

POST

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Mysterious Millionaire
the truth about HOWARD HUGHES
 Skiing 6 pages in color

Social Climbing on the Slopes

*At the snow spa of Sugarbush, Vermont, skiers ride safely
to the mountaintop under glass, but the ascent toward status is rugged.*

By GAY TALESE

Each Friday afternoon they gather along Park Avenue wearing their Aspen-raced ski parkas (mildewproof, crease-resistant and allergy-free) and their slim, zippered stretch pants (pickpocket-proof), and wait for the chalet bus that will transport them up to a ski weekend at Sugarbush, Vermont—where they might break a leg.

Such grim possibilities do not haunt them. "If you ski, you're going to break something sooner or later," said Mary Baker, an attractive brunette, casually shrugging her shoulders under her black fur parka. "And besides, breaking a leg is no worse than having a baby."

Though she spoke with somewhat limited authority—she has had two babies, but so far has broken only an arm—her friends standing along the sidewalk quickly agreed. They were all young people of great energy and optimism; their only problem was that merely three months of ski weather remained, and the chalet bus was already five minutes late. Finally somebody yelled, "Here it comes," and a big vehicle, driven by Johnny McBride, who used to chauffeur Count Basie's band, stopped and, amid a clatter of skis and a clinking of bottles, everybody hopped aboard.

"We've met somewhere," said a Wall Street broker to a slinky blonde, sitting across the aisle. "Was it Squaw Valley?"

"No," she said demurely.

"Kitzbühel?"

"I don't think so."

"Wait!" he exclaimed. "It was at Bunnie's wedding."

"Oh, yes," the blonde cried. Then the broker broke out a bottle of Scotch and handed the blonde a cup.

Meanwhile the bus moved on through suburbs and exurbs, dipped into the winding roads of smaller towns and, at last, climbed into the hills of New England, not stopping until, six hours and 288 miles later, it had crossed into Ver-

mont and reached that frosty joyland, Sugarbush.

Sugarbush is the most chic snow spa in the Eastern portion of the United States. Opened in December, 1958, nicknamed "Mascara Mountain" and "El Morocco on the Rocks," it styles itself after the fashionable slopes of Europe. Its skiers, without having to risk a single hair blowing out of place, can ride to the summit of the 4,000-foot mountain within glass-enclosed, wind-proof gondolas which are globe-shaped and which look, as they hover over the white trails and trees, like an endless sky train of varicolored apples on the stick.

Dior provides the pants

It was too late for skiing when the Park Avenue bus arrived that Friday night, but by 10 the next morning the slopes were slippery with sophisticates. There were women in Christian Dior pants and parkas lined with Scottish fleece and rimmed with silver fox. There were men in Garmisch boots cut from the hides of sheltered Bavarian steers, and flamboyant, quilted parkas flapping with various cardboard tags indicating that either the parkas or the wearers—and possibly both—had skied in such storied European places as Chamonix, St. Moritz or Cortina d'Ampezzo.

The slopes of Sugarbush are superbly conditioned for social climbing. At the very top, though the group numbers fewer than 100 of the 2,400 who ski Sugarbush on a busy day, is café society's heralded jet set, which does not come by bus. The jet set, which travels to Europe a great deal and insists on having to its parties at least one Greek shipowner, a Ferrari auto racer and a cocktail of countesses, was not lured to Sugarbush through any enticement by the center's 36-year-old president Damon Gadd, a congenial but not effusive Yale man. It came, rather, because it was seeking a new cold-weather playpen and because one of its very favorite people was Sugarbush's chief ski instructor,

Peter Estin, a slim, rich, 35-year-old former Dartmouth ski hero, a tennis player and wine-taster, a linguist, a cartoonist and a climate-hopping *bon vivant* whose current girl friend is a French baroness. Estin has had as many as three Greek shipowners to a single party.

With such credentials, Peter Estin had no difficulty getting the jet set to Sugarbush, and soon they decided that they liked the place so much they built their own small chalets on the mountain near Estin's. Sugarbush quickly achieved its posh, cosmopolitan image. Each weekend this winter the mountainside has been climbed by rising new cliques, but the jet set remains the envy of many of those below.

For one thing, jet-set skiers sleep late in the morning. Inasmuch as they have their own chalets, they may rise late for breakfast and are not subjected, as are ski-lodge guests, to the nine a.m. closing of dining-room doors. On this particular Saturday morning the jet set was the last to appear on the slopes. They were casual and calm in slipping on their parkas and their Italian goggles. They walked slowly, confidently toward the gondolas. They *knew* they would get seats.

At lunchtime the jet set did not have to submit to the clatter of the cafeteria. They retired, instead, to a private club, Skiclub 10, within which some of the most slumberously sleek and exquisitely elegant women ever to have schussed through a ski boutique sat on the dark blue banquettes, amid the smoke of Turkish tobacco, surrounded by music from *La Dolce Vita*.

They do not possess the sweet, college-girl look of most of those in the cafeteria, girls whose confidence comes from a surfeit of attention from college boys. Skiclub 10 women are somewhat older, between 27 and 32, and, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said in another time, they are "nourished on subtler stuff" and "choose *apéritifs* wisely." There is just the slightest trace of boredom in their manner, just the right amount of challenging coolness. Nearly all of them are