

ZEN

AND THE ART OF SKI PRODUCTION

Handmade meets high tech at the Swiss factory of luxury ski manufacturer Zai

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It's the Bentleys. I haven't skied for 15 years, so on this crisp, blue, Swiss alpine morning, when a low profile would be preferred, Zai's Sam Tinson is handing me a pair of racing-green Zai-for-Bentley skis – a collaboration between the luxury ski manufacturer and the iconic car brand.

Not that any Zai ski is particularly innocuous – against the neon speed-freak aesthetic of mass-produced ski ornamentation, Zai's elemental understatement stands out by virtue of its composure. But the Bentleys are the nearest Zai gets to purposefully eye-catching – adorned with a lattice of spring steel and crowned at each tip with the unmistakeable winged B.

"Let's head up," says Tinson. I heft the skis onto the lift, leaning them oh-so-gently against the metal railings as if they were glass and not a durable compound of natural rubber, cedarwood, and Swiss

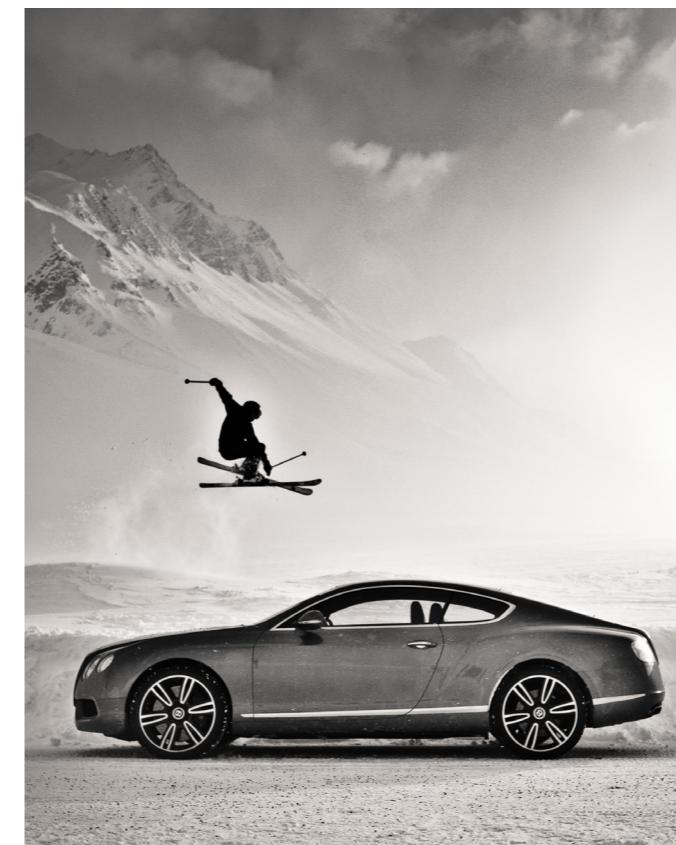
Watch-grade stainless steel. They cost around £8,640.

The slopes we're ascending are those of Disentis/Mustér, an Alpine resort town east of Andermatt and overlooked by a huge, butter-yellow Benedictine monastery. Simon Jacomet, Zai's founder and creative director, attended lessons at the monastery as a boy and it's where he first learned about Zen Archers – monks that become one with their weapon. It's a theory that's underscored his sport and his career, which has included turns as an instructor for the Swiss national ski team and as a designer with ski behemoths Völkl and Salomon.

"Skiing should be as effortless as possible," Jacomet explains. "But you need a product that can make this happen."

To achieve this, and frustrated by the limitations and compromises of mass production, Jacomet left Salomon and set up on his own in 2003. He selected his





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② hometown as the site for his workshop, and hired a team of local craftsman that included master carpenters and metalworkers – and all passionate skiers.

Staffed with employees that shared his obsession with performance, Jacomet commenced an intensive process of R&D. Today, Zai has 10 different types of skis available for purchase on its website, and, despite the demands of a flourishing brand (they sell through 60 select dealerships, and have opened their first boutique in Courchevel this season), you can still find Jacomet zipping down the piste with a prototype strapped to his leg, or in the factory discussing the next design with his craftsmen.

The factory, based in an old printing works, has a production run of about five pairs of skis a day (adding up to roughly 900 a year as some, like the Bentleys, take longer to manufacture). It feels more like a carpenter's workshop sharing office space with a firearms manufacturer. A not unpleasant chemical blend hangs in the air, while the sound of tools mixes with tinny Springsteen. Jacomet's obsessiveness is everywhere: in its custom-built machinery, in its custom-built carbon fibre compound zai'ira (less brittle, more bounce), and even in the custom-built, Jacomet-designed furniture in his office (just less bounce).

Touring the factory, I nod along to the list of materials that Zai pours into its handcrafted skis:

walnut veneer, carbon laminates, natural rubber, Dnyeema fibre (used in body armour), granite. Hang on – granite? Stone bends, apparently. Part of Zai's patented Carbon Fibre Stone (CFS) technology, the manufacturer creates the cores of its latest Spada skis using green Rofna-Porphyr gneiss from the mountainside about an hour down the road. The stone is pre-stressed by combining it with carbon fibre, allowing it to flex without breaking and resulting in a core with superb damping qualities. One satisfied customer described the ski's performance as "lying on the snow like a silk tie".

You hear the word "damping" a lot at Zai, along with "resilient" and "durable". Zai itself means "tough" in the local Rhaeto-Romanic language, and all of the materials they use fall in line with Jacomet's austere design philosophy: despite how pretty their skis look, nothing is added that isn't contributing to the skis' performance (he admits that he'd prefer to create skis without logos on). The result is a longer lasting ski, losing only about five per cent stiffness after a hundred days of skiing (as opposed to an average of 25 per cent after 30 days with ordinary mass-produced skis). This is why Zai has a customer base that extends beyond the monied St. Moritz crowd to locals on ordinary salaries who see Zai longevity as an excellent investment. ③



Why didn't you set up in a more lucrative market, like St. Moritz? I ask. "Because it all comes together here," comes the answer

◎ During the tour, one of the craftsmen, Duri, breaks off to say hello. He could have been designed by Zai: his arms are as lean as jerky, and his eyes have just enough bright blue in them not to be transparent. I reach for the obvious: "You ski?" Duri blinks. "Yes, I ski." Of course, Duri, who grew up skiing with Jacomet, is something of a demon. I'm told that he "turns so tight that he's almost going uphill again". There's a photograph on the workshop wall of a grinning Duri astride a lime green sports motorbike while holding a matching pair of Zai Laisas.

Having now reached the piste, I clip my boots into the Bentleys and stare down the mountain preparing for injury. Tinson tries to reassure me, "Zai is known for having a very smooth, solid line. Beginners enjoy using them as much as world class skiers." This is true: Antoine Dénériaz, the 2006 Olympic Men's Downhill Champion, is one of the company's ambassadors. As the Bentleys begin to slice through the snow, Jacomet's words return to me, when, after I asked him why he didn't set up in a more lucrative market like St. Moritz, he replied, "It all comes together here."

Not for me, unfortunately. But at least I didn't damage the Bentleys. Broke a pole, though. ☺

