



# Charting His Own Descents

**“Get a grip of yourself, man, you’ve skied lots of stuff like this before,” says my rational mind. My reptilian brain, the one that sends you into panic reaction mode, wants to jump out of my skull and hide somewhere. “Oh God...this face is huuugggge...” There’s nowhere to go but down, no island of safety, just blank hardpack, windblown snow.**

Those were the thoughts of Lee Lau as he made his first turns down the northeast face of Fissile Mountain, a rarely skied, 55-degree, 540-vertical-metre route. The 37-year-old Vancouver patent lawyer had ventured out one morning last March with buddies Peter Weiland and Andre Munck. Their excursion started with a 4.5-hour tour from Whistler’s Peak Chair, over Singing Pass, southward beneath Fissile and then back along the summit ridge.

So far, these circumstances are interesting, though not singular. What sets Lau apart from the legions of backcountry skiers—whether hard-bodies, accomplished mountain men, wannabes, weekend warriors or train-wrecks—is his impulse to meticulously chronicle every moment in words, pictures and graphics. Lau seems to spend more time recording his exploits than performing them.

The lines in italics above are taken from his website account of that day. It included 36 photos, some with route-lines and peak names drawn in, plus topographic maps, a detailed graphic from his altimeter watch, plus—most improbably—a graph from his heart-rate monitor. Lau peaked at 164 beats per minute—while skiing, not climbing.

*The view from the summit ridge is stupendous, breathtaking, marvellous, indescribable...picture tells a thousand adjectives.*

Lau was born and raised “pretty far from skiing”—in Malaysia. On a family holiday in the U.K. when he was eight, Lau first glimpsed snow and loved it: “Seeing people racing down the slope was the coolest thing.” His first skiing chance came in his late teens, after the family moved to Vancouver and Lau got a job bussing tables at Grouse Mountain. “We were wearing jeans, K-way shells, rented gear and beat ourselves senseless on the rope tow,” he recalls. “It was typical North Van quasi-rain, wet snow, and I swore I’d never go back.” Instead began a series of 40-day seasons, and Lau evolved into a good skier.

Lau’s first backcountry skiing came in the mid-’90s. At that point in law school at the University of Victoria, he’d fallen into the common “downhill rut” in the pre-shaped-and-fat-ski era. Two buddies introduced Lau to telemarking, and they started heading into the backcountry behind North Vancouver. “Largely it was a way to save money,” says Lau. He began to develop what became a storehouse of self-taught knowledge and understanding of the backcountry. The trio’s first substantial backcountry tour was the Squamish-Cheakamus Traverse in 1996.

*Every time I turn I look back and see sluff tumble down 2,000 feet past me to the glacier. Please, please, please let it just be*

*sluff. About 200 metres down the slope, legs burning and mentally a mess, I make it over to the first island of safety.*

Also in the mid-’90s Lau met Sharon Bader. Bader is a grant-writer with a charitable organization. The two married in 2002 and spend a huge amount of time in the outdoors. An accomplished skier, Sharon’s touring philosophy is to find great snow on nice terrain, rather than “peak-bagging” followed by survival skiing. The day of the Fissile attempt, she was touring with friends on a nearby glacier, from where they watched.

A couple of years ago Lau switched back to fixed-heel gear, and now does a fair bit of lift skiing. It was at Whistler last New Year’s where I was introduced to him. “A lot of my lift-skiing is in-bounds for the morning and then going out into the backcountry in the afternoon,” says Lau. His favourite run is “wherever there’s a lot of powder.” His main focus, however, is difficulty of terrain rather than snow quality. “What matters is the mountain and the terrain behind the descent,” he says.

*I head down the slope; nothing pretty about the turns...I had gotten over the “Oh S%@t” feeling of the first pitch and managed to string together some semi-competent steep skiing.*

The extraordinarily fit and athletic Lau has one physical handicap: his “wandering eye.” Not the kind Sharon needs to worry about. Lau is completely blind in one eye, severely reducing his depth perception. His cronies crack that it’s what gives Lau his remarkable calm: he can hardly tell the difference between a blue cruising run and a 50-degree couloir. Nor does his skiing deteriorate much in poor visibility, even a whiteout. “People with depth perception need to see well all



the time," says Lau. He on the other hand skis largely by feel, even in good weather, and doesn't get as affected by changing light like the rest of us who depend on good depth perception.

***I knew the chances of that face sliding were slim to none; I knew the face would probably sluff and as I skinned and climbed higher on Fissile I knew that snow conditions would probably be crap. All of this was very rational. Yet, I am shaking, mentally fried by skiing a slope that, had it been in-bounds in Whistler, would not have been a problem.***

Lau's urge to chronicle stems in part from his self-described obsession with maps. He reads extensively, loving John Baldwin's classic *Ski Touring in the Coast Mountains*. The recording impulse also relates to his other interests: "I love things that show spatial dimensions. I don't like to just say a route was hard, or long, or tall, I want to know how much. I love to quantify stuff." And he loves to shoot digital photos.

The other motivation is practical. In addition to classic routes, Lau and his friends do a lot of ascents and descents for which there is no information. "I don't want bad weather to defeat my ability to go out and ski a piece of terrain," he says. "So from a

safety point, it's not a bad idea to take pictures of a feature in good weather." Judging by how readers lap up and pass around his accounts, many agree. Lau's archive is jammed with travelogues, everything from ski touring at Rogers Pass to mountain biking B.C.'s remote Chilcotin Plateau. One account finished with a close-up of a KFC bucket showcasing some après-ski "healthy eating."

***Already the sheer terror...of the first turns on the NE face is receding and I am plotting out other lines to ski. Banana Chute is the "baby line"...only 45 degrees and is not as big a vertical drop as the Peak Chutes. Who am I kidding?***

In late April, Lau and his buddies returned to the same area and skied the infamous "Fissile Like a Missile" couloir. For this winter, Lau's skiing plans include McGillivray Pass north of Whistler. He wants to go back to Rogers Pass and ski the northern Selkirks, "some of the most beautiful places in the world." He also loves the Duffy Lake area near Pemberton. And he wants to improve his climbing skills.

Lau's Fissile descent can be viewed in full at: <http://www.leelau.net/2006/fissile120306/fissile120306.htm>. From there you can work backwards to Lau's main archive.❧

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