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Exclusive Ski Maker Zai

Ski maker 'Zai' (a Rhaeto-Romanic word meaning 'tough'), is based in the picturesque village of Disentis, in the heart of the Swiss Alps. The founder and Creative Director Simon Jacomet is a passionate skier who has built skis for most of his life. Disillusioned by the pressures of commercialism whilst working for Salomon and Volkl, Jacomet founded Zai in 2003 with a vision to create "a ski unlike any that has existed before; one that far transcended mass-produced designs in quality, materials and handling." The unassuming exterior of Zai's factory hides a production line that is a cross between an artist's studio and a workshop, staffed by twelve local skiing artisans. "You cannot work for Zai unless you are passionate about skiing," says CEO Benedikt Germanier. The company's attention to detail is second to none, from the sourcing of the materials to the skill and passion that goes into the making of the skis themselves. Jacomet himself ensures that every single ski is as close to perfection as possible.

On average, Zai produce five pairs of skis a day, each with its own unique number. This is a steep change from mass production - and you can guess the payoff. A pair of Zai skis costs the consumer an average of £5,000.

Looking at the detail and features of the ski, you begin to understand why that price tag is so high. Each element of a Zai has a clear purpose or function. The granite core (its Green Rofna-Porphyr gneiss, to be exact) wrapped in carbon fibre makes the ski lighter than its aluminium counterparts but with the compression strength of stone and tension of carbon.

Then there's the Vulcanised natural rubber of the top surface, protected from notorious ski queue scratches by a stainless steel top edge. The end product is a thinner and lighter ski than its mass produced competitors, which still manages to be more robust and offer better damping properties. Every detail of these beautiful blades is delivered with elegance and style.

But are they really different to ski on?
Skiing is a very personal sport where confidence and ability combine. As such, it is important that you feel you have the right equipment for your ability. The writer of this article said: "Of the skis I tested, the 160 Zai Spada was unlike any I have skied on before, being both grippy and responsive, carving the shortest swings but also giving stability

and smoothness on the larger GS turns. It was a pure joy to ski on and it truly did leave me tingling with excitement. The Spada was definitely the ski for me."

A close second was the "Zai for Antoine", also a great ski on the long sweeping turns, giving as much as I gave them. However, I found it less agile than the shorter Spada."

What do you get for your money?

Zai encourages its customers to visit their factory. It's an experience well worth the time - and not just for the self-confessed ski geeks. You get to see where your money is going, watch your skis being built, and then test them on the mountain.

Unlike the skis you pick off the shelf, it means you know exactly what has gone into your new equipment and understand where your money is being spent, from the detail in the core to the thicker edges and top quality thermoplastic base.

The skis address the extra weight added in the bindings by replacing the three major components (heel spring lever and front/rear of the foot plate) which are normally made from steel on the standard Salomon Z-Speed with aluminium parts custom made by Salomon. This provides a 200g weight saving over the standard Z-Speed.

For your money, you physically take away a package of skis, bindings, carbon poles, ski bag and a two year breakage guarantee. More intangible - but no less important - is the experience, the passion and the quality craftsmanship you get. Plus you become one of an exclusive club of Zai skiers - it only numbers around 5,000 people at the moment. Would I buy a pair for £5,000?

The writer adds: "Despite having never spent more than £500 on a pair of skis, the answer is a definite 'yes' - if I still lived in the mountains, had an apartment there, or money was no object. Sadly, none of those apply and I count myself lucky if I ski for more than a week during any one year. For now, all I can do is admire Zai skis for the beautiful, desirable and functional product they are and add them to my wish list of items that one day I would like to own."

In a time when almost everything is mass produced and profit is king, it is refreshing to see ski-passionate visionaries like Jacomet breaking the mould

by encouraging freedom to experiment and break boundaries. While Zai are well established in the luxury market, selling through Harrods' Snow + Rock concession in the UK and producing skis for Bentley, Hublot and St Moritz, their skis primarily appeal to ski purists and those looking for robustness, toughness and quality. Zai skis are certainly expensive, but you are buying something special.

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