

# Sledding the San Juans

## A Non-Motorhead Falls Headlong for Snowmobiling

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT

**B**eing a complete non-motorhead by nature, I've often wondered: What's the big deal about riding a big, stinky, noisy machine across the snow? Last March, before winter released its grip on the San Juan Mountains, I set out to find the answer to that question, and found it in three very different places.

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### MOLAS PASS

"It's a simple machine," explained Silverton Snowmobile Club President Jim Lokey. "A throttle, and a brake."

Well, there was a bit more to it than that. This was a sleek, modern marvel, an unbeatable combination of power, efficiency and incredible handling. But the thing I liked most about my snowmobile was its heated handlebars. That, and the emergency kill switch, which Lokey promised would make the machine stop instantly (if I remembered to use it) the moment I got into trouble.

They called it a sled, but this was a machine that was built for speed, and I was pretty sure I'd like that, too.

It was a chilly dazzle of a day up at Molas Lake Park, elevation 10,500', just off of U.S. Highway 550, five miles south of Silverton. Fields of snow beckoned in all directions, and the glacier-honed spires of the Grenadier Mountains in the Weminuche Wilderness grinned on the horizon, as the wind lifted banners of snow off their flanks and into the bluebird sky.

Lokey spent years of his life up here as a snowmobile tour vendor prior to selling his concession in 2012. Today, he and his successor, Larry Gallegos with San Juan Backcountry Tours, were taking me out for a spin to give me a taste of what it was all about. Lokey's teenage son Levi was along for the ride.

"You want to just ease into it," Lokey advised. "You don't want to go just tearing out like you are from Iraq, and run into a tree and come back to me and go 'Jeem, ze macheen will not go! I do not know what to dooo....' We have had that happen to us."

Lokey laughed, the low-key laugh of a surf bum from So-Cal who found his way to oceans of snow as an adult.

My sled was pretty spunky with its 500cc engine, but I was sure I could avoid the trees. I repeated the operating instructions to myself: *This hand is go and that hand is stop and if I get into trouble, I push that down.*

"OK, got it. Ready to roll."

Snowmobiling is not a quiet sport. Our two-stroke engines ripped through the morning hush, as we roared out onto the crisp corduroy. The Silverton Snowmobile Club uses a snowcat to groom miles of trail up here, both within the 137-acre Molas Lake Park (managed by the Town of Silverton) and on the public lands surrounding it on both sides of the highway.

As Lokey and I zoomed along, Levi and Gallegos took every opportunity to dive off the trail and cavort like motorized otters in deep pools of snow. Their sleds had big paddles and longer tracks for powder, and aggressive turbo-charged engines for hill-climbing.

Mine was a trail machine, made for going down the road. That suited me just fine, as I got the feeling for using my weight as a counterbalance when cruising around tight curves, or standing up in the saddle as we popped up over a steep rise.

A couple of times, despite my best efforts, I slipped off the trail and my sled wallowed in deep drifts of snow. I hit the kill switch, then the guys deftly dug me out and we were on our way once more.

Our two-hour tour took us on a big, beautiful loop through rollicking, winter-wonderland terrain, back and forth across Highway 550 a few times, and all the way to the top of Molas Pass, culminating

with a steep climb up to a place called Rocky Point on the flanks of Sultan Mountain, with boundless views of the Weminuche.

At one point, Lokey paused to point out fresh lynx tracks across the trail and into the woods. He often sees coyotes up here, too – proof, he said, that wildlife and snowmobiles can coexist just fine. And although there have been bitter turf wars in the past, the friendly waves from backcountry skiers we passed along the way seemed to say that they were OK with sharing the terrain, as well; after all, our snowmobiles created trails that make it easier for them to access the powder bowls they craved.

"The user groups coexist pretty happily, now," Lokey said. "There is rarely any kind of conflict; everyone is on their day off, having a good time."

Snowmobiling on Molas Pass has come a long way over the past 10 years. With its gorgeous views, easy accessibility from Highway 550 and meticulously groomed trail system, it turns out to be a great place to get a taste for the sport.

The area is literally buzzing all winter long. Special events promoted by the Silverton Snowmobile Club and the neighboring San Juan Sledders from Durango include XMS Snocross competitions, drag-racing on Molas Lake, adaptive sledding events and safety courses for kids.

"We have turned this into a big family park," Lokey said, when we wrapped up our ride. "There's a sledding hill, cookouts, bathrooms. There is expert riding up here at Molas, but what's cool is that the moms and the kids can ride on the trail and the dads can ride off and play."

Or vice versa, of course.

San Juan Backcountry Tours snowmobile guide Larry Gallegos playing in the powder on Molas Pass. (Photo by Samantha Wright)

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### A NOTE ABOUT SAFETY

Riding on a big, powerful machine can lull you into having a false sense of security. But the safety risks associated with snowmobiling are very real. These include avalanche danger as well as exposure to the elements; should you have the misfortune of becoming lost or stuck when you are miles and miles from help. In snowmobiling, as in many things, there is definitely safety in numbers. That's why even experienced sledders prefer to join a club, so they will always have people to ride with.

### ESSENTIAL GEAR

Dress as if you were headed out for a day of skiing – layered clothing topped with a snowsuit or snowpants and parka. Add goggles and a warm hat to go under your helmet, unless you are wearing a custom heated snowmobile helmet with a built-in face mask. Warm mittens or gloves, thick socks and tall, insulated winter boots finish the ensemble. Some tour operators offer snowmobile suits and boots for their guests; others do not.

### CONTROVERSY AT MOLAS LAKE

A small but popular portion of the Molas Lake trail system groomed by the Silverton Snowmobile Club passes through the West Needles Contiguous Wilderness Study Area, which the Bureau of Land Management recently determined should be closed to motorized travel. When local officials started making noise about the negative impact the closure could have on Silverton's wintertime economy, Colorado lawmakers joined forces to tack a provision onto the pending Hermosa Creek Wilderness Bill, which would preserve full, historic snowmobile access in the Molas Lake area. For now, the Bureau of Land Management has given snowmobilers permission to ride in the sensitive area, as the controversy works itself out.



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## TOURING AROUND TELLURIDE

A few days later, I was suited up once more, and ready to check out Telluride Outside's "Family-Friendly Half-Day Tour."

By now, I was an old hand, listening to snowmobile guide Scott Gilbert fill us in on the basics of snowmobile operation and safety as we sat astride our sleds.

Gilbert's message was emphatic, and simple: "Just keep your eyes on the trail."

Then he threw in some words of wisdom for the uninitiated: "The throttle will beat the brake every time. So the worst thing you can do in a panic reaction is grab onto everything. If you are going someplace you don't want to go, just let go and you will slow down."

Once again, our machines were equipped with hand and throttle warmers. I cranked up the heat as Gilbert explained how to feather the throttle to rev up the RPMs.

"Do the kids sit in front, or back?" asked a Hawaiian woman whose two young boys were along for the ride.

"Kids sit in back, behind Mom and Dad," Gilbert said. "Be sure to hang on."

And we were off.

Telluride Outside's Fall Creek snow base, about 30 minutes west of Telluride and Mountain Village, is the gateway to beautiful backcountry with end-

A first-time snowmobiler cruising down the road near Telluride Outside's Fall Creek snow base as a spring storm was closing in. (Photo by Samantha Wright)

less riding opportunities. The Big Kahuna out here is Beaver Park, highlighted by rolling hills and vast glades known to locals as "The Circus."

Our small group comprised of mostly inexperienced riders wasn't going quite that far. But we were still in for a treat as we raced along single-file on a wide, gently curving groomed trail leading us further and further back into pine, fir and aspen forest.

"It's too much fun at times," said Gilbert, a Wisconsin native, as we paused to admire a soaring view of the Wilson Range. "I feel guilty getting paid for it."

Eventually, our trail led to a hidden forest glade with Dolores Peak looming above us like a protective goddess, where Gilbert turned us loose to play.

To have an untouched meadow all to ourselves seemed pure magic. It was pristine, beautiful and white. The drone of our engines filled the air like hornets as we swarmed the meadow. It was a guilty pleasure, like dragging your finger through a perfectly frosted cake and licking it, over and over again.

A sudden spring storm chased us out of the glade and all the way back down to the staging area, hard pellets of snow smacking our face shields as we flew along the trail.

At the end of our tour, safe and sound back at the staging area, Gilbert summed up the high we were all feeling: "It's empowering. You are on this big machine, and you are in control of it and you can go really fast. And it's so simple. If worse comes to worst, just hit that red button."





## IF YOU GO

### MOLAS PASS

Durango, Silverton & Molas Pass Snowmobile Tours, operated by San Juan Backcountry out of Silverton, offers guided snowmobile tours and rentals at Molas Lake Park on a daily basis throughout the winter. 800-494-8687, [sanjuanbackcountry.com](http://sanjuanbackcountry.com)  
The Silverton Snowmobile Club ([silvertonsnowmobilers.org](http://silvertonsnowmobilers.org)) and San Juan Sledders Snowmobile Club ([sanjuansledders.org](http://sanjuansledders.org)) sponsor a variety of family-friendly snowmobile events.

### TELLURIDE

Telluride Snowmobile Adventures (970/728-4475, [telluridesnowmobile.net](http://telluridesnowmobile.net)) and Telluride Outside (800/831-6230, [tellurideoutside.com](http://tellurideoutside.com)) provide half-day and full-day snowmobile adventures in the Telluride area. Many of the trails in this region are groomed by the Westend Sledders, a snowmobile club based in Norwood (visit [coloradosleddcity.com](http://coloradosleddcity.com) for club information).

### GRAND MESA

Six lodges on Grand Mesa stay open year-round, catering to snowmobilers in the winter season. Most offer cabins, restaurants and snowmobile rentals and/or tours.

- Alexander Lake Lodge (970/856-2539, [alexanderlakelodge.com](http://alexanderlakelodge.com))
- Electric Mountain Lodge – Accessible by snowmobile or snow coach only during the winter season. (877-929-5522, [electricmountainlodge.com](http://electricmountainlodge.com))
- Grand Mesa Lodge (970/856-3250, [grandmesalodge.com](http://grandmesalodge.com))
- Mesa Lakes Lodge (970/268-5467, [mesalakeslodge.com](http://mesalakeslodge.com))
- Thunder Mountain Lodge (970/856-6241, [thundermountainlodge.net](http://thundermountainlodge.net))
- Vega Lodge (970/487-3733, [vegalodge.com](http://vegalodge.com))

The Delta SnoKrusers ([facebook.com/snokrusers](http://facebook.com/snokrusers)) groom 138 miles of multi-use trails on Grand Mesa. Several other snowmobile clubs from the region are also responsible for grooming portions of the vast trail system. The Grand Mesa Nordic Council grooms an additional 32.4 miles of cross-country ski trails in enclaves of Grand Mesa that are off-limits to motorized use.

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## GRAND MESA

I was ready for more, and I knew where to find it. Donna Ankenbauer of the Delta SnoKrusers had offered to take me out for a day of sledding on Grand Mesa.

Spring had already sprung in the North Fork Valley, with tender little green leaves emerging from bare branches in the orchards around Crawford. But as the road rose steeply out of Cedaredge, a shocking transformation took place. Suddenly, all the world slanted vertiginously away, and I was once again in a realm of snow.

Grand Mesa, a colossal flat-topped mountain spanning 500 square miles on Colorado's Western Slope, is said to be the largest mesa in the world. Rising about 5,000 feet above the surrounding river valleys, it is an alpine island in the sky that catches snow clouds as they sail by. The place gets an average of 420 inches – 35 feet – of snowfall per year.

It felt like entering a lost world – Narnia, perhaps, under the White Witch's spell. Even in late March, the place was buried in huge dollops and deep sparkling drifts of snow. I pulled to a stop in front of the cozy, rustic Alexander Lake Lodge, one of three lodges clustered in an area near the U.S. Forest Service visitors center.

Ankenbauer met me with two snowmobiles and an extra helmet. This was definitely the highest-tech, coolest-looking sled I'd had a chance to ride so far, with its custom turquoise paint job and sleek, glossy lines.

Ankenbauer, a California girl with long blonde

The author embraced the mantra "ride it like you stole it" in an off-trail ride on Grand Mesa. (Photo by Donna Ankenbauer)

hair tucked inside her helmet, married into an old Cedaredge family that's had a cabin on the mesa since 1929. Seven years ago, she and her husband decided to move up here full-time. They are both lone-eagles with high-tech jobs that allow them to work from home. Ankenbauer absolutely loves it. She goes out sledding whenever she gets the chance, and once a week or so, gets together with other Delta SnoKrusers for a club ride.

"We usually do a destination ride, to the Vega Lodge or Electric Mountain Lodge for lunch, and then go home," she said. Or sometimes, they'll head out to Land's End, a ranger observatory on Grand Mesa's western rim, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, that's surrounded by moonscaped benches of smooth flat terrain.

Once a winter, usually in February, they do a multi-day group ride all the way along the Sunlight to Powderhorn (S.P.) Trail System, the main corridor trail across Grand Mesa, that runs 120 miles from the Sunlight Mountain ski resort, near Glenwood Springs, to Powderhorn.

It used to be that Grand Mesa was a hidden gem, known only to the locals. But these days, it's definitely been discovered. Snowmobile clubs from across the country come here by the busload, frequently staying at one of the lodges on the mesa that cater to them. But the beauty of Grand Mesa is that, with all of its gorgeous vast terrain, "You can tour all day and never see a person," Ankenbauer said.

Altogether, the S.P. Trail connects with 180 miles of other groomed trails on the mesa.

Trails are numbered according to the mileage dis-

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Silverton teenager Levi Lokey has grown up snowmobiling on Molas Pass. (Photo by Samantha Wright)

tance from Sunlight Resort to where the trail intersects the S.P. trail. Once you get a feeling for how the number system works, it helps you to keep your bearings in a place where it is otherwise very easy to get lost.

But this impressive trail system is just the beginning of what sledding on Grand Mesa is all about. The real fun starts when you go off-trail.

Ankenbauer's favorite thing to do is boondocking: riding through the trees with no groomed trail. "For some reason, God seemed to put all the trees with the exact same spacing apart so the sled's skis fit through," she laughed. Then there are all those endless meadows full of deep, untouched powder, and the lakes, and the lakes, and the lakes.

Grand Mesa has over 300 of them, mostly man-

made, and tied into a century-old irrigation system. As we cruised along, there seemed to be another frozen, snow-covered lake just over the top of every rise, and we'd pin the throttle and sail across it at 80 mph. Fun? Hell, yeah.


Ankenbauer's mantra: "Ride it like you stole it."

Back at Alexander Lake Lodge at the end of the day, a group of guys huddled over beers and burgers, the next table over from us. I asked them what they loved about Grand Mesa.

"It's got awesome riding, that's the biggest thing," said Ryan Smith, a 25-year old Delta native who lives in Grand Junction now and has been riding up here his whole life. "It has the biggest variety of anywhere. You can go out to Land's End and ride

endless flat powdered fields all day long, or go back over into Hidden Valley and climb the Chutes of Death all day long. There's flat boondocking, and steep boondocking. If you know the mountain, everything's here."

## A FINAL NOTE

The three areas profiled here are only a drop in the bucket when it comes to snowmobiling opportunities in southwestern Colorado. Visit the Colorado Snowmobile Association's website, [coloradosledcity.com](http://coloradosledcity.com), to learn more about the three dozen or so snowmobile clubs across the state, and the trail systems that they maintain. 



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