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the Year of

Living Seasonally



■ Clockwise from top: Professional skier, Ben Dolenc; corporate dropout, Clay Coolman; and rafting guide Pandita Servais.

I. Spring Forth

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO HAVE THAT DREAM JOB IN THE OUTDOORS? THE AUTHOR FOLLOWED FIVE CHARACTERS THROUGH RIVER TRIPS, SKI MOVIES, LIFTLINES AND RESTAURANT JOBS OVER THE COURSE OF A YEAR TO LEARN JUST WHAT IT TAKES TO EXPERIENCE THE WILD AND FREE LIFESTYLE OF A SEASONAL WORKER.

STORY BY TOM PRICE
PHOTOS BY LIN ALDER



Ben Dolenc should have known better, but here he is again, waking up hung over in the parking lot. It's the last weekend of April and Copper Mountain's annual end-of-ski-season "SunSplash" bash. Last night he got into the spirit of it, celebrating at the new

Pravda vodka bar. Within an hour of showing up, Dolenc, who looks like someone's charming kid brother and is known as "Little Elvis" to his friends, was stretched out on said bar, straddled by a French-Canadian bartender named Clara who was dumping shots down his throat. Two hours later, Little Elvis left the building—Clara in tow.

Alas, the King doesn't always get his way. As the sun pokes over the Ten Mile Range, Dolenc is alone in his home—a beat up camper shell snuggled into the bed of a '93 Nissan pickup that's pushing a quarter million on the odometer. In a sleepy haze, he paws through the debris for clean-ish clothes and dresses hunched over. Grabbing his skis, he locks up and starts walking toward the slopes in search of caffeine before starting work at 9 a.m.

Just another day in the "play now, maybe pay later" life of the seasonal employee, the wandering tribe that provides the muscle, and mythology, for America's outdoor industry. Forget just going on vacation. For them, life *is* vacation. To the rest of us who try to make due cramming a year's worth of outdoor living into a ski weekend or weeklong rafting trip, seasonal employees seem to have it all figured out. Tied down by nothing more than what can fit in the back of a 4Runner, they're free to live completely in the moment, going wherever the surf's up, snow's deep and action hot.

Sure, the work may be monotonous—running a cash register, slinging food, serving drinks or guiding the same river—and the pay lousy, but for those who choose this route, the lifestyle tradeoff is worth it. It's not for everyone: It takes a certain confidence in yourself to chart a path that's truly your own. And while the paths of free-spirits like Ben Dolenc may seem similar—precipitating into the mountains when it's cold, flowing downstream with the runoff when it's warm—dig a little and their itinerant stories diverge. Most are young adults putting off growing up, taking pretty much any work just to keep playing for one more season before settling down, getting a "real job." Then there are the few who have made a career of seasonal employment. For an even smaller number, the siren call of nature has pulled them out of their office cubicles and into a midlife career change, the type of which most can only dream. The lifestyle isn't always easy. As aging joints creak and account balances dwindle, many know they're living on borrowed time, just a blown knee or failed head gasket from having their freedom come to an abrupt halt.

For Dolenc, today is the last day on the job as a professional athlete—a paid skier—in a Warren Miller ski film. Come morning, the Nissan is headed for Seattle to be stored. Then, Dolenc is off to the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, in search of more fresh tracks. After that, maybe he'll head to Alaska, or Whistler, or Mount Hood. The specifics don't really matter; he's in the flow. ►



II. Summertime, and the living is easy

PANDITA SERVAIS KNOWS ALL ABOUT the flow between seasons. She's been paddling in it for four years. After snowboarding the Appalachians all winter, she's made her way back to Fayetteville, West Virginia, for another summer as a whitewater guide for the Rivermen company on the Gauley and New rivers. At only 5' 5" and 120 pounds, she takes a quiet pride in being one of the company's few female guides.

"I do want to have a real job, eventually," the college dropout says, but what that entails will get figured out later. For now, there's boating to do. The 21-year-old is up at dawn pumping up boats and packing lunches before wandering over to the main lodge to deliver the mandatory safety lecture and "Deliverance" jokes to her guests. For the next five hours, their lives will be in her tiny hands, as she steers through Class V rapids, occasionally fishing out swimmers who've been flung into the churning river. Come five o'clock, after watching videos with her jacked up guests and collecting tips, she'll wander back down to the employee housing area—a refugee camp from Winnebagoland—to swap stories and have a beer, or maybe slip away to indulge in her real passion—kayaking.

When a rare day off does come around, Servais must decide where to unwind. Combine an overwhelmingly male population, cold beer and a never-ending lineup of vacationing guests, and the atmosphere in summer destination towns begins to pulse with an incredibly sexually charged energy. In fact, for Servais, whose Thai mother gave her almond eyes and an inviting smile, it's almost a job hazard. Fayetteville is what the military would call a "target rich environment," bursting at the seams with bars and jacked up boatmen. They're hitting on Servais like moths on a streetlamp, but all will flame out, getting the same polite brush off.

"I don't take it seriously," she laughs, "especially if it's guests." Although guests are commonly understood to be fair game, dating other guides is considered a bad idea. "I did date a guide last summer, and what I can tell you from that is you don't want to date a raft guide," Servais says. "You date one person in the rafting industry, and it doesn't matter where you go—you're gonna see that person, and you're going to see them with another person."

"I do want to have a real job, eventually"
—Pandita Servais



AT 43 (and looking several years younger), Pete “Tilts” Tilton is one of the rare few who’ve made a career as a seasonal worker. For 20 years, he’s been rowing rivers all over the world, migrating south to winter in Chile or Southern Africa, before coming back again. June means he’s out west, guiding on Cataract Canyon on the Colorado River through Canyonlands National Park near Moab, Utah.

“Everyone that rafts with me is envious of me,” Tilts says in a flat New England burr. “They don’t want a real job, they want to raft.”

In the lexicon of seasonals, a “real job” is one that requires being in a city, having a desk or doing anything other than being outside. Virtually every trip someone asks Tilts about what it takes to do his job. A lawyer from Manhattan. A Chicago stockbroker. They’re usually fit from a lot of gym time, but after volunteering to pull on the oars awhile they slump around the campfire, shoulders aching, in silent awe of Tilts and his Mark McGuire-sized forearms. The combination of his physical competence and the serene natural beauty that comes along with his “office” is powerfully alluring.

Part of the appeal is how uncomplicated his life seems. “I’m not philosophical about yin and yang and karma and what is that? Feng shui?” he says. He just knows that when he’s doing things right, everything flows, and that if you take people away from city life, their normal worries will drift away on the river. “Time kind of slows down. You get in tune with nature, and tuned out of everyday life. I only know it’s the weekend because I see more traffic.”

Like a lot of seasonal workers, Tilts didn’t plan this career—it seems to have chosen him. He grew up playing hockey in Concord, New Hampshire, and earned a BA in Business and Sociology/Anthropology. But after a post-graduation trip west, he never returned. Leaving this environment now can be jarring, as he found out 10 years ago. He tried going back, even got a fiancé and was eyeing a mortgage on a place in upstate New York, but when the relationship soured he returned west.

It’s easy to understand why; most seasonal outfits are a great place to work, and run on a combination of meritocracy and patronage; once you’re in, the perks of seniority just keep adding up. Those that apply tend to be healthy, outgoing, fun-loving people. Imagine bringing together everyone you know who’s the life of a party, then putting them in one place; it’s like summer camp as a kid, only with cars, beer and ready cash. Like Tilts and Servais, they tend toward the same unofficial uniform: a worn baseball hat from a favored brewery; mirrored sunglasses secured with faded chums; T-shirt and shorts; and a pair of crushed Tevas that never come off no matter how rough it gets.

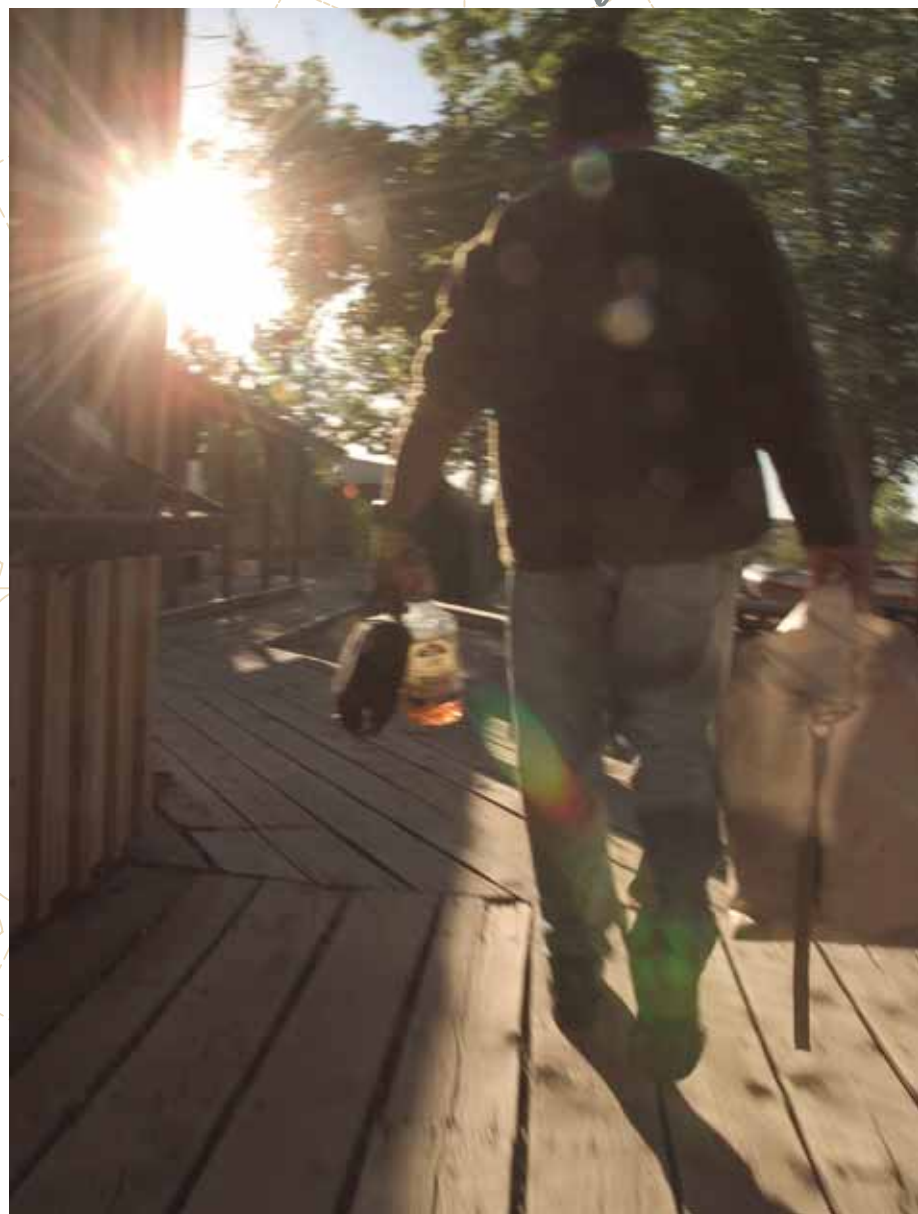
FOR THE THOUSANDS of tourists trapped in a desk job who get a vacation’s taste of Servais’ and Tilts’ daily routines, the allure of their lifestyle exerts an almost mythical pull. Just ask Steve Downing*, a bookish, preppie of 39 years who favors button-downs and short haircuts. On the outside, he may look like a librarian, but inside beats the heart of a would-be river guide. For Downing, guiding could be the antidote to more than a decade of working in offices, first in midtown Manhattan as an editor and now in Santa Fe, New Mexico, as a journalist.

“Guiding is very physical. It all comes down to you and a pair of 12-pound oars. It’s very simple and concrete in a way my current profession is not.” But, as they say, “talk is cheap, whiskey costs money.” Actually leaving a career and starting a new one takes some doing. This summer Downing took the first steps toward living his dream, getting his “woofer,” or Wilderness First Responder certification. Still, he’s moving slowly, scared to jump in completely without feeling it out first. ▶

*Name changed at the request of the river guide.



“Everyone that rafts with me is envious of me,” Tilts says



III. Autumn: Legends of the Fall



SEPTEMBER, 2003, and another gloomy gray rain has settled over Seattle. Dolenc's summer didn't go as he'd planned. The Morocco trip was a wash—no snow—and while filming in Alaska he took a really bad fall, “about 1,800 feet down the Sphinx Runnel.” The whole thing was caught on film, he says, describing how he tumbled out of control and landed upside down and backward. The only damage was a snow burn on his wrist. He's been lucky—he's had a compressed heel and a separated shoulder, but hasn't yet had to go to the hospital.

“It's always a battle to stay healthy,” Dolenc says.

This isn't the first time he's been lucky. A couple of years back, he'd given up on skiing. Having made a whopping \$500 that season, he went back to school. Then a miracle happened. “I got a call, and a week later I was in New Zealand for a month” shooting a ski movie for Disney. Dolenc left college and his live-in girlfriend behind. “I want to take telemark skiing to the next level,” he says, and knows the NASCAR-style carnage of his near disaster will likely do him well with sponsors and fans, making another season possible.

A FEW MONTHS LATER in Park City, Utah, an early frosting of snow has whipped the audience inside a crowded amphitheatre into a frenzy. It's Warren Miller ski movie time, the annual signal for winter to begin. The jacked up crowd yells at the screen as the riders rip steep lines and huck cliffs all over the world. Laughter erupts when the segment Dolenc shot in Morocco appears. The snow was lousy, but he gets some good screen time canoodling with a snake charmer in Marrakech, flashing the same smile he used on Clara back in Copper.

Tilts is in the audience. The summer didn't turn out as he'd planned either. He bought a couple of acres 10 miles from town and hoped to get a little house up before winter but was stymied by permits. The roots he's been wanting to plant will have to wait another season. In the old days, he would have gone south for the winter, but no longer.

“Until the early 90s, I could just go down to Chile and be sure to get a job,” making \$150 per day, he explains. But years of American tour companies running trips down there has trained up a cadre of local guides, who'll work for \$30 or less, and the salad days are over. Rather than worry about it, he's adapted, renting a spare room in someone's house and returning to a job with the US Ski Team setting up races around the country. It's similar to guiding—plenty of logistical details and heavy lifting—and that's just fine by him. More than just a paycheck, it also comes with health benefits, and he's got it set up so his pay is spread over nine months, giving him something steady to count on. He's also learned to plan ahead: one colleague has made a killing getting stock tips from her rafting clients, and now Tilts has four different retirement accounts going.

Servais has a way to go before she works into Tilts' cushy setup: She'll spend this winter at Massanutten, a small resort in far eastern Virginia, grinding out 16-hour days teaching wannabes how to snowboard and waitressing at Encounters. Wearing her uniform of black tights and a baby blue short-sleeve shirt, she can bank up to \$400 on a good night, slinging chicken sandwiches in red plastic baskets.

“If I can save enough money, I'd like to spend a month in Colorado, or maybe go to Whistler. I figure it's only three months, I can put up with it.”

...while filming in Alaska [Dolenc] took a really bad fall, “about 1,800 feet down the Sphinx Runnel.”

IV. Winter

MILLIONS BOUGHT Po Bronson's *What Should I Do With My Life?* chronicle of average people answering life's big question, but not one of his 70 case studies is about someone going from office jockey to ski bum. As much as people need to believe in the possibility of it—the stories of spine surgeons who gave it up to be a ski instructor at Vail—the reality is that that kind of transition is a myth. The gulf between a six-figure salary and minimum wage is just too far to fathom.

That distance weighs plenty on writer-by-day, wannabe-raft guide, Downing's mind. "Maybe the illusion at the heart of [seasonal work] is delusion," he says. "Part of the myth is that ... you're somehow removing yourself from living in the ranks of those living lives of quiet desperation and adopting something that's more of a heroic exercise in personal freedom. I think what it really comes down to is what shade or flavor of quiet desperation you want to live with."

Later, Downing will make calls to editors, interview characters, write and make travel arrangements for upcoming assignments. Not a bad life really, living on the edge of adventure yet behind the screen of a laptop. Professionally successful, he knows he won't be able to just row his way out of that reality.

"Nobody gets to go on spring break for 23 years. It's just not an option. You're going to have to deal with complexity, ambivalence, failure and, ultimately, separation, but with those come moments of personal triumph and satisfaction, too."

DEEPLY TANNED, WEARING BAGGY PANTS and a soul patch, Clay Coolman could be the poster child for the soft landing on exit from corporate life. For the last eight years, he's managed a large law firm in Fort Lauderdale, his income increasing along with his frustration. Although he had literally just about everything money could buy, the 33-year-old realized there was something to that "you can't buy happiness" stuff.

"Down in south Florida, there was the status-bullshit; fast cars, women, what you made, where you lived, all that was a factor in the society I was in and I just got sick of it." He found himself dreaming of past surf vacations and ski weekends—the times when he was really happy. On December 11th, 2003, he finally made the break: He took his nest egg, packed his bags, and flew west, landing in Colorado's Rocky Mountains at Copper Mountain Resort.

Now, his new home is a group house with four other guys, and his bedroom—littered with empty red plastic cups and half buried in clothes—speaks of long nights and stiff drinks. To say it's spare on decoration is an overstatement, the exception being a collection of baseball caps over the closet, the centerpiece a Hooters gimme-cap autographed by Pat Riley.

Coolman found work as a ski-lift foreman making \$9 per hour, a buck more than his young charges. The job is pretty straightforward—every six seconds it's either load someone onto a chair or watch them come off, in between shoveling snow into place and patting it down. The lifties are all dressed in matching lime snowsuits, with their names and hometowns pinned to their chest, but it's a safe bet Coolman's the only lifty in all of Colorado wearing a \$4,500 Rolex. His crew don't notice, or don't care; Coolman's a good boss, covering breaks for his workers before taking plenty of his own. Even though the work is a far cry from the intellectual challenge of managing a big law firm, he's beaming.

"I've lost 15 pounds," he says. "I'm hiking for turns and every day I hang out with great people." ►



...it's a safe bet
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the Year of Living Seasonally



V. Spring: Redux

“I BROKE MY WRIST in four places in the snowboard park,” Servais laments. The attempt at a 360 spin off a tabletop has cost her about \$700. “My plan for that money was to move to the beach, or go out west.” That’s no longer an option. Her doctor cut her a break, allowing her to pay \$100 per month, but she’s been unable to work for the last six weeks, and like most young workers, she’s uninsured.

“I don’t know what this means for rowing—we open up in three weekends, and the season ends here on Saturday. It’s frustrating. I mean I always have many options open, something to always go back to, but the fact I can’t go to Colorado right now...” Her voice drifts off before bucking up, “there’ll be another time.”

Back in Park City, Tilts is enjoying a rare night back in town, downing a Philly cheese steak and Bud Longneck at the local sports bar after hitting the stacks in the gym. He’s seen what Servais is going through happen all too often. “A lot of these kids have no idea how close to the edge they are. If they break something, it can wipe them out; they’re in big trouble.”

Friends drop by his table, ask how things are going. He’s just back from setting up race-courses in California, and next week it’s up to Alyeska, Alaska, for the US Alpine nationals. I ask him when was the last time he spent an entire month in the same place. He takes a pull on his Bud, tries to puzzle it out and then realizes he genuinely can’t remember.

April finds Dolenc on a tear, ripping through what may be his last spring as a sponsored skier. His three-year contract with Nike ACG is up in May, and he has no idea whether or not it will be renewed. “I’ve had a great run. It’ll happen at some point, and I’m fine with that.” He’s only 26 years old and already thinking about the end of his career. If it’s over, he’ll retire with a camper full of custom-made gear and a ridiculously large number of shoes, which he can Ebay to pay tuition at graphic arts school. He’s done his years washing dishes and loading lifts, and may never live in the mountains again.

Tilts’ career, on the other hand, just keeps rolling along. This time of year, when Utah’s resorts are closing down, hundreds apply for what some locals call “membership in the



On the road again: When was the last time Tilts spent an entire month in one place? He can’t remember.

government leisure team,” a.k.a. unemployment. Although Colorado’s resorts banded together years ago to eliminate such largesse, it’s still allowed in Utah, and you don’t even have to show up anymore. Just fill out the forms online, and start collecting your \$183 a week. Not Tilts, however. It’s a point of pride that he’s never once applied, and anyway he’s got his US Ski Team deal worked out to cover the gap before rafting starts. The summer is shaping up well, with some rafting on the Colorado, maybe a Grand Canyon trip or two and a couple runs on the Middle Fork in Idaho. The winter was spent getting things sorted for his house, and he hopes to have it built by the end of the season. “I’ve never had my own place before, and I’m getting kinda antsy.” If nothing else, he’ll build a garage with an apartment over it. “It’ll be nice, for once, to have all my shit in one place.”

This is the last week at Copper, and Coolman is looking like the cat that ate a cage full of canaries. “I got in a hundred days of boarding this season,” he boasts. “I won’t go back to the corporate world. I won’t. It’s a totally unhealthy lifestyle. When I worked at the firm, something was always in my mind, there was something always on the burner. Here, when I go home, when I put that shovel in the shed, I’m done.”

He knows he’s lucky to have made the midstream transition and pulled it off. “Making that step, taking that transition, is the hardest thing to do.” But now that he’s on the other side, he’s eager to reap the rewards—he leaves next week for a month-long surf safari in Indonesia.

Over in Santa Fe, the siren call of the river is getting deafening to Downing. Slots for his dream job as a guide in the Grand Canyon are extremely competitive, so he’s called up a company and offered to work all summer—for free—as a swamper. They haven’t said yes, but they haven’t said no, and he’s been invited to come spend three weeks in Flagstaff and on the river in a shakedown cruise.

“It may be a huge mistake to build a whole set of assumptions about how cool it is to be on a river, to build those assumptions on vacations and assume you’ll get the same satisfaction out of cleaning the toilets and washing the dishes for rich, overweight people

who don’t know how to travel in wilderness. I should chalk it up to a stupid midlife crisis, but here’s the thing: I don’t want to be 60 and not have done this. I was a nerdy overachiever who never had the balls to step out of the career track and just go *do* something. I never took a summer off. I never had the guts to get in a van and just start driving to see what’s awaiting me, so there’s some unfinished business there.”

Back in Fayetteville, Servais has driven down to the Riverman camp, to get the broken down school bus she uses as a home set up for the season, in case she needs it. She still can’t make up her mind about where to work this summer: rafting here, or maybe waitressing out on the Outer Banks. Her wrist is still very stiff and sore. But last night she had a great time, catching up with friends arriving for the season. They swapped stories of the winter around a campfire; draining Coors Light tallboys while the barbecue smoke boiled up under a tarp strung between two sagging trailers.

The next morning, two early-season tour groups are heading out. She decides to tag along on the later one—go for a ride with Leeman, the head guide, give it a look, paddle some, see how the wrist feels. Her time of contemplation, however, ends at the put in. Word comes in over the radio that PJ, one of the other female guides who’s working her first trip of the year, just snapped her tib/fib getting ejected at Five’O rapid. An ambulance managed to crawl down a narrow road slashed into the steep canyon to get her out. Now the entire group of passengers is waiting on the riverbank, unable to continue downstream without another guide.





Leeman listens, thinks for a minute, then comes over and talks quietly with Servais. She pauses, pats herself down to see if her safety gear is in place, then checks her helmet straps. “Well, I guess my wrist is healed,” she grins, “I start work in an hour.” And just like that, the year of living seasonally continues.

In May of 2004, Nike ACG renewed Ben Dolenc’s contract, for two more years. To find out about seasonal work nationwide, check out www.coolworks.com.

Season to Season

Idyllic lifestyle or nightmare? Follow our intrepid enthusiasts through a year of fun:

If it’s
———,
they’re...

	 Ben Dolenc	 Pandita Servais	 Pete Tilton	 Clay Coolman
Winter	Pro skier and film star	Snowboard instructor and waitress	Works for US Ski Team	Ski-lift foreman
Spring	Pro skier and film star	Whitewater guide	Colorado River guide	Surfer
Summer	Pro skier and film star	Whitewater guide	Colorado River guide	Lawyer
Fall	Pro skier and film star	Snowboard instructor and waitress	International river guide	Lawyer