

Guide to Great Guides

Tahoe's top outdoor instructors teach their students well.

Together, this compilation of ten of Tahoe's best guides and instructors represents precisely 545 years of hard-won outdoor savvy. The youngest is 44 and the oldest is 73—an average range and age typical of the CEOs of the world's largest companies. They've each lived enough life to wisely and safely guide others, and none is about to slow down.

What else? They're all originals, having followed their muses into the great outdoors rather than being bound by desk and chain, yet they're all successful business people, who have launched and sustained enterprises, some of which are in their fourth decade. Each seems to have been fundamen-

tally changed by an exposure to air, earth, fire and especially water—in both liquid and frozen forms—and has worked to bring others into the world he or she inhabits and loves. And each has an abiding appreciation for these mountains—and if given an opportunity, will wax poetic about the beauty and transformative powers of the Range of Light in general, and the Tahoe Sierra in particular.

Lastly, for such an accomplished group, they're surprisingly casual about results, insisting that growth and mastery lie not in the destination, but in the journey. They'd be happy to help guide you on yours.



Ralph Cutter

OWNER OF THE CALIFORNIA SCHOOL OF FLYFISHING

Base of Operations: Truckee, CA

Claim to Fame: World-class instructor, fly tyer and author of the definitive *Sierra Trout Guide* and the stunning DVD, *Bugs of the Underworld*

Hot Tip: Slow down.

If Ralph Cutter could be plunked down anywhere in the world, he'd choose the deepest recesses of the Sierra Nevada, fishing an unnamed

lake or outlet on the backside of the Minarets, maybe, or the Humphreys Basin, surrounded by granitoid talus miles from fire rings, bootprints and discarded monofilament birds' nests.

Cutter is a fifth-generation Californian, whose forbears surveyed the Sierra, shared campsites with John Muir and created the eponymous bug juice used by generations of woodsmen to fend off mosquitoes. He was raised in the San Francisco Bay Area and learned to fish at the tender age six. But it wasn't until

the mid-70s when, after taking a class from legendary fly fisher Mel Krieger, he "got hooked and never looked back." Meaning that he's immersed himself in all things piscatory for nearly 36 years—and become something of a legend himself as the proprietor and headmaster of the California School of Flyfishing. He's the authority on taking to Sierran waters with fly rod in search of the brook trout, cutthroat, rainbow, brown and especially *oncorhynchus mykiss aguabonita*, the California Golden Trout. It should be mentioned that Cutter's business partner and wife, Lisa, is as dedicated and accomplished a fisher as he.

Cutter is passionate about passing along his love for the sport. And though he can teach folks to catch trout in about 15 minutes, he's more inclined to slow things down in order to cultivate an appreciation for the fishing art.

"People want to take all the shortcuts, when the reality is that fishing is a process, not an end point," Cutter says. "And a lot of people just go straight there and stop. Why do I need to learn entomology? Why do I need to learn a variety of casts? Why do I need to learn how to effectively read a river when I can catch fish perfectly well with a fly, using one or two techniques? That's valid, I guess, if your whole reason for fishing is to catch a fish. But it's just so much more involved. The day I stop learning is the day I stop fishing."

Geoff Clarke

**GUIDE FOR ALPINE SKILLS INTERNATIONAL, EXPEDITION:
KIRKWOOD, LAKE TAHOE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

Base of Operations: South Lake Tahoe, CA

Claim to Fame: Telemark skiing phenom, first Professional Ski Instructors of America (PSIA) telemark ski chief examiner, backcountry ski guide extraordinaire

Tele Hot Tip: To improve your tele skiing, focus on shifting more pressure to the inside foot. By doing so, you'll be able to edge the inside ski more effectively, which will fine-tune your fore and aft balance and translate into a cleaner turn.

Backcountry Skiing Hot Tip: Take an AIARE (American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education) Level I avalanche course. Enough said.

Geoff Clarke's favorite guiding moment is at the end of a week-long ski tour, when clients thank him, in so many words, for helping them discover their inner mountaineer.

"It's a feeling that you get—when clients open up to being guided through extreme terrain—and follow you," says Clarke. "Not so much on a reliance on the guide, but more as a companion in the backcountry who can show them where to go safely."

As far as credentials go, Clarke's got the goods: He's certified by the PSIA as a Nordic track and telemark instructor,

by the American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) as a ski mountaineering guide and by the AIARE to teach avalanche courses. In 1989, he became PSIA-West's first telemark examiner.

Clarke's qualifications make him the go-to guide for backcountry touring. And though he'd rather maintain free heels on humdinger ski tours, like the Sierra High Route (one of his favorites), the recent rush to randonee gear has resulted in fewer folks skiing with free heels—which sometimes forces him to lock down his own.

"But even if there's just one tele skier on a ski tour, I'll use tele gear," he's quick to add. Most of all, however, it's Clarke's dedication to empowering his clients that has him coming back to guide terrain that's high and wild.

"He's the best," says writer and backcountry guru Craig Dostie. "His skiing is flawless—obnoxiously flawless. He can ski breakable crust and make it look like powder. And he's understated as an instructor—not at all forceful—which is perhaps his most endearing quality as a guide."



PHOTO BY CRAIG DOSTIE



Sally Jones

**PROGRAM DIRECTOR OF THE
AUBURN SKI CLUB**

Base of Operations: Soda Springs, CA

Claim to Fame: Full-certification Nordic examiner and clinician, first-degree aikido black belt and owner of local aikido dojo, Master Somatic Coach

Hot Tip: Drill your one-leg balance whenever possible by taking two strides and holding the last glide until you stall. And then drop your poles on the ground and ski, concentrating on body position.

A native of Birmingham, England, Sally Jones' crisp British accent contrasts with the Nordic ski discipline that she's made her life's work. She discovered snow sports during college and, after launching a career in outdoor education, relocated to New Zealand. There, Jones parlayed her love of cross-country skiing

into a gig as ski school director of the nation's largest groomed trail system. In 1991, Jones traveled to Tahoe, picking up work at Tahoe Donner XC. For four years, she followed the snow, teaching in both hemispheres until being offered a job as program director of the Auburn Ski Club (ASC).

Jones is not just one of the area's most accomplished cross-country ski instructors—she's one of the hardest working. When she's not instructing or running the youth and junior skiing program at ASC, she's organizing national races, serving as a board member of the Far West Ski Association, instructing aikido students or providing life coaching.

As a PSIA examiner and clinician, Jones draws on her background in bodywork and martial arts to help her students find flow, both on and off snow.

"My main focus has always been and will always be finesse," she says, "and helping my students avoid struggle. When we hit a bump wrong, or if the trail gets icy all of a sudden, our energy goes high, we go into our heads, spin out and start to doubt ourselves. But what aikido trains is to drop our energy down—lower our center of gravity. And that's a metaphor that works well in everyday life: When we get that stress button hit—through work, relationships or on skis—we can actually be in a good, balanced place to make a better move."

COURTESY PHOTO

Max Jones

OWNER OF SPOONER LAKE OUTDOOR COMPANY

Base of Operations: Spooner Lake, NV

Claim to Fame: Mountain Bike Hall of Famer, two-time national mountain bike champion, Flume Trail creator.

Hot Tip: Buy the best bike you can afford, and learn to float your front wheel.

In the summer of 1982, Max Jones was a newly-minted mountain bike racer. He was already one of the strongest rock climbers in Yosemite Valley, an elite cross-country ski racer and a sponsored road bike rider. He was living in Incline Village and needed trails, lots of them, to train on. One day, he was poring over the U.S. Geological Survey topographical map of Marlette Lake, scoping out terrain, when he spied a line of blue dashes labeled “aqueduct” connecting Tunnel Creek Road to Marlette Lake.

Jones ventured out, eventually stumbling on what he had hoped to find: a decrepit and overgrown flume bed contouring nearly 1,000 feet above Lake Tahoe’s shores for five miles. After receiving an informal nod from the Nevada Division of State Parks, Jones set about clearing the trail of deadfall, rock slides and willows. By October, he had singlehandedly created one of the most superlative stretches of mountain bike single-track in the United States: the Flume Trail.

Jones rode the Flume into history: After retiring from a distinguished 15-year career, he was inducted into the Mountain Biking Hall of Fame. And as the proprietor and chief shuttle driver of the Spooner Lake Outdoor Company, which is the unofficial start of the Flume Trail traverse, Jones sees a lot of folks who would have more fun on their bikes with a lesson or two.

“There is this thought in the mountain bike world that “No, I can pick this up on my own,” says Jones. “For example, there’s a downhill technique that I’ve never seen written up in the magazines—just one little trick—and it’s amazing how much more stable riders are on sandy, rocky and loose downhills. It’s just huge, even for good riders.”

Jones tries to explain the technique, but eventually demurs. “It’s really something that has to be experienced.”

Jones is available for private lessons, but only on a special request basis. And those who do bike the Flume with him come out the other side a transformed rider.



Julie Young

OWNER OF O2FITNESS

Base of Operations: Northstar-at-Tahoe, CA

Claim to Fame: professional cyclist, national champion, cross-country skier, trail runner, endurance sports coach

Hot Tip: Visualization: To get the most out of a workout, picture yourself at a pivotal stretch of the race course; see yourself looking strong.

Julie Young wants to pump you up. Not with muscles, necessarily, but with a love for life-long fitness and a yen for achieving athletic goals

that, she says, will enrich the mental, emotional and physical realms of your life. “To me, it’s all about lifestyle,” she says. “I love helping folks understand that athleticism isn’t just a habit or a quick fix—it’s a passion. It does so much to create balance, clarity and make the wheels go around smoothly.”

She knows whereof she speaks: her pedal strokes were some

of the smoothest and fastest on the pro cycling peloton while she competed from 1990 to 2002. Young happened into road biking relatively late in life, after competing on the UCLA golf team. Arguably one of the most athletically precocious American cyclists, Young came off the golf course to dominate the peloton. Within a year of her first recreational bike rides, she was invited to the National Team camp; the next year, she was racing for the U.S., eventually picking up a pro contract, and going on to become one of the most dominant stage racers in Europe, snagging the yellow jersey at the prestigious Tour de l’Aude, the women’s equivalent to the Tour de France.

“It didn’t feel like work to me,” she says. “That self-discipline and perseverance of setting a goal and seeing it to fruition—I think it was empowering and confidence building.”

After 12 years of riding and captaining professional teams, she hung up her cleats, picked up skinny skis and became one of Tahoe’s top citizen cross-country ski racers and trail runners. In 2005, she cranked up her training business, o2Fitness, to help others attain personal bests, whether road biking, alpine skiing or running.

Viewing her role as a guide rather than teacher, Young says that it’s not so much about the activity, but discovering oneself in the process.

Mickey Daniels

OWNER OF MICKEY'S BIG MACK CHARTERS

Base of Operations: Carnelian Bay, CA

Claim to Fame: 42 years of catching and cataloging The Lake's fish population

Hot Tip: Fish instead of ski; the best time to fish for Mackinaw is in the winter.

After spending the better part of his life plying Tahoe waters in search of The Lake's mighty Mackinaw trout, Carnelian Bay's Mickey Daniels insists his storied career hasn't been so much about finding fish as making new acquaintances. "To me, the fish are a bonus to get out and see your friends, meet people and have coffee in the morning," he says. "That's really what it's all about."

Daniels, 73, migrated to Tahoe just prior to the 1960 Olympics, took a liking to trawling The Lake and made the area home. Though he had fulltime gigs with the Placer County Sheriff's Department, the California Highway Patrol and as the publicly elected constable of North Tahoe, Daniels didn't let desk jobs get in the way of his fishing. And when fellow anglers asked Daniels to guide them in Tahoe's fishery, he figured he'd

charge them for his time; after launching his business with a 14-foot boat, Daniels traded up every few years to accommodate demand.

These days he pilots the 43-foot *Big Mack II*, a formidable vessel that's part yacht, part fish magnet, and comes replete with downriggers, state-of-the-art fish finding gadgetry and a cush cabin (some people would rather nap than fish, Daniels chuckles). Daniels rises well before dawn to welcome his guests, collect minnows and prowl The Lake's frigid, glassy waters not only for the rapacious Mackinaw, but also brown, rainbow and Kokanee, the famous freshwater salmon that spawns in the Basin's streams.

Daniels records and tags every fish he catches, and shares his data with researchers from UC Davis and the University

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COURTESY PHOTO

Bela Vadasz & Mimi Maki-Vadasz

OWNERS OF ALPINE SKILLS INTERNATIONAL

Base of Operations: Truckee, CA (summer); Sugar Bowl, CA (winter)

Claim to Fame: Decorated mountain guides and ski instructors who helped create American mountain guiding standards

Hot Tip: Lighten up. The Vadaszes have made an art of minimizing pack weight through years of experimentation. Look for redundancies and toss the superfluous stuff.

There are few husband-and-wife mountain guiding teams, and fewer still whose first names are synonymous with not only their brand, but an entire approach to moving efficiently and safely in high mountains. "Bela and Mimi" and their service, Alpine Skills International (ASI), are, to the outdoor community, interchangeable.

Simply put, the Vadaszes are among the most decorated and accomplished guides in the United States, and leading alpinists

and skiers in their own right. Mimi is one of the few American women to have climbed Mt. Everest without Sherpa support; in 2003, as a member of a non-supported expedition, she summited in gale-force winds, rescuing an ailing team member during the descent. And anyone who telemark skied in the mid-1980s will remember the widely circulated photo of Bela shredding Chute Out, an extreme couloir near Tioga Pass. That photo opened minds to terrain that could be aggressively skied on three-pins—and helped usher in the telemark skiing era.

Bela and Mimi's success is perhaps attributable to their exacting technical standards and multi-disciplinary approach. Rather than focusing on any single skill, they guide entire mountains, bottom to top—rock, ice and snow—using a participatory teaching style that's distinctly American. Bela is one of the first U.S.-based guides to become fully certified by the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA), and he was instrumental in codifying American ski mountaineering guiding to European standards, which was *sine qua non* for the AMGA's inclusion into the IFMGA. In 2008, Bela received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the AMGA.

When they formed ASI in 1979, Bela and Mimi drew inspiration from their own mentors, Sierra legends like Jules Eichorn, Allen Steck and David Beck. "We wanted to be just like them," says Bela. They've certainly achieved that goal. And then some.



COURTESY PHOTO

Lee Schmidt

OWNER OF HIGH SIERRA WATER SKI SCHOOL

Base of Operations: Sunnyside and Homewood, CA

Claim to Fame: Proprietor of the biggest water ski school (in terms of volume) in the U.S., fully certified as a water ski instructor as well as an International Certified Race Coach from the United States Ski Coaches Association

Hot Tip: Move your hips forward by arcing your lower back and shifting your center of mass directly over your feet, and there you are: ready to shred water.

According to Lee Schmidt, ten minutes of waterskiing is equivalent to an hour of weight lifting. If true, that would make Schmidt, a water ski instructor at Tahoe for 31 years, a very strong guy.

Schmidt learned to water ski in Meeks Bay when he was just three years old. “Back then you could ski off the beach,” he says. “I remember my parents holding my skis when I was really little, the boat would start and they’d walk in up to their necks and let go.”

By the time he was ten, Schmidt was waterskiing at a national level, and he was a junior national champion in both

slalom and jumping. After attending Southern Oregon University on an athletic scholarship, and teaching at boutique ski schools at Lake Shasta and Medford Pond, he moved back to Tahoe, ironically for the snow skiing; Schmidt is an internationally certified alpine coach who works winters for the Squaw Valley Ski Team.

But during the summers, Schmidt runs his High Sierra Water Ski School out of two locations on the West Shore—and business is brisk.

“We teach more students, on average, than any other ski school in the country,” he says.

While the prospect of skiing Tahoe’s famous waters lures many first timers, it’s adrenaline that brings them back. The rush occurs somewhere between the end of a turn and the pull across the wake; pros accelerate from 19 to 72 miles per hour in eight-tenths of second. Amateurs don’t ski nearly as fast, but the outcome’s the same: the desire to take another pull.

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COURTESY PHOTO



Chris Fellows

OWNER OF NORTH AMERICAN SKI TRAINING CENTER

Base of Operations: Truckee, CA

Claim to Fame: World-class ski instructor, entrepreneur, author of *Total Skiing*

Hot Tip: Find the middle of your skis underfoot; focus on the perpendicularity of your spine and shins relative to the pitch.

Like other decorated ski instructors liberally sprinkled around The Lake, Chris Fellows is a ranking member of the

PSIA, having served on the certifying body’s national demonstration team. As a consummate technician, he can analyze the mechanics of a turn with preternatural clarity, and help clients make quantum leaps in their ability to descend mountains.

What sets Fellows apart, however, is that rather than tie himself to a particular ski school, he created his own: the North American Ski Training Center. NASTC is a total immersion program that has no physical boundaries—a movable powder

feast with on- and off-piste intensives at ski areas spanning several continents and both hemispheres. He staffs the school with fellow PSIA team members and IFMGA guides, and steeps his students in week-long learning laboratories that include on-snow sessions, videography, chalk talks and individual coaching, resulting in vastly improved skiing as well as the occasional epiphany. Some clients realize the week is just as much about being well as it is about skiing well.

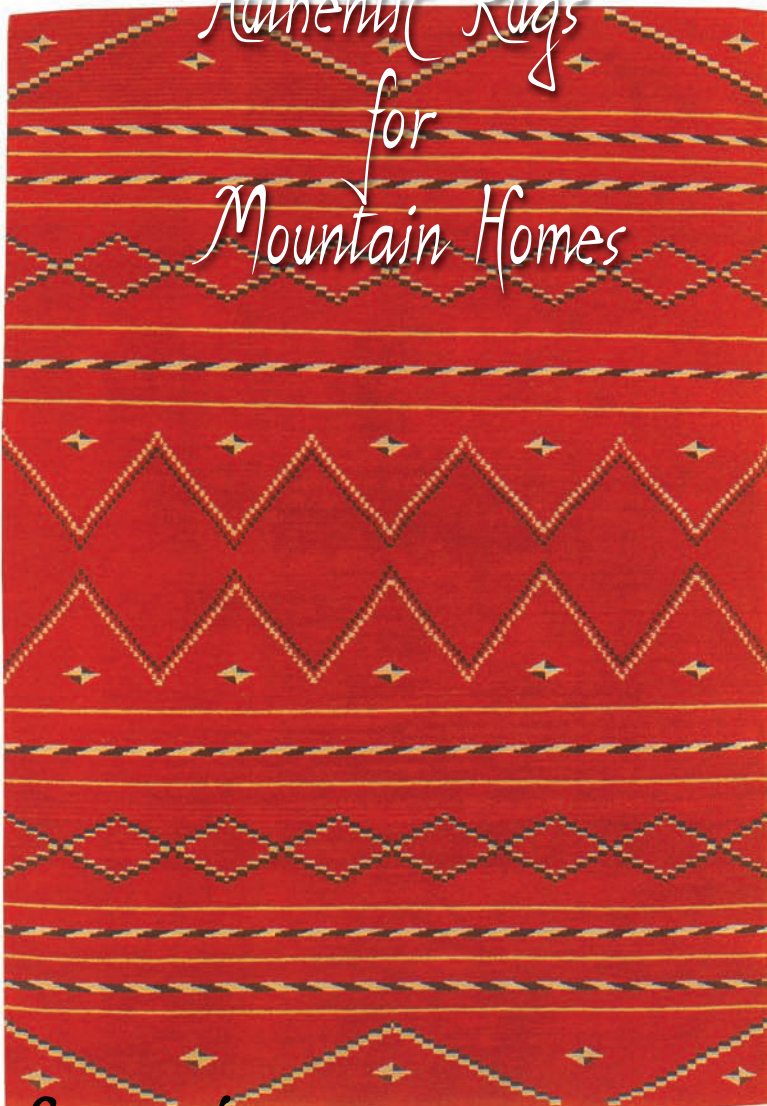
Fellows’ passion for teaching is obvious. “I’ve been skiing with some of the same people for 16 or 17 years,” he says. “And they don’t return to NASTC because they’re not getting any better—they’re getting a lot better. But they’re able to realize new horizons and new objectives and goals. It’s pretty satisfying to work in a field where you can build those kinds of relationships.”

In his book, *Total Skiing*, released last December, Fellows shares his framework for curing common skiing ills; according to Fellows, the world is comprised of skiers who are overpowered, underpowered, underskilled and a combination of all the above. Root cause lies in variables such as fitness, mobility, stability and flexibility.

“I believe all of us have strengths and all of us have weaknesses, but we don’t all have the same strengths and weaknesses,” he says. “So in reading the book, you can say, ‘Wow, I didn’t realize this is one of my weaknesses; I thought it was one of my strengths.’ And then you can patch up that hole.”

PHOTO BY JONATHAN SELKOWITZ

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(Mickey Daniels continued from page 50)
of Nevada, Reno—and he reports that Lake Tahoe’s a tough body of water for a fish to make a living: “Just 315 square miles of watershed for 192 square miles of lake,” he says. “There’s little spawning habitat, and that hurts.”

The Mackinaw, however, are a durable species and incredibly long-lived (Daniels caught one particular trout 20 years after first reeling it in) and hefty, with the true leviathans exceeding 35 pounds. As to hooking one of these monsters, Daniels is circumspect. “Let’s face facts,” he says. “They average right around four to five pounds. But the more you go out, the better chance you’ll get a big fish. Sooner or later, you’re going to get one. It’s simply the law of averages.”

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The sport is nothing, if not strenuous. The rigors of waterskiing are so great, in fact, that even the strongest skiers can’t last much more than 15 minutes per pull. “I’ll get out there for the first ski of the season and ski for five minutes, then be so sore I can’t ski for three or four days,” Schmidt says. That’s why waterskiing, according to Schmidt’s own research, has the lowest mean age—about 13.5—of any recreational sport in the United States.

There may be something about magical about Lake Tahoe, however, with its bracing temperatures and stunning vistas, which acts as tonic for water skiers, both young and not so young.

“I keep saying I’m going to hit my peak, because of my age,” says Schmidt, who is 57. “But technically, I’m skiing as well as I ever have.” **TQ**

Frequent contributor Brad Ressler has written for TQ about the Death Ride bicycle tour, chi running and making his own skis.