

Steven Peterzen – a life of adventure

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

Steven Peterzen has spent a lifetime saying “yes” to adventure. And it’s led him to extraordinary experiences across the globe.

Peterzen, who has lived in Sisters for the past decade, is the founder and owner of ISTAR Stratospheric Ballooning. ISTAR launches and recovers payloads for scientific and technological experiments for agencies, companies and academic institutions. The recovery field operations are often adventurous, since flights are usually terminated in remote areas.

Peterzen often works with locals, including native peoples in Arctic regions, to ski in and remove 10 percent of the flight equipment from the landing area.

It’s all just part of the job — a very enjoyable part of the job — for a man who has spent his entire life engaged in outdoor activities from skiing to sea kayaking to climbing to sailing to cycling and more.

Peterzen grew up along a creek at the Ohio-Illinois border along the Mississippi River. His parents were avid paddlers.

“I started paddling, really, before my memory,” he told *The Nugget*. “We canoed and tent-camped all over. That just stayed with me.”

Peterzen’s love of outdoor adventure early on paired with a passion for science.

Along that creek where he grew up, he was constantly “turning over rocks to look at the insects and crawdads.” He was inspired further in high school in Clinton, Iowa.

“I had a fantastic science teacher,” he said. “I did the summer camps, everything I could to stay involved with it.”

Peterzen took up climbing at age 16, and hitchhiked across the country at age 20 to pursue that passion. He found himself owning and operating a guide business in Lander, Wyoming. That’s

when destiny came calling.

A man called looking for someone with Peterzen’s skill-set to be a support contractor setting up a field camp for a National Science Foundation/University of Wisconsin glaciology project in Antarctica.

“When he dropped the word Antarctica — yeah, how soon can I get there,” Peterzen recalled.

His wife, Francie, and their new baby stayed in the log home they’d built themselves in Wyoming — an adventure in its own right — while Steven worked from October to March in Antarctica.

“I was able to talk to my wife once (by satellite phone),” Peterzen said.

The Antarctica project opened a lot of doors and a broad vista to Peterzen. Despite his love for science, he had shied away from a career that might confine him to a lab working on some obscure element of inquiry. This work offered him a different and more congenial path.

“Here was all this science before me,” he said. And he didn’t have to specialize — any subject area was open to him.

“I wanted to play with ALL of them,” he said.

The Antarctica project led to work on an ice shelf in Greenland, drilling and setting off explosive charges to gauge seismic activity, and eventually into sending scientific payloads into the stratosphere with balloons.

The ISTAR website notes that:

“In 1991, ISTAR began supporting stratospheric ‘Near Space’ research programs utilizing high altitude balloons. This first balloon campaign was directly in support of a NASA-funded ozone investigation over Greenland with a team from Harvard University. In 1992, ISTAR took the field management role of the NASA-funded stratospheric balloon program in Antarctica.

“From 1992 through 2001, ISTAR successfully managed over 20 separate 800,000 m3 balloons from Antarctica and launched a series of smaller balloons. During that period, ISTAR also managed and led the recovery team of the payloads and flight hardware.”

His work would lead him from Arctic regions to Morocco and a stint working in Italy with the Italian Space Agency.

Peterzen’s value reflects a simple yet rare quality — he knows how to do a lot of things and has a knack for getting things done when the chips are down and the money is short. His skill set is very broad, ranging from a long list of wilderness skill certifications to heavy equipment operation and project management. And he’s a natural problem-solver.

“You have this bag of tricks in your pocket that you can use to make a project successful without always digging into your pocket,” he said.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Steven Peterzen has worked in some of the harshest environments in the world.

Adventure isn’t just Peterzen’s job — it’s a way of life for him and his whole family.

For nearly four years they lived aboard and cruised their sailboat “Totem.”

Peterzen noted that sailing “also honed our skills in weather observations, rigging applications, mechanical and electrical troubleshooting, and the overall maintenance. These skills parallel the efforts

needed when managing field operations in ballooning.”

Peterzen came to Sisters 10 years ago because “it’s an ideal location” for the life he chooses to lead. He’s been an avid skier since he was a kid, and enjoys teaching at Hoodoo.

“I don’t need a huge mountain, but I need a fun mountain,” he said. “And Hoodoo

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