

ON A MISSION
Simon Jacomet aims to create unique downhill blades that transcend their mass-produced counterparts

EXCELLENCE
Skiing

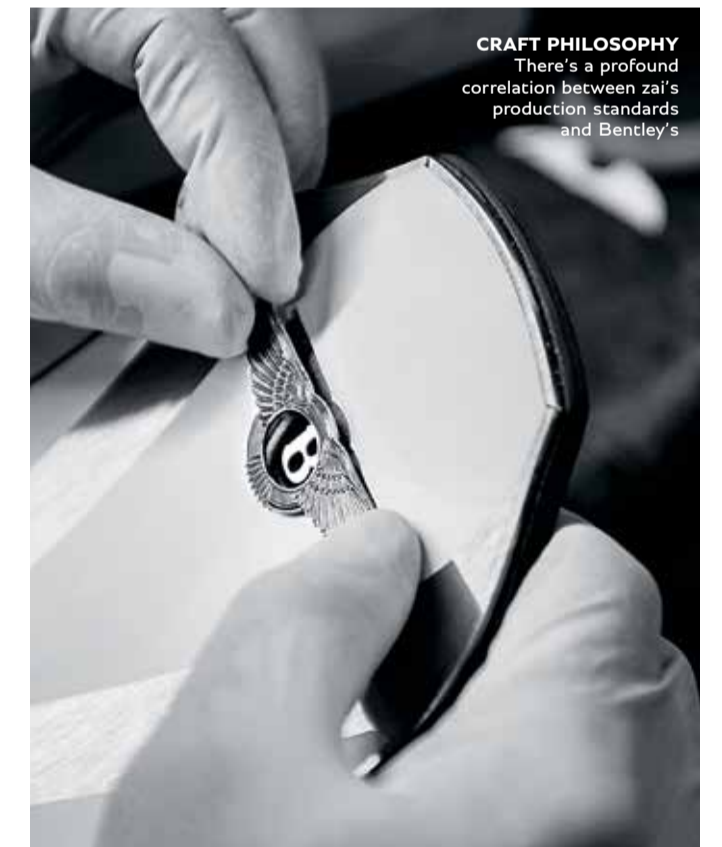
MASTER *of* *the* elements

Simon Jacomet, driving force behind the zai for Bentley ski, combines a deep understanding of materials with a zen-like quest for the intangible

Story: Nick Scott / Photography: Dan Cermak

Sleep doesn't get much of a look-in when it comes to the daily agenda of Simon Jacomet. The creative director of bespoke ski company zai is on a mission – to create unique downhill blades that transcend their mass-produced counterparts. His quest regularly sees him work 18-hour days at zai HQ – a modest workshop in Disentis, just over 80 kilometres south of Zurich, Switzerland, and a hive of Zen-like artisanal industry – yet Jacomet still manages to find the time to build his own house, sawing and assembling every wooden component himself.

A former technical coach for the Swiss national ski team who previously developed skis for Salomon and Völk in the early 1990s, Jacomet found himself unimpressed with the methods and mores of large-scale ski manufacture. "I really began to understand the amount of compromise you are forced into," he says, "not just with the quality of materials, but also with new ideas. When it's time to come up with something fresh, the marketing people say, 'No, it'll be too difficult to explain to customers.'



CRAFT PHILOSOPHY
There's a profound correlation between zai's production standards and Bentley's

“The geometry of a ski is something naturally beautiful for me to take advantage of”

The product should drive the market, rather than the other way around. This is our philosophy at zai.”

To some, Jacomet’s attention to detail and quality might seem borderline pathological. He personally built more than two hundred prototypes before releasing zai’s first ski, the Classic, in 2004, a year after the company was founded. He tested each one himself, and another of his frustrations during his fledgling career was that the performance of skis would be calculated using computer algorithms, and then they would behave entirely differently on the snow. He now personally trials prototypes of every zai ski before they go into production. “I want to test that there is more power back from the ski with less effort, and keep a clear focus on easiness and function and nature of movement,” he says.

He’s even been known to dart out of meetings having glanced out of the window to see that the conditions were just right for a particular trial that he needed to do. He once left a batch of leather samples outside in the factory car park for an entire year – in sun, rain, snow, wind and freezing conditions – to ascertain their durability in different weather conditions before selecting the sample he would use to build the world’s first-ever ski with a leather surface. Which brings us to another of the core tenets of Jacomet’s rarefied approach to his craft: he is constantly on the hunt for innovative new materials that will improve his skis’ feel, responsiveness, smoothness, stability, speed and resilience (the word “zai” translates as “tough” in the local language).

The new zai scadin, released in October, has a felt surface, the natural wool fibres transformed into a strong, flexible, scratch-resistant material by a special pressing process. The zai spada, meanwhile, has a 50-million-year-old Swiss Alpine granite core, which is prestressed using carbon fibre, allowing it to bend without breaking. This is no gimmick. Granite has far better



RAREFIED APPROACH
Jacomet is constantly looking to work with innovative new materials



OUT ON THE SLOPES
Whatever the algorithms say, skis behave differently on the snow



MAXIMUM ENJOYMENT. MINIMUM EFFORT.



A SKI FOR ALL SEASONS The zai for Bentley is designed to be enjoyed in all conditions and by skiers of all abilities. As our infographic shows, it is suitable for any level except absolute beginners, offers blistering speed where necessary, and will shine on almost every kind of snow. Its versatility and durability mean it will continue to provide enjoyment, season after season.

shock-absorbing properties than aluminium, yet it’s no heavier. Weight is something that weighs constantly, so to speak, on Jacomet’s mind. “I always ask why a material should not do more than one thing,” he says. “Something being there for just one purpose is an inefficient use of weight.”

The jewel in zai’s crown is the ski made as part of a special partnership with Bentley. Handcrafted with a natural rubber surface, cedarwood core and stainless steel edges, it comes in ice white, navy blue or British racing green, and was designed to emulate the effects of driving the Continental

Supersports. “When you drive a Bentley, it has a huge amount of power, yet you feel safe and comfortable driving it,” explains Jacomet. “So I tried to emulate this effect with a ski. People testing it described it in exactly the way I would describe driving a Bentley, which was pleasing. It’s also about the whole philosophy of hand-crafting. There is a profound correlation between our own production standards and Bentley’s.”

A genuine artist, Jacomet is highly tuned to his wares’ aesthetic appeal. “The geometry of a ski is something naturally beautiful for me to take advantage of,” he says, “but the beauty needs to come from the quality of the materials over eye-catching design.” Skis, for him, genuinely have soul, and he exudes a certain piety when it comes to how he employs them on the slopes. This mentality can be traced back to the Benedictine monastery in Disentis where

Photos: zai AG (3)

Jacomet now personally tests prototypes of every zai ski model before they go into production

he was educated – by, among others, a hang-gliding abbot-cum-spiritual-mentor. “This particular teacher encouraged you to coax your own skills out of yourself,” he says. “It was a Benedictine monastery, but we would talk about Buddhism and Zen. It took me about ten years on the slopes to understand what he was teaching. It’s interesting to see how connected the two are.”

In keeping with this philosophy, zai customers visiting Disentis are now being offered two nights’ overnight stay at the monastery, sleeping in sparsely furnished monks’ cells without any access to phones, laptops or Wi-Fi. It’s a far cry from the Glühweinglugging après-ski revelry in which most visitors to the Swiss Alps would expect to indulge, but then Simon Jacomet is a skiing revolutionary in every possible sense. In an era where the words “spirituality”, “passion” and “craftsmanship” have become marketing platitudes, he is the living embodiment of their true meaning.