

SKI RITUALS

For many people around the world, skiing is not only a sport: it's an ever-evolving tradition that offers a connection to a place, a landscape, and others.

There is no snow in Oukaïmeden, a ski resort in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. But sometime after midnight, it begins, and by first light, the mountain is fully cloaked in several feet of white. As daybreak fog lifts, a long line of butter-yellow taxis pulls in from Marrakech. It's not just the rumor of snow that brings people up here; it's the possibility of skiing.

In its most basic form, skiing is the tradition of strapping a long, slender board to each foot with the purpose of sliding over a surface, most often snow. It exists as both pastime and sport, a mode of travel and even, for some, a means to survival. More deeply, it invites us to connect with the surrounding landscape, the ground underfoot, and to the people who share in the experience.

It's not long before the mountainside at Oukaïmeden is dotted with people. Some are leaned over, focused on mastering the art of the snowplow, while others are learning how to walk wearing ski boots for the first time. Some take turns posing with skis, purses in hand, with no real intention of skiing at all, as a few others whimsically throw snowballs into the air. There are those that gaze apprehensively toward the summit, and the ones who have their skis pointed down, determined: ready to push off.

At first glance, this scene shares traits with many other snowy places around the world. From Israel to Canada, Kosovo to India, Morocco to Switzerland—downhill skiing exists almost everywhere snow falls on a slope. Where there is skiing, collective joy can often be found. Big mountains and backroad hills become venues to experience the feeling of giving oneself over to gravity, regardless of location. There is also a sense of freedom in this setting: a moment of being temporarily released of whatever restrictions may be binding one's life. In this way, skiing offers an opportunity to feel the collective flicker of humanness, to share in a moment that transcends personal identity and circumstance.

Despite its modern reputation, skiing was first invented for pragmatic reasons. Essentially, to get around during winter when the snow-covered ground made hunting a challenge. Some of the world's oldest ski artifacts date back to 6000 BC in northern Russia. Here, the tradition of skiing still exists in pockets of the region. In one location, the Kuznetsk Alatau Mountains, skis are handmade from aspen trees and remain an essential travel tool for hunting antelope in the winter months.

Whether skiing is done for pleasure or purpose, to observe it in ➤

01 Visitors enjoy a range of activities at the base of a small ski hill in the Solang Valley, near Manali in India's Himachal Pradesh.

