

SPORTS

Sleek skate skis go dashing through the snow **D4**



PARTIES

What's hot, from bubbly to barbecues **D6**



GIFTS

Bowling for Christmastime: pin lamps and other 11th-hour presents **D8**



Diversions

A GUIDE TO THE GOOD LIFE

EDITED BY MARC SILVER

Winter High

Cold-weather ballooning is on the rise. Float over mountain goats, enjoy wine and warm brie

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Cold-weather ballooning in Colorado

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BRIAN BAILEY—NETWORK ASPEN; JEFFREY MACMILLAN FOR USN&WR (2); JEFFREY AARONSON—NETWORK ASPEN

RECREATION

White-weather wafting

BOMBARD SOCIETY



BY CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

the interest: the promise of a smoother, longer ride; new tour operators who hope to get you naturally high; and a series of ballooning festivals that aggressively promote this cold-weather activity.

Peak season. Summertime balloonists can, of course, see the same magnificent landscapes—the Swiss Alps, the Colorado Rockies, and the New Mexico desert are prime launching pads. But conditions in winter can be better. Gone are the dreaded thermals—rising columns of air that are warmer than the surrounding air—that can make for a rough ride in summer. “Everything is just so clean and fresh with the winter air,” says Tina Reeves, editor of *Balloon Dispatch*, an online magazine. How about the cold? No need to worry about the wind chill, because you’re flying *with* the wind. Plus, the burners that heat the air inside the balloon and keep it aloft also keep passengers warm and toasty.

Ballooning isn’t without risks. Over the past decade, there have been 174 hot-air-ballooning accidents and 21 deaths,

FLIGHTS OF FANCY. Winter balloonists feast as they fly high over the Swiss Alps on a Bombard Society tour.

according to the National Transportation Safety Board. A Mayo Clinic study of hot-air-balloon crashes concluded that pilot error was a leading cause; so was collision with power lines. The researchers suggested that more training could lead to fewer accidents—in other words, look for an experienced flight crew and operation.

The price can be stratospheric. Adventurer Buddy Bombard, the luxury-balloon patronized by Schoenrich, charges about \$1,400 a day for six- or nine-day packages; the rate includes meals, a deluxe hotel room, and a daily 3½-hour balloon excursion. Stateside, a half-hour in a balloon can set you back more than \$100, a price that can include champagne and breakfast. But to really get some altitude—and see why this trend is about more than hot air—you’ll typically spend

Edyth Schoenrich scales the Swiss Alps almost every winter. She takes in the same bird’s-eye view that backcountry skiers and mountain climbers do—steep, dangerous rock formations covered in deep powder snow.

But the 83-year-old medical professor from Baltimore never breaks a sweat—and gets to enjoy crackers and warm brie with a glass of Burgundy, served en route. “It’s so serene,” she enthuses, “so spiritual.”

Conquering the Matterhorn in January isn’t generally a tranquil experience—unless you’re doing it from the basket of a hot-air balloon. And more folks are doing just that. The Balloon Federation of America sees a steady inflation in the balloon business. “Winter ballooning is the bright spot,” says President Phil Bryant. Fueling



twice that to stay aloft a few hours.

A wintertime balloon ride is usually slow and quiet. Merlin Sagon, who runs Camelot Balloons near Beaver Creek, Colo., pilots his eight-person balloon to a deliberate takeoff in the Vail Valley on a late-winter morning. He sails more than a thousand feet into the deep blue sky until he reaches an inversion layer where air temperatures can be as much as 30 degrees higher than on the ground. The Gore Range looms on the horizon, covered by a generous blanket of powder. "When it snows a lot, we see so much wildlife here," says Sagon. "It's magnificent." He wraps each excursion with a soft landing and servings of snacks with sparkling white wine and hot cider.

Air voyeur. A winter balloon trip just isn't right, some would argue, unless it's done en masse. Balloons are impressive things to look at, cutting a sharp profile against a winter landscape with their bright colors and designs. Events such as the Snowdown Balloon Rally in Durango, Colo., are mostly admired from the ground. But if you're lucky enough to know a pilot, it's worth begging for a ride. "The world is a different place when you're up there, and there are balloons all around you," says Doug Lenberg, a sponsor of February's Snowdown event.

Balloon Bombard takes a few customers to the International Château d'Oex Alpine Balloon Festival near Lake Geneva. Even with burners igniting and shutting off, he says, it is peaceful, even a little surreal. Up on alpine ridges, above the timberline, black chamois mountain goats let you float within a few hundred feet of them. The balloon seems to climb the slopes effortlessly and comes so close to snow-covered trees you can pick a pine cone. Best of all, you don't need a rope and ice pick to see it all. ●

HIGH TIMES

Camelot Balloons Beaver Creek, Colo., www.camelotballoons.com. 1½ hours: \$225 adults, \$190 seniors, kids

Balloons Above the Valley Napa, Calif., www.balloonrides.com. One hour over wine country: \$185

Alexandria Balloon Flights Milford, N.J., www.njballooning.com. One hour: \$165

Northern Light Balloon Expeditions Sedona, Ariz., www.northernlightballoon.com. One to two hours over the Coconino National Forest: \$145

WINTER SPORTS

Skating on snow



BRIAN BAILEY—NETWORK ASPEN

SLIDE SHOW. Shorter than cross-country skis, skate skis are built for speed—and they're kind to knees.

ideal sport for anyone wanting an exhilarating but low-impact winter workout. The fluid strides of skate skiing don't jar knee and ankle joints, so people can exercise for hours without getting too sore. And because you use lightweight poles to push forward, the sport works shoulders, back, and abdominal muscles, as well as lower body. Best of all, there are a dozen or more specialized strides that can help you go faster and faster—20 mph or more.

Cold rush. "That's why adrenalin addicts love it," says Mike Miller, a veteran skate-skiing instructor at Mountain Meadows and originator of skate-ski sprint racing, which joined the Olympics in 2002. "People who get into it most tend to be Type A's,

very aggressive and competitive."

For that reason, many cross-country trails banned skate skiers when the sport first emerged in the 1980s. But its rising popularity has since pushed a number of ski areas to add wide skating lanes at cross-country ski areas. "You can pretty much do it anywhere these days," says Miller, whose Mountain Meadows area charges \$17 a day for adults. (Private lessons run \$50 an hour.) And because skate skiing doesn't require a conventional ski track, you can skate ski on only a few inches of snow, a boon in lean snow years.

Newcomers might want to rent equipment before buying. Those who like skate skiing can then invest in used gear for as little as \$150; a set of new skis, boots, and poles can cost as much as \$900. As with any ski sport, comfortable boots are the most important item. Next is windproof clothing. "It's gotta be windproof," says Boyles. "Cause you're gonna go fast." ●

BY ALEX MARKELS

When it comes to cross-country skiing, Gavin Boyles figures "faster is better." So instead of bundling up in a wool sweater and knickers and tromping through the woods on long conventional cross-country skis, last week the 27-year-old distance runner donned nylon tights and a fleece shirt and slipped on a pair of sleek, supershort, featherweight skate skis—the tool of choice for a new breed of wintertime speed demons.

Positioning his skis in a V shape, he pushed off in a side-to-side skating stride and was soon flying around the cross-country course at Vermont's Mountain Meadows ski area. "I was blowing by all the cross-country skiers," recalls Boyles. "It was a blast!"

Boyles is one of a growing horde of runners, mountain bikers, and skiers who have discovered skate skiing, the

HOLIDAY PARTIES

Have a rockin' New Year's Eve at home

BY SAMANTHA LEVINE

The black-tie mandate and the hotel warehouse party are fading as folks seek the comforts of home and hearth. But even a home-bound party can offer escape from the stock drops, pink slips, and war calls of 2002. Live it up a lot or a little, depending on what's left in your wallet.

Anyway, conspicuous consumption in an ailing economy is deemed by many to be atrocious taste. Cynthia McKay, president of Le Gourmet Gift Basket Inc. of Castle Rock, Colo., and her husband used to host elaborate catered affairs on New Year's Eve. But this year, they're toning it down. Their soiree will merely feature ice sculptures, fresh seafood, and towers of Godiva chocolates. But fabulous doesn't have to mean ice sculpture-fancy. Some tips from the homefront:

Hungry for fun. In warmer climes, hosts are stocking barbecues with New York steaks and gussying up traditional sides, like mashed potatoes, by scooping them into champagne glasses, says Beverly Hills-based party consultant Mindy Weiss. Instead of blowing dough on display tables, use a cleared-out entertainment unit for drinks and snacks. You can



indulge in the wacky martinis craze with green sour appletinis, white chocotinis, and red crantinis.

Some regular-guy hosts, like New Yorker Andy Tannen, exploit mail-order food catalogs to save time and avoid hassles. Tannen's guests love the smoked Willie Bird turkeys he and his wife order from Williams-Sonoma. Each bird costs \$59 (preshipping) and feeds about 12.

"You don't have to do any work, and everybody likes them," says Tannen, a senior vice president at a public relations firm.

Many hosts are bringing in personal chefs to offer warm-and-fuzzy entertainment. Pro cooks prepare dishes during the party as all watch and learn. Neil and Julia Beck Bromberg of Potomac, Md., are chipping in with two other families for a chef from Cuisine to You, a local gourmet food company. The menu's not set yet, but "we have a couple of Atkins people, so there will be a lot of protein," says Bromberg. The Julia Child treatment will cost at least \$800, plus ingredients.

In the mood. Ambience is everything. You can get your Martha Stewart fix by covering a wall with strings of tiny white lights, then draping the whole thing with shimmery gauze to create a warm effect.



At the other end of the spectrum, at-home dance floors come to life with intelligent lighting that continuously pans, tilts, and changes colors and patterns to the beat of the music, says Polly Onet of Ober, Onet & Associates, a New York-based event-planning company. The

DRINK UP

Champagne, uncorked

The things we do for our readers! Perched at the bar of Manhattan's dark, cozy Bubble Lounge, I look longingly at nearly a dozen flutes of fizzing champagnes lined up in front of me—ranging from spectacular, expensive vintages to budget-friendlier alterna-

tives. Though it breaks my heart, I leave the glasses three-quarters filled. My drinking partner, lounge manager Emmanuelle Chiche, and I, sniff, take miserly sips, and concentrate hard on the fla-



vors so we can develop a clearheaded list of the best-tasting bubbly for New Year's Eve. Here are six champagnes that should jump-start any celebration, with typical prices from discount stores:

Krug Grande Cuvée

Multi-Vintage: If you want to splurge on a really special bottle of champagne, or want to

make a spectacular impression, you'll have to shop carefully. Buy the wrong year, and you could end up paying \$200 for mediocre bubbles. A smart alternative: one of the top-of-the-line champagnes blended from several good years. This Krug fills your nose with hints of brandy. "Perfect for the last champagne of the evening," says Chiche. \$120.



HOME RUN. Do New Year's in-house with personalized confetti, private chefs, and more.

Nets are available online for just a few bucks.

Music of the night. It's too late to book live talent, so stock the CD (or MP3) player. But there's only one song that matters on New Year's Eve: "Auld Lang Syne." For most, that's synonymous with Guy Lombardo's beloved rendition. "It's a heartfelt thing for people," says Roderick Thomas, jazz department manager of the Washington, D.C., Tower Records. "I can't think of anyone who says, 'Is there anyone else who does that song?'"

Puttin' on the ritz. If your portfolio emerged unscathed this year, try the stunt used by New York party planner David Tintera. He built a nightclub onto a client's home, then booked three acts, including '80s pop phenom Lisa Lisa (sans Cult Jam). The party's cost, Tintera discreetly says, "was in the seven figures." Or go for the Christo look. Chicago caterer John Calihan lined the walls of one home with burgundy silk and hung a canopy of gold fabric from room to room.

For a real show-stopper, a select set of folks opt for private fireworks displays. The pros at Fireworks by Grucci will gladly bring a six-to-eight-minute show to your backyard for a minimum fee of \$56,000. Once rare, these down-home displays are becoming (relatively) popular. Company spokesman Philip Butler says they have at least six booked for this New Year's Eve. So much for an end to conspicuous consumption. ●

equipment can be rented from lighting or party supply stores for about \$200 to \$400 per light if you set it up yourself. Having the rental company do it will tack on an additional \$200 to \$500.

From on high. You can individualize your party down to the smallest detail

with Confoti (www.confoti.com), personalized confetti featuring your digital images. For \$16.95, the company will create a bag of 3,200 pieces of confetti, 800 pieces showing your pix, and the rest in complementary colors. Or stage a balloon drop, if you've got the high ceilings for it.

to your backyard for a minimum fee of \$56,000. Once rare, these down-home displays are becoming (relatively) popular. Company spokesman Philip Butler says they have at least six booked for this New Year's Eve. So much for an end to conspicuous consumption. ●

Pol Roger Brut Chardonnay 1995: Champagne houses are now releasing their 1995s and 1996s, which are turning out to be the best years since the much-lauded 1988 and 1990 vintages. Laced with fresh peachy flavor, this vintage won raves from *Wine & Spirits* magazine. The publication awarded it 95 points out of 100 and called it "the best [of its

type that] Pol Roger has produced in recent memory." \$75.

Moët & Chandon Brut Impérial: *The Wine Spectator* calls this nonvintage champagne "terrific" and rates it a 90. It has a clean, outdoorsy taste. Chiche's sip puts her in mind of "riding a horse." \$38.

Bollinger Special Cuveé: When Chiche has to buy her own champagne, she grabs a

bottle of this dry, oaky nonvintage bubbly. In our tasting, it held its own against vintage champagnes three times its cost. \$31.

Roederer Estate Brut: Unimpressed by a fancy name? Try an Italian, Spanish, or Californian sparkling wine. Kevin Zraly, author of the *Windows on the World Complete Wine Course*, says if you close your eyes, you

probably can't taste the difference between this fresh, airy Californian and its French ancestors. \$17.

Segura Viudas Brut Reserva Heredad: Joshua Wesson of the Best Cellars chain of wine stores loves a bargain, like this Spanish sparkler. It comes in a fancy bottle with a medieval crest and goes down smooth and light. \$18. *-Kim Clark*

The Guide

It's not too late to find a memorable holiday gift. Our last-minute nominations:

Binary lighting

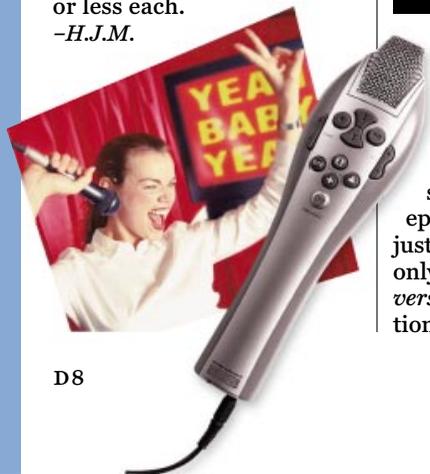
Stand it up to turn it on. Knock it over to turn it off. The **Knock-off Lamp** (Bozart, \$40, www.bozart.com) is the size and shape of a bowling pin but comes in sherbet colors. Perfect for toddlers, hipsters, bowlers, or those with unresolved aggression toward lighting.

—Holly J. Morris

Accidental harmony

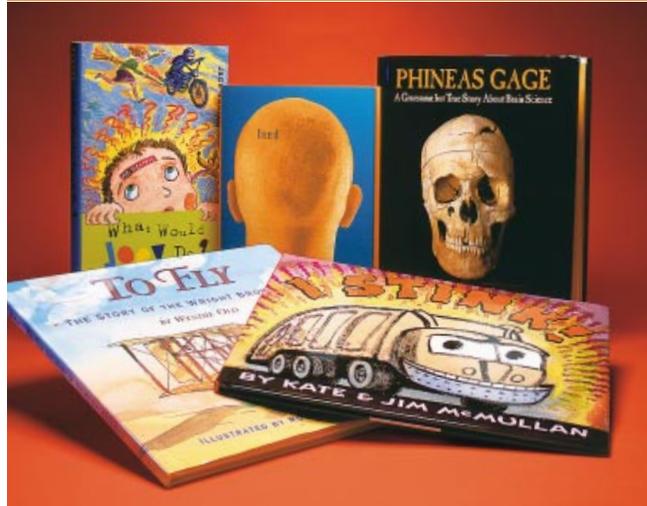
Drone, croak, or squawk into the **On-Key Karaoke Player** (IVL Technologies, \$70, at Wal-Mart). Whatever scary sounds you emit, the microphone-size unit will render your voice credible—albeit while giving it a somewhat robotic quality. By modulating input to match the original song in real time, it allows non-singers to rival the vocal stylings of any computer-enhanced diva. The player can provide harmony, too, and duets with men, women, or aliens. The unit comes with 50 songs; more can be had at the On-Key Web site for \$1 or less each.

—H.J.M.



D8

TROPHY READING



Books to mark

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books editor Deborah Stevenson's suggestions for holiday gifts:

I STINK! by Kate and Jim McMullan. A rowdy, colorful, and icky portrait of a garbage truck. (Ages 3 to 7.)

TO FLY by Wendie Old. Stevenson says there's "not a wasted word" in this Wright brothers bio. (8 and up.)

WHAT WOULD JOEY DO? by Jack Gantos. The hyperactive scion of the dysfunctional Pigza family gets home-schooled. Last of the Joey trilogy. (10 and up.)

PHINEAS GAGE by John Fleischman. An iron rod shot through a man's head and he lived. Really! And taught science a thing or two about the brain. (9 and up.)

FEED by M. T. Anderson. Titus's dystopian life goes haywire when he falls for Violet, who challenges the transmitters in people's brains. (12 and up.) —Vicky Hallett

To serve fans

Could this be the biggest box set ever? **The Twilight Zone Gold Collection** is five seasons, 49 disks, 156 episodes, and \$400—and just 2,500 exist. Available only through *Another Universe.com*, the limited-edition set includes every

episode of Rod Serling's classic series. —H.J.M.

Bloomtown

Banish post-holiday slump by "encouraging" indoor flowers. "Forced" feels like you're whipping them," says horticulturist Steven Frowine of the Dutch Gardens bulb company. Better

bulb selection and proper precooling give today's off-season blooms better odds of success. We tested three. Lily of the Valley's bell-shaped blossoms emerged in about 10 days and have stayed fresh for two weeks and counting. After 3½ weeks, the bold red blooms of the **cocktail amaryllis** are about ready to explode. As for the paperwhites, they're green and leggy but no sign yet of flowers. Gardening stores sell winter blooms, as do Internet sites like *gardeners.com*, which provided our test models (sold in baskets and vases priced at \$20 to \$40).

—Marc Silver

Sweet endings

The multicolored goo that oozes out of the **Arctic Twister** (Black & Decker, \$70) doesn't look much like the perfect dollop on the box, but one bite and you're in a McFlurry of Blizzard heaven.

The soft-serve delight the machine cranks out isn't an ice-cream sundae; it's sundae ice cream. Dump in your choice of flavor and virtually any topping—cookies, fruit, candy,

tortilla chips—and it emerges as one. Make **Chunky Monkey** nutless, change the ratio of cookies to cream, or create something that didn't exist for a reason, like fruit-cake cooler.

—V.H.



TOP, FROM LEFT: JEFFREY MACMILLAN FOR US&W/R (2); BOTTOM, FROM LEFT: CORBIS; JEFFREY MACMILLAN FOR US&W/R

White water rafting is probably one of the craziest water sports you can get involved in. The idea of hurtling down a river in a blow up rubber boat, dodging whirlpools, hitting rocks and falling down waterfalls just sounds nuts right? But it isn't. And here's why. White water rafting is an awesome adrenaline rush that mixes the thrill of dangerous white water with the camaraderie of a war movie, pitting you and a group of similarly petrified individuals against the best that nature has to throw at them. Whiteout is a weather condition in which visibility and contrast are severely reduced by snow, fog, or sand. The horizon disappears from view while the sky and landscape appear featureless, leaving no points of visual reference by which to navigate. Whiteout has been defined as: "A condition of diffuse light when no shadows are cast, due to a continuous white cloud layer appearing to merge with the white snow surface. No surface irregularities of the snow are visible, but a dark object may be clearly