

# WHAT HAPPENS IN PORTILLO

A Hero's Story and an Uprising  
in the Chilean Andes

01 • Frequent avalanches streak the slopes around Portillo, requiring a staff of wary, knowledgeable patrollers. Constant vigilance aside, they aren't afraid to take a little break to enjoy the view—or fly a kite. "Jefe" and an accompanying patroller smile and scan the skies from the patrol station at the top of the Plateau Chairlift. Photo: Jonathan Selkowitz





02 • In Chile, Sept. 18 is *Fiestas Patrias*, a holiday celebrating the country's first moves toward independence from Spain in 1810. Jorge Barros, in a traditional hat and with Chilean flag trailing beside, makes his way toward the hotel and awaiting festivities.  
Photo: Jonathan Selkowitz

Words KELLEY McMILLAN

In August 1972, trouble rumbled across the Chilean Andes. Something big was about to go down.

In the country's capital Santiago, General Augusto Pinochet, the commander-in-chief of the Chilean Army, was in the midst of squeezing left-leaning President Allende out of power. Soldiers roamed the streets of Santiago with automatic rifles slung across their shoulders, while the CIA secretly infiltrated the country, scheming with the government's far right to assist in Allende's ouster. The country was running out of food, and the *escudo*, Chile's currency at the time, was grossly inflated, making for a thriving black-market economy. This was great if you were a gringo ski bum working in Portillo, like my father was. You could sell greenbacks for 10 *escudos* on the dollar and stay at the fanciest hotel in Santiago, the Hotel Carrera, for two bucks a night.

This was also the month my father almost died.

**SET AMONG** the craggy 20,000-foot peaks of the Andes, 12 miles from the base of Aconcagua (the highest peak in the Americas), and overlooking the icy blue waters of the Laguna del Inca, Portillo is the oldest ski area in Chile. The Chilean government opened the Grand Hotel Portillo in 1949 with 125 rooms, two lifts and the Chilean army grooming the slopes by bootpack. In 1961, Bob Purcell and Dick Aldrich, two East Coast businessmen, bought Portillo and transformed it into a world-class resort. They launched a ski school headed by racing great Stein Eriksen, who was succeeded by a roster that included Emile Allais, Siggi Grottendorfer and Pepi Stiegler. In the early 1980s, Bob's nephew Henry Purcell and his brother bought out their uncle and Dick. You'll still find Henry eating dinner at 9:00 p.m., watching over the dining room and making sure his guests are having a good time.

As in my father's day, there's Pisco sours and live music each night in the hotel bar. An eclectic mix of glamorous *Norte Americanos* and Chilean aristocrats mix with the regulars, pro skiers and national ski teams who train at Portillo during

August and September for the upcoming World Cup season. Board games are stacked in the living room by a roaring fire, and foosball in the basement and the annual Sol de Portillo ski race are highlights for both kids and adults. Storms run in directly off the Pacific and dump several feet of snow overnight. No matter your provenance, everyone is there to ski. People come as strangers and leave as friends, bound together by powder, Pisco and the unspoken rule that what happens in Portillo, stays in Portillo.

A lanky string bean of a human at 6-foot-5-inches and 150 pounds with a mop of brown hair, my father was 24 years old when he struck out for Portillo, drawn by the promise of a job as a ski patroller, three-foot storms and adventure. He'd ski bummed in Aspen and had just graduated from an extended stint at the University of Colorado in Boulder, where he'd come across an ad for jobs in Portillo in the local paper. He applied, interviewed with the head of Portillo's ski patrol (who spent the North American winter in Aspen), and was hired. By June, he was in the Andes.

03 • Skiing at Portillo is all about sunny days and deep powder, finishing at the blue waters of an alpine lake. Chris Davenport takes full advantage of the experience, finding fresh turns a week after a storm.

Photo: Adam Clark

04 • Built by Poma specifically for the resort, the four “come-and-go” T-bars ascend avalanche chutes that are too narrow and steep for regular chairlifts. Each bar of the lift can carry five skiers, and the lifts are so intimidating the area recommends them only for expert skiers. For those who survive the fear factor, they can also provide pow turns for days.

Photo: Adam Clark

When Dad landed in June 1972, signs of unrest had already trickled into the mountains. Upon arriving, he was told he didn't have a job; the Purcells were in discussions with the government to nationalize the resort and trying to give work to *Chilenos*. But Dad was stuck at the end of the world, and Henry Purcell, then Portillo's general manger, let him stay. As the season wore on, Chile started to unravel. It ran out of meat, gas and finally wine.

Though the country was about to blow, for the most part life hummed along as usual for Portillo's guests and employees. It snowed almost every day that season, as Dad remembers it. He skied every day, on a pair of 215cm Fischer Presidents, until Penny McCoy, an American ski racer and bronze medalist at the 1966 World Championships held in Portillo, gave him a pair of 207cm Hexcels. A couple of days a week, the Chilean army would train on Portillo's slopes, which were also filled with famous racers of the day: Andy Mill, Cindy Nelson and Otto Tschudi.

Dad lived in a four-person bunkroom in the Inca Lodge behind the hotel. “Your goal was to be invited into the hotel by a guest,” he says suggestively. The ski patrollers were a rowdy, unsophisticated bunch largely from Colorado and Utah, whereas the ski school staff, headed by Grottendorfer and largely made up of Europeans, were polished and professional. Dad made friends with a fellow patroller named John Holloway, a 19-year-old kid from Boulder, CO, and most nights the two fueled up on booze and omelets at the 5 p.m. tea, which still takes place each day. Then he'd hit the bar, followed by the disco, which kicked up at midnight and shut down at 2 a.m. The disco played records then—now there's a DJ, but otherwise it's mostly unchanged. For a broke 25-year-old skier, it was paradise. Until it wasn't.

By late August, a couple of weeks before the resort closed, it was time for Dad to start graduate school at the University of California, Berkley. A Santa Rosa storm system moved in and quickly began unloading heaps of snow—by the look of it, he knew he had to get out soon or risk being trapped for days, if not a week. He organized a cab to the train station through a fellow employee named Ramon, whose father owned a local taxi company. Ramon would take Dad, Holloway and two Chilean women who worked the front desk, Marisol and Maria, to the train station.

On the day of departure, Ramon pulled up to the Inca Lodge, Dad slid in the front seat and Holloway squeezed in back with the two girls. They slowly wound down the switchbacks toward

the train station, the main access point to Portillo in those days, before coming to a spot where an avalanche had swept across the road. They got out of the car to assess the situation.

As they tried to figure out what to do, another avalanche swept past nearby and they decided it was time to leave, quickly. Having been buried in an avalanche a few years earlier at Loveland Pass, CO, Holloway was particularly bothered and made his way out in front of the group—right into another avalanche.

“Then I heard it crack and I knew it was coming right at us,” Holloway says. The whole mountain shook. “The next thing I knew, the snow caught up to me and blew me down the hill.”

Holloway kicked and fought and flailed to keep his upper body above the snow. When he came to rest, he had been carried hundreds of feet down the hillside and was buried to the middle of his back, but his hands were free and he began to dig himself out.

Five minutes later, he climbed up the debris path toward where he'd last seen his companions. He trudged further up the road, rounded a corner and saw a pair of legs flailing straight out of the snow. He ran toward them and began digging. As he cleared away snow, the legs started to go limp. He finally freed Ramon, who jumped out of the hole and high-tailed it away.

When the snow enveloped my father, he said it reminded him of bodysurfing at first. “It felt like when you get swept under by a wave, and you're waiting to pop out, but you don't, and you're sucking snow for air.”

Dad was buried under Ramon, who, with all his commotion, had pushed snow into my father's face. “I couldn't breathe,” my father says. He could hear Holloway above him, but Dad couldn't move in the concrete snow. He pissed his pants and thought, “Hey, it doesn't matter. We're all dead.”

Holloway dug furiously, until he came across my father, who was entombed upright. “Your dad was buried, like he'd been laying in a coffin, hands across his chest,” Holloway says. By the time Holloway got to him, Dad had been buried 25 minutes.

Finally freed, Dad said, “We've gotta get those girls. I was holding both their hands, dragging them down that hill, so I know they are right here.” When he sat up, a foot appeared where his back had been.

They dug through urine and bloodstained snow, grabbed limp legs and ripped Maria out of the hole. Her face was blue, but Dad exhaled a few deep breaths into her body. Her eyes opened and she came to.



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05 • Portillo is a party destination—even the lunches can be wild. The deck at Tio Bob's, the mountain's slopeside restaurant, has hosted world champions, Olympians and thousands of skiers down for a great time. Photo: Adam Clark

06 • With *Laguna del Inca* glimmering below and *Tres Hermanos* peak above, Chris Davenport enjoys a perfect Portillo day. Local legend says the ghost of an Incan king haunts the lake's waters; not a bad home for a lost apparition. Photo: Adam Clark



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More than 30 minutes had passed, and they figured Marisol was long dead. "But we needed to find her, dead or alive," Holloway says. Later, she would tell them she was walking in a field of daisies toward a white light. When she heard their voices trying to rescue her, she snapped back into her body.

They scraped the last handfuls of snow from her face; Dad gave her mouth-to-mouth and her eyes fluttered open. "She was cool as a cucumber, not one bit of panic, no screaming," Holloway remembers.

With everyone out, they hurried down the road to a highway maintenance shack. It was freezing and the snow and avalanches kept falling. They had no food, no water, no blankets and few clothes. So, they collected all the furniture they could find in the building and lit a huge bonfire on the floor. Ramon told the group he'd run to get help. Marisol recounted her brief visit to the other side. Dad and Holloway were exhausted. That night, they all slept close to each other for warmth.

Marisol turned out to be the daughter of Chile's national police chief (one of Pinochet's henchmen), who organized a military escort. In the morning, a caravan of Army jeeps showed up and whisked the group to Santiago, where a small parade was celebrating their survival. Dad and Holloway spent one night in Santiago. The next day, Army officials delivered them to the airport, where they were able to bypass all the bureaucratic paperwork normally required to leave the country. They never saw the girls again.

Weeks after the avalanche, Pinochet launched a bloody coup, Allende was dead, and the country entered a decades-long dictatorship in which hundreds of thousands of civilians died or disappeared. But Portillo remained largely untouched. My dad was in graduate school by mid-September, but his life was changed forever. For years, he'd panic whenever he fell face-first into powder. He returned to Portillo in 2006. He says he had no lingering fear, though his wife told me he'd eyed the slopes anxiously. They left their vacation early.

**THIRTY-ONE YEARS** after the avalanche, I returned to Portillo with an old friend from Chamonix. I wanted to see this place that shaped my father's life and populated his stories. It was September, and a late-season storm was hammering snow as we wound up the switchbacks, passing the railway station where Dad had spent the night after the avalanche. When we arrived, a St. Bernard waited in the doorway.

In the hotel lobby, I ran into the American downhiller Travis Ganong—he was itching to get out into the powder and was begging the hotel manager to open up the lifts, to no avail. We'd have to wait until morning to ski the 16 inches of fresh.

That first night, we danced on a bench overlooking the bar. The hotel's guest relations guru, Felipe Lopez, jumped onstage and played a mean harmonica with the band. Coaches, ski techs and boot specialists from Head huddled over tables having muffled discussions about equipment tweaks and the hundreds of World Cup skis they had to tune. The United States Ski Team was prepping for the Olympic season, and in the days that followed, we watched Bode Miller and Ted Ligety swoop down a downhill course set on Rocca Jack. One warm day, an Aussie and an Argentinian woman skied in bikinis down to the lake. That turned the ski teamers' heads.

In the basement halls, which are lined with signed posters of Lindsey Vonn and Daron Rahlves, in the steamy après bar, or skiing down Garganta chute, I could feel my father everywhere. Visiting Portillo, a place he loves, a place that changed his life, I came to know him better. As an adult, I assumed parts of his avalanche story had been inflated or distorted by time—that he'd been buried for 25 minutes, that there had been a parade in Santiago, that he'd saved the daughter of one of Pinochet's henchmen. But without prompting, Holloway corroborated all of these details.

Portillo hasn't changed much since my dad's day—Juan Baize, the regal maître d', still holds watch over the dining room. The five-person Rocca Jack tow lift still slingshots skiers up the mountain and (some) employees are still angling for an invite for a night's sleep in a hotel bed. There are now 14 lifts, more rooms in the hotel and snow cats groom the slopes rather than army grunts. A hot tub, waterfront chalets and heliskiing have been added. Frank Coffey heads the ski patrol and Mike Rogan leads the ski school. There are fewer Americans on staff and no aspiring dictators. But Portillo's authentic and lively spirit remains the same.

My dad's avalanche story and the place called Portillo circled my childhood. It was one of those tales that orbits your parents, shrouding them in mystery, making them larger than life, and shaping how you come to know them. Sometimes, it takes a lifetime to unwind these tales—fact from fiction, muddled memory from truth. Sometimes, it turns out, hero stories are true. §