



blown in

John Falkiner: Real. Interesting.

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Aussie John Falkiner is the most fascinating man you've never met.

by Amy Marwick

Falkiner knows every nook and cranny on Mont Fort, Verbier, Switzerland. // Photos: Mark Shapiro



What would it take to really be the *most interesting man in the world*? Well first, he'd have to be a skier—a backcountry skier. Let's see...his résumé must include countless adventures in exotic (ideally dangerous) places—on skis. Handsome, yes. Kind, check. The whimsy of a child, yes. Intellectual without being pretentious; of course. A last name that connotes a mastery of nature; an

accent rich from a world faraway; a twinkling eye...

Meet John Falkiner, untiring guide, telemark pioneer and ski model from Verbier, Switzerland's golden age. He's been James Bond's stuntman, owns numerous first descents and has travelled the globe seeking out the world's most exotic powder pockets. An IFMGA guide, he leads expeditions to the Lebanon, Russia and Iran and was among the first Westerners to discover the skiing in Kashmir. We recently had tea with Falkiner—his friends use only his last name—at his mountain chalet to talk travel and technology, and the politics of powder. (*Editor's note: For a better faraway effect, read the Falkiner quotes with an Australian accent.*)

BCM: What was the reception like when you were travelling in Iran?

FALKINER: *In Iran, I couldn't speak to people, but they were inviting me in to have a cup of tea, and they would run to find somebody who maybe spoke a little bit of English or French. And that was magical. You know, you are sitting around and you're saying, "Well, I've got to go find my friend..." and they're saying, "No! No, you're from Australia. We want to know!" Nobody, once I got into Iran, asked me for my passport whatsoever.*

So you might as well have been an American? *Americans are a little bit louder about their political views, which makes it harder. If you've got a non-political motive for going, and you're not trying to change something, then there*

is a strong chance that you're not going to have any problems. If you go in with a pair of skis and you're going there for the mountains and for the people, and you work a little bit with the people—getting them to help carry your gear up with horses and stuff like that—you involve the local people, then you won't have problems.

So, where's next? *Any resort that doesn't have high-speed facilities in it is more attractive to me because it means that the whole rhythm of the resort is slower. Usually, my uphill access is just stepping through the door to open up wider terrain. So where I'd like to go could be within Europe—it can be within totally unthreatening countries—it's not that I am choosing these countries for all that. >>*



Above: Falkiner in Chamonix, France, 2009.

Below: Falkiner filming for a German TV commercial in 1992. // Photos: Ace Kvale



it just happens that my life has taken me to those places to ski.

So you're working from the topographical maps and Google Earth and all that backward to where those places may be? *I'm going where the snow is. Sure, you look at maps, but also having done what I've done for so long, there's this network of travellers and I talk to them. There's a whole group of mountains just outside of Rome called the Abruzzi that got a magnificent amount of snow this year. They had more snow down there than they did in the Alps; a lot more snow—five or six meters. I mean, I'd love to go back to areas like Nepal. I've trekked over various things in the summer. I skied underneath Everest in Tibet. This year, I skied the Shishapangma in Tibet. If you look at the whole of Russia, it's unbelievable how much is untapped.*

When you were in Iran, last season, you ran into some hunters way up in the mountains. Tell us about that. *We had walked probably three or four hours up and we had climbed a thousand meters or more. And I had seen some tracks in the snow on the way up and I was thinking, "What the hell is this? It looks like somebody has been walking up here." Then, as we got to the top, we saw these guys with guns, which you really weren't supposed to have there. Of course, Mohammed [his guiding partner] speaks Persian, so we could communicate with them. We did what you would do normally with somebody you meet up in the mountain: we shared tea with them; we shared food, and they brought out what they had.*

And then they slid down with you guys? *As long as they could stop themselves, they slid down. I was just poking around at the beginning because always in these unknown mountains you get no avalanche information. So I skied the first run, and they thought it was fantastic. Then we regrouped, and they said, "Well this is how we go down," and off they slid. It was quite steep, about 45 degrees with spring snow.*

Do you think that they, if given the opportunity, would like to ski? *If you look at Kashmir, a lot of the Kashmiris ski now. And there is a ski culture that is growing there. In the first years when we went in 1989, not so many people skied. Now, there is a large proportion of the kids who do ski, and now they've got fat skis, and they are involved with the industry there. Some of them ski pretty well.*

The flip side of this, of course, is that a society can westernize itself out of its own culture. *It's a double-edged sword. In Siberia, I went to visit some reindeer herders. We flew in by helicopter after a climbing expedition. On our way back, we stopped to see these reindeer. As we were talking with some of these herders, a helicopter came in with all the kids. The children were down at school with their parents, and it was only really the grandparents who were being nomads moving with the reindeer. In previous times, the whole family unit used to travel together. Now, because of the demands of education, they can't have a teacher travel with the nomads, but I think that would be a damn good asset. But they are actually missing an unbelievable natural education up in the mountains as nomads.*

How has Kashmir changed? *I first went to Kashmir in 1989 when there was virtually no communication. They had an operator there who would plug you in and connect you with the outside world. When we came back in the early 2000s, the cell phone had started, but you didn't really see computers or any form of Internet there. Three years later, the hotel we stayed at introduced Wi-Fi. I remember arriving and going up to the bar, which is what you used to do before dinner and sit and chat for an hour. So I went in and there were 10 people, all sitting around, all with their computers open, nobody communicating whatsoever. I felt really sad about that. Suddenly something had been lost. It's like going to the Hilton and you know that the barman's name is going to be Max, and you know that your drink is going to be made exactly the same. It suddenly unifies everything in the world and makes it just the same, but what I love is going to different situations.*

And taking people with you. *If I have been skiing with somebody for a week and by the end of the week they haven't constantly got their head to their smart phone, I feel like I've achieved something. ■*