halfway up the climb, I dismount and pull out my snowshoes, opting for a 40-minute hike to the cabin instead. As Mike pulls away, I shout after him to put the kettle on.



02 \* Sugar Bowl was closed due to a power outage, but patrol was more than willing to put us on top of this cliff. Mike rode in, paused for some good light and stomped it to whoops from a small crowd in the parking lot.

03 \* The cornices that form on the roof of Mike's cabin makes venturing outside to use the facilities a bit of an adventure.

04 \* When it storms at Area 241, you don't need to look far to get deep.

05 \* The only way to cover the five miles up to the cabin is by foot, sled or Mike's 1977 IMP snowcat, with its smoky Ford Mustang engine. The machine is the same as the one used to escape at the end of the film *The Shining*. It has character, but it's often quicker to walk.



By the time I reach the cabin, the kettle is just starting to boil, sitting atop a woodstove that is nestled to one side of the cabin's single room. All summer Mike had been e-mailing me pictures of the construction in progress, but somehow it had looked bigger in the photos. In front of me now is a metal-beamed, granite-walled house with less square footage than the previous night's modestly priced offering in Reno. A hefty rooftop cornice hangs threateningly above one side of the cabin, and it dawns on me that Mike has built a hobbit house, complete with an oval door that you have to duck through when entering. "Quaint" might be the term of choice by realtors if employed to market the property. "Well, here it is," Mike says, brimming with pride. It might be quaint, but he has every right to be proud: It is an admirable place to hole up and shred out a storm.

The I-80 closure has seen to it that we've lost too much time to ride today, so we set about household chores instead; unloading hefty bags of whole foods from the trailer, excavating a path to the hobbit hatch and stoking the wood burner to bring the cabin's interior to an inhabitable temperature. A brief lull in the storm parts the clouds and I get my first chance to see the surroundings. The cabin itself is perched atop a small peak, its location chosen to, at least in theory, allow the wind to carry off snow and prevent total burial in winter. It's only January, and to me it looks like both the wind and



Mike's shovelling efforts have a challenge ahead of them. Out back, beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, are a set of solar panels that top up a rack of car and boat batteries stored under the cabin, providing ample power.

When I ask about the toilet facilities, Mike points outside to an old toilet seat that's fixed to a welded, squat-high, portable frame and a shovel. Trudging through snow to sit on an icy seat among silent trees becomes one of the most endearing experiences of my stay. After only a day, I find I am immersed in a strangely yin-yang existence, balancing the aggravation now involved in performing normally effortless daily routines—washing, eating, shitting—with the joys that simple cabin living brings to mind and body. My whole pace of life seems to have slowed down to about the speed of Mike's wheezing 1977 IMP snowcat, and it's a refreshing change from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. In the absence of TV, we sit and sup on mugs of tea. It's good to catch up. Meanwhile, outside the snow starts up again and doesn't look like it's going to abate any time soon.

“At Area 241,  
every day will be unique.”



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For the next couple of days, we punctuate cabin life with excursions by sled to nearby resorts, letting the snowpack settle and consolidate. Brief lulls in the six-day storm allow us to grab occasional sunny shots. On one sled departure from Sugar Bowl, we are hit smack in the face by the sight of snow-laden, but untouched, Donner Ski Ranch. A patroller informs us of a power outage that has prevented the resort from opening all day and, within minutes, Mike, who grew up riding at Donner, has asked the patroller to run us up to a band of cliffs that sit, pristine and beckoning, a few hundred feet above us. He needs little persuasion. “Hell yeah, I need something to do today,” he chuckles as he starts up the snowcat.

The landing is deep and Mike’s smooth air is accompanied by a chorus of cheers from a small but appreciative crowd that has

06 \* “As a Euro-based photographer, it is trees like this one that keep me loving my trips to Tahoe. This one at Donner Pass sits just behind a roller, meaning hardly any shaping was needed. Even crappy weather days can turn out the goods if you know where to look. Mike certainly knows.”

gathered in the parking lot. We ride down to the sled, saddle up and head for home, weaving in and out of the traffic again, this time with me at the helm. At Area 241, every day will be unique.

By midweek the snowpack has settled enough to ride and we head over to a frozen lake, hitting a few rollers and natural hips along the way. We’re joined

by Zak Shelhamer and Tyler Walker, two locals Mike has taken under his proverbial wing. Both riders are oozing enthusiasm and attack any jump we find with unparalleled gusto. As darkness draws in and the snow starts falling again, I get the feeling that if allowed to, Zak and Tyler would continue riding until dawn. I envy their stamina but feeling the days of digging out the cabin, I adopt the voice of reason and persuade the group to throw another log on the fire and cook up some hearty food. The suggestion is greeted by enthusiastic nodding all around. Of course we haven’t told our two young riders and cabin newbies this will take more than an hour to accomplish. They’ll soon learn that time runs slowly here, and they’ll learn to appreciate it. Life is simple; eat, sleep, ride and repeat. Tomorrow is a new day and no one here is going to snake your line. ▲



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