

Cool for cats

words by VINCE SHULEY

pictures by SANTIAGO ADVENTURES

I feel spoiled. It's late June in Chile and big snowstorms have allowed almost all the resorts to open with powder conditions.

To the west I can see the Pacific Ocean, in every other direction I see the vast expanse of the Andes Mountains.

To the east I'm dwarfed by Cerro Aconcagua, the highest peak outside of the Himalayas.

Today I'm a guest of Anton 'Toni' Sponar, an Austrian born ski instructor from Aspen who owns and operates Ski Arpa Snowcats.

He points out the boundaries of his land, spanning 2000 hectares (5000 acres). I ask him how his operation in the Arpa Valley came about.



South American spindrift at the top of Ratonera

picture: SANTIAGO ADVENTURES



"The cat skiing came out of necessity. I never had any money to build a ski lift." The cost of purchasing and maintaining his two snow cats was relatively small compared with installing and operating a chair lift and rebuilding the access road into the Arpa Valley.

Our guide is American Patrick Graham, who spends his winters mountaineering in the backcountry of Idaho. He explains that at our elevation (3610 metres/11,800'), much of the snow has been wind-affected, but he reassures us that it will get better as we descend.

I drop in but struggle to find rhythm on the hard snow. My first turns of winter 2008 aren't as epic as I'd hoped, but my

Operations headquarters – 'El Refugio'.

picture: CODY DUCETTE

Summit of Cerro Blanco with Mt Aconcagua in the distance

picture: SANTIAGO ADVENTURES

attitude quickly changes as I clear the wind packed snow and lay out some long powder turns.

The remaining 500 metres vertical takes us through open bowls and challenging couloirs with no tracks in sight.

We load up the cat for our second run and all I can think about is how lucky I am to be in Chile this season.

The Arpa Valley is located just near Los Andes, 80 kilometres north of Santiago. The access road is challenging (4WD-only) and the facilities are minimal.

With its extensive alpine terrain and serious lack of crowds, Ski Arpa is a unique backcountry experience and a great day trip from the Chilean ski resorts.

More info:

www.santiagoadventures.com

<http://www.southamericaski.com>

