2 The Winter Sport Tourism Product

Spotlight: Ian Hunter, Working in a winter wonderland

Ian Hunter

Ski rep, Ian Hunter has been in the ski sales business since 1979. He started his career working in ski retail for three years before moving to an in-house position with Norvinca Inc – at that time, the Canadian distributor for Nordica, LOOK and Dynastar. After nine years he left Norvinca to form his own sales agency in order to maximize income by representing multiple brands.

In 1990 Hunter signed with Group Rossignol Canada Ltd and is still in the same role today although he has also represented many other lines during this period. "I'm responsible for sales into retail and rental markets, as well as sell-through from retail markets which can involve co-op advertising, staff training, promotion through athletes and ski professionals," Hunter explains.

Over the past 35 years or so, trends in ski gear have evolved considerably, driven partly by the advent of snowboarding. "Ski designs changed radically, starting in the mid 90s," says Hunter. "Shaped skis started a period of tremendous growth in the ski industry which was suffering at that time due to the popularity of snowboarding."

In order to compete with the popularity and growth in the snowboard industry, ski manufacturers put considerable resources into designing more user-friendly, higher performing skis to try to regain the 'cool factor'. Hunter says that snowboarding's success, particularly with the younger generation, caused ski manufacturers to re-think their approach to the sport. "It accelerated the development of recreational skis to make skiing more fun, easier to learn, and to provide more performance," he says.

With skiers increasingly seeking equipment to enhance fatigue-free skiing, it is new technology that is driving sales in ski equipment today. "Wide skis brought skiers into the powder fields allowing intermediate skiers to go where previously only snowboarders and expert skiers could go," Hunter explains. "Twin tip skis brought the youth back into the sport as freestyle, slope style and half pipe gained popularity."

Retail staff has a significant impact on what products the consumer chooses, so Hunter works closely with the Rossignol retail network. "Staff training sessions, demo days and casual conversations with the staff are all key components of grass roots marketing," he explains. He also runs popular consumer demo days but says these tend to be "a bit of a shotgun approach". Private demo days can be very effective but are cumbersome to orchestrate.

Like many people working in the ski industry, Hunter's job is synonymous with his passion for the winter sports' lifestyle. "I get to get out of bed every day and talk about something I love: snow sports and related equipment," says Hunter. "I have been fortunate to ski with current, past and future world class skiers. I have been to ski, boot, binding and pole factories. I have seen the evolution of equipment from prototypes to finished products and have been lucky to be, in a small way, a part of that process. I have skied in a number of countries and many resorts, all under the guise of working."

Hunter's core business remains alpine, Nordic and snowboard hard goods, although he has also represented companies which specialize in goggles, helmets, sunglasses, bikes, cycle clothing, technical outerwear and layering systems. These days a job in his field would require experience in retail as well as wholesale sales. "Experience selling as an agent for smaller brands would be good training in preparation for selling a major brand," he advises.

His prognosis for the future of skiing is a bright one: "Ski manufacturers like Rossignol will continue to test new designs and materials to expand the performance and ease of use envelopes. Boots will continue to become warmer and more comfortable and bindings will also evolve or perhaps radically change to offer even greater protection."

Source: Interview with Ian Hunter, November 2014

Winter sport activities

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the focus of this book is on the winter sports of skiing and snowboarding, and as previously noted, there are approximately 120 million ski and snowboarders worldwide, with nearly a third of those coming from Western Europe. Figure 2.1 shows the distribution of skiers and boarders by region of origin. The share of international visitors is less than one sixth of participants, with the international flow of skiers and boarders primarily restricted to Europe. Overseas visitors in the U.S., for example, represented just 3.8 per cent of total skier visits in 2012/13. Although some countries have very few ski areas, they are still, like the Netherlands and the U.K., significant outbound markets, sending around one million skiers and boarders each to the mountains every winter.

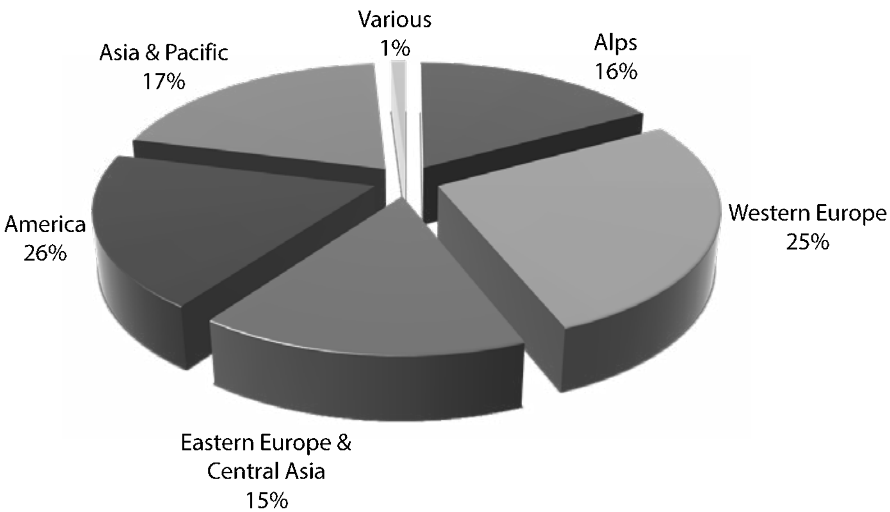

Figure 2.1: Distribution of skiers and snowboarders by region of origin (Source: Vanat, 2015)

France, Germany, Japan and the U.S. have the biggest domestic ski and snowboard markets, each numbering between 11.5 and 13 million people. In terms of inbound visits, Austria leads the way, with over 34 million, followed by France with 15 million and Switzerland with 13.8 million. Meanwhile, countries with a high level of participation rates amongst domestic populations include Switzerland (37%), Austria (36%), Norway (25%), and Finland (24%). Interestingly, only 4.3 per cent of the population in the U.S. takes to the mountains each winter. Table 2.1 lists the countries that receive over one million skier visits, along with participation rates as a percentage of their population.

Other variations on downhill skiing include heli-skiing, where skiers are flown by helicopter to virgin slopes where they can ski on pristine powder snow. The sport has shown a marked increase over the last few decades. Approximately 95 per cent of all heli-skiing in the world occurs in British Columbia, Canada where, collectively, the industry accounts for about 100,000 skier days with gross revenues exceeding $100 million annually. Hans Gmoser, an Austrian mountain guide, had a major pioneering role in heli-skiing in the 1960s and was the founder of Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH). Mike Wiegele was also a leader in the industry, with his operation commencing in 1970. The profile of heli-skiing has continued to increase, in part due to the exposure in Warren Miller movies that show extreme skiers making the most of the enviable conditions.

Country	Number of ski areas	Skier visits (SV)	National partici-pation rate (in % population)	Number of skiers (national)	Proportion foreign skiers (%)
Andorra	3	2,184,806	20.00	17,059	92.00
Argentina	22	1,500,000	2.50	1,065,275	25.00
Australia	10	2,082,600	2.00	445,250	1.50
Austria	254	53,155,600	36.00	2959,793	66.00
Bulgaria	32	1,200,000	5.00	349,082	25.00
Canada	288	18,700,400	12.50	4,307,199	12.00
Chile	21	1,250,000	3.00	516,508	15.00
China	350	6,880,000	0.40	5,128,426	0.50
Czech Republic	176	8,700,000	20.00	2,032,584	35.00
Finland	76	2,846,000	24.00	1,263,867	17.00
France	325	56,226,000	13.00	8,573,709	32.00
Germany	498	14,922,000	18.00	14,606,508	10.00
Italy	349	28,100,000	8.00	4,918,584	15.00
Japan	547	34,432,389	9.00	11,452,777	3.00
Korea, South	18	6,531,832	6.00	2,937,312	10.00
New Zealand	25	1,413,552	7.00	305,558	36.00
Norway	213	6,390,000	25.00	1,180,675	8.00
Poland	182	5,000,000	13.00	4,989,895	10.00
Romania	45	1,200,000	3.00	653,714	5.00
Russia	220	3,653,870	2.50	3,562,512	2.00
Slovakia	91	5,000,000	18.00	987,901	25.00
Slovenia	44	1,357,128	15.00	298,904	17.00
Spain	34	5,677,571	5.00	2,368,527	10.00
Sweden	228	8,070,800	20.00	1,823,885	8.00
Switzerland	240	26,538,264	37.00	2,958,530	50.00
Turkey	43	1,200,000	1.00	806,945	15.00
Ukraine	54	1,400,000	2.50	1,114,330	5.00
United States	481	57,092,127	4.30	13,616,748	5.60

Table 2.1: Skiers visits along with participation rates as a percentage of the population (Source: Adapted from Vanat, 2014)