

## LIFE IN A LIFT PYLON

A ski resort needs more than snow and pistes that have neat corduroy stripes every winter morning. Life on the mountain means work all year round. The ski patrol work with everything that allows the guests to have problem-free skiing. The lifts should carry thousands of skiers every minute;

this is work that begins early in the summer, even before the snow has completely vanished. Everything old has to be lubricated and adjusted. A new lift is being built.

High up, with a wrench and a lubricant pump, you have to mind your step and have faith that your tools and equip-

ment will do their job properly regardless of the weather – in blazing summer sunshine or the dull autumn dark.

Text by Håkan Wike



## Summer work for a snow fanatic

- Johan builds ski lifts in Åre

Johan hangs in a harness, ten metres up in the air. Huge nuts are tightened. The pylons for the new lift are moved into position, one after the other, with the help of a helicopter and with muscle power.

"There's a lot to put together and fasten tightly. It's like a giant meccano set for adults, but if you can put together furniture from IKEA you can do this." Johan laughs and says that there are pieces missing here as well, that he has to make modifications and adjustments to make things fit. But don't get the idea that this is carelessly constructed; safety is always the highest priority. A lift is constructed with a number of man hours, in the shape of mechanics and foremen from the life company. The rest of the workforce comes from the resort itself, which is why Johan is working on the lift that will be one of the most important ones during the Alpine World Ski Championships in Åre, in February 2007.

### Two seasons, two jobs

It was skiing that attracted Johan to Åre back in 1994. As a mogul skier from Östersund, 100 km away, Åre was practically on home ground. After eight years of seasonal employment a year-round job on the lifts meant security and stability, even if he thinks that the winter season is more enjoyable.

"Running around with a lubricant pump and oiling twenty lift pylons gets a bit

boring. It's more fun building lifts. I spent some time on the construction of the last lift, two years ago, as well. The giant Russian helicopter that lifted whole pylons into place was amazing; the wind from the rotor blades almost blew those of us standing below off our feet. This time it's a smaller helicopter and we assemble the pieces one at a time, four pieces per pylon.

You can't be scared of heights and you must feel secure hanging in a harness and putting things together, regardless of whether there's a helicopter hovering over you or it's dark and pouring with rain.

"When it rains for a whole day it's easy to start sneaking glances at the office buildings and wondering whether it's time to find another job," says Johan and laughs. "But that passes when the weather improves. Most days it's wonderful to be able to work outside. With good clothes and good equipment there are rarely any problems."

### Likes alpine environments

Sometimes things are rushed, with a tight schedule, and Johan and his colleagues have to work both long days and in the dark. For Johan, who has always lived in Jämtland, in northern Sweden, darkness is nothing strange.

"The period in the autumn, before the snow arrives, can be dismal. Dark when we go to work and dark when we go home, with a small amount of daylight in the middle of the day."

The winter season begins in the middle of December. During Christmas, New Year and the half-term holidays in February and March the village is packed with lots of guests, and there are busy days for the ski patrol. Åre experiences particularly severe problems with snow and ice on lift pylons and cables. December and January is a tough time for Johan; cables that blow off, ice encrusted pylons that must be hammered free.

"Sure, there's a lot of work a long way above the ground, but as long as you take it easy and pay attention it's not especially dangerous."

What Johan most enjoys are steep terrain and situations where he can put his alpine skills to use. As a member of Mountain Rescue Team he also has to go out on rescue missions in the southern part of the mountains. Often it's tourists that have ended up in a difficult situation due to bad weather, or bad judgement. Abseils in confined, steep areas. Glacier accidents. Avalanche accidents.

"But it's not often that we get called out into the mountains. There are significantly more incidents in the areas around the lifts."

So far Johan hasn't been involved in any serious accidents at work. Precision and a perfectionist attitude are assets, especially ten metres above the ground, or hanging in a harness on an icy mountainside.

**Name:** Johan Olsson  
**Born:** 1973 in Östersund, Jämtland, Sweden  
**Lives:** In Åre  
**Works:** On the ski patrol. This means on skis during the winter and with service and maintenance of lifts and facilities during the summer.  
**Good at:** Seeing the facilities as a whole. I'm also happy to work in steep terrain where I have to climb and abseil.  
**Bad at:** Swimming. But I'm also pretty stubborn and determined and don't give up, even with things I don't like.  
**Leisure time:** All types of skiing in the winter, preferably cross-country with the dog. Fishing, climbing and cycling in the summer.  
**Favourite gadget:** A good headlamp.  
**Next goal:** The Alpine World Ski Championships in Åre, 3-18 February 2007, is a challenge for all of Åre.



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