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*a slab unleashes
white fury cascading down
we watch, out of reach*



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ON THE COVER

"We had just had a major
avalanche cycle, followed
by six feet of new snow
and were a bit timid about
the avalanche conditions,"
photographer Grant
Gunderson says of the cover
shot of Corey Felton from
the Mt. Baker bc. "Even on
really sketchy days, you
can still go out and have a
lot of fun if you listen to the
mountain." **Grant Gunderson**





La Ciencia de la Nieve

One class at a time, Diego Allolio is changing snow safety in South America

by Brigid Mander

An Andean ridge, freshly coated in untracked powder, spread out in front of our small crew. Despite the new snow, we did not check the avalanche forecast or examine records of the season's past storms before heading into the backcountry that morning. We rode the lift and slipped out the Cerro Catedral boundary ready to make our own observations and assess the stability ourselves.

It wasn't because we couldn't be bothered to prepare, but rather that avalanche information and education aren't readily available in Argentina. But Diego Allolio, one of my touring partners that day, has been working to change that since 2010's austral winter.

The Buenos Aires-born Allolio is no stranger to improving and promoting the outdoor community in the southern cone. After more than a decade of working in the U.S. as an instructor with the National Outdoor Leadership School, he returned to Bariloche to launch his own guiding and adventure company, structured around North American norms.

After climbing Aconcagua in 1999, he

became disappointed with the waste on the mountain and worked to bring the Leave No Trace (No Deje Rastro) campaign to Argentina and Chile. He then helped implement standardized canoe and guide instruction in South America with the American Canoe Association. Now, noting growing numbers of Argentine skiers heading out of bounds without experience or education, he's focusing on avalanche safety.

"The growing numbers [are] resort skiers who got bored inbounds and are taking on the backcountry, which in South America means terrain with little access to external help," says the tall, energetic Allolio. In Argentina, avalanche classes were held sporadically, Allolio says, with widely inconsistent protocols; avalanche-information-sharing sites sometimes appeared on Facebook and any grassroots efforts were neither comprehensive nor reliable.

"When I started guiding, even a few years ago, the general idea was that avalanches didn't occur in South America," says Marcos Couch, an internationally certified guide and friend of Allolio's. "Then, we had some incidents, and the subject became serious."

"Formal education seemed reserved for mountain guides," Allolio adds, "but I realized that there was a strong community of ski mountaineers and recreational skiers looking for advanced avalanche training, too."

With that in mind, he researched different protocols, and in 2010 he approached the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE) about holding more courses

in South America to standardize the education for professionals and recreationalists.

It wasn't just a matter of arranging a few courses, however. Language barriers and Argentina's volatile, struggling economy compounded the usual obstacles associated with raising education levels. So Allolio embarked on a massive, voluntary translation of AIARE Level I and II materials and books and has been investigating external fundraising opportunities to keep tuition costs more manageable for would-be students.

"People are starting to realize that avalanches are part of life in the mountains, and that, with education, we can prevent accidents," says Alexandra Taran, a guide with Casa Tours, a backcountry guiding operation, and founder of the South American

Beacon Project, which collects beacons to donate to South American snow workers and athletes. "There are many people involved, but Diego is at the forefront of making this once-unavailable curriculum available to anyone."

Since Allolio's classes began in 2011, 139 alumni have been added to the AIARE database, including guides, ski patrollers, instructors, freeriders and climbers, as well as mining safety workers and ski-area managers. "In 2015 we are planning to hold seven courses," Allolio says, "and possibly a Level III and an instructor course so that courses can be taught in Spanish in the future."

"Diego has done a ton of work," says Brian Lazar, former executive director of AIARE and a current board member, who oversaw Allolio's initial efforts. "But the current model of bringing foreigners in to teach is not sustainable, economically or otherwise." So Lazar supports his effort to train locally based instructors.

"It's truly one of those grassroots efforts, much like how we started here at AIARE," adds Tom Murphy, former director of operations. "When you're starting a project like that, it's a passion project. Diego saw what we were doing, that there was a void in South America, and he is attempting to fill that void."

"This is just the starting point," Allolio says. And, right now, seeing the growth in awareness among the Andean ski community is enough for him. "There's more to be done. But my original passion [in outdoor education] was to help others become independent backcountry travelers."

[photo] Diego Allolio puts South American snow-safety education to the test. **Mark Fisher**