

A high-angle photograph of a snowy mountain slope. The snow is bright white and shows tracks from skis or snowshoes. Dark, jagged rocks are scattered across the slope, particularly in the middle ground. The sky is a clear, deep blue. The overall scene is bright and crisp, suggesting a clear day in a high-altitude or alpine environment.

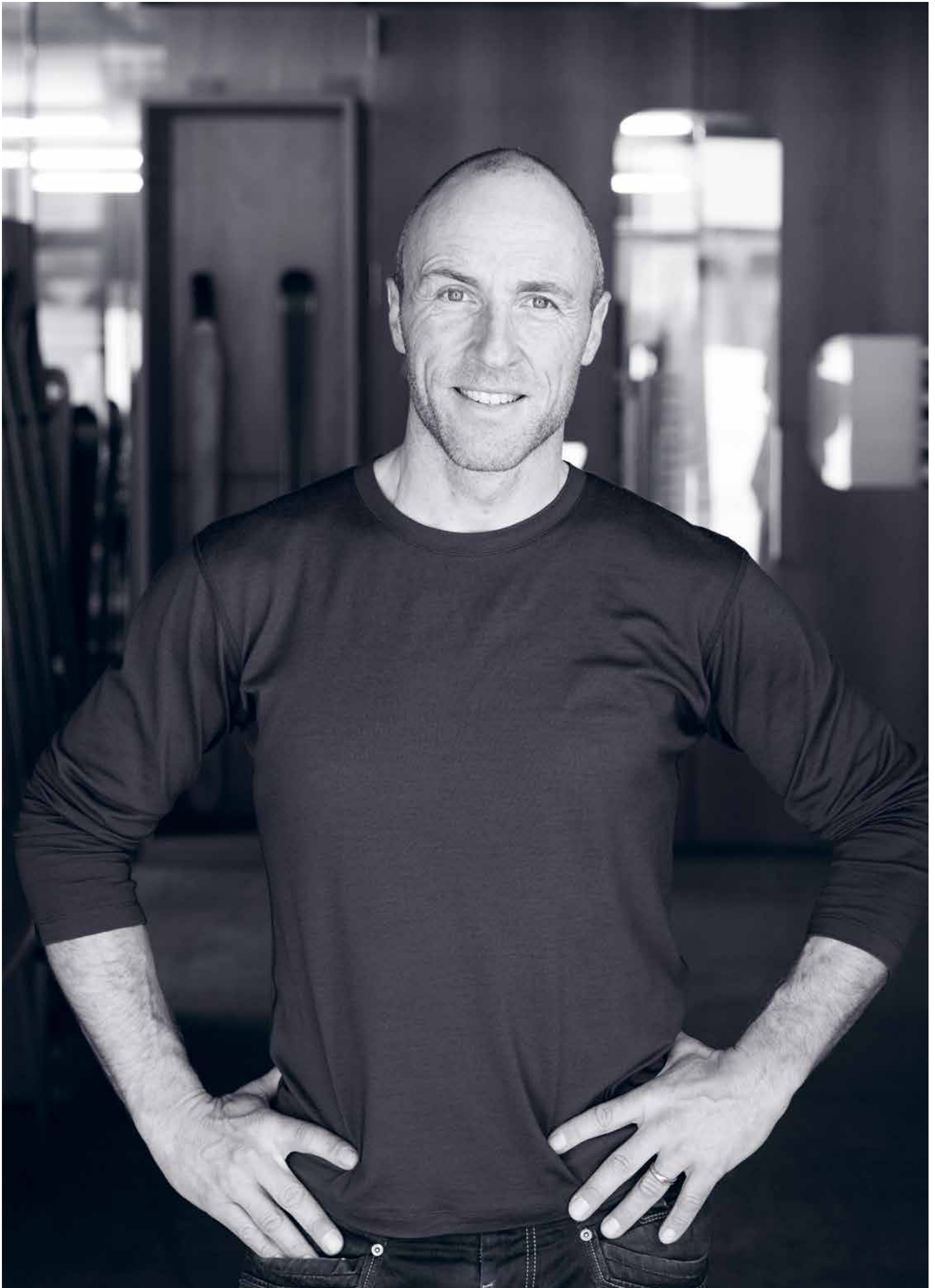
What a **difference** a ski makes

BY EVRA TAYLOR



“I rebel,
therefore
we exist”

Albert Camus



Benedikt Germanier, CEO of zai

Benedikt Germanier, a rebel with a cause

How did a young man in his twenties, with early training as a ski instructor for disabled people, become the partner and CEO of a major European ski manufacturer? The unlikely answer is, through a curious merging of movement therapy and sports. Benedikt's business journey has been as intense as some of the alpine slopes his clients enjoy sloshing their way down.

Like many entrepreneurs, Benedikt did not follow a straight path to his current destination. At the age of 25, he studied

economics, satisfying his innate curiosity and broadening his horizons. As a businessman, Benedikt likes to point out the irony that he studied macroeconomics rather than business. In pursuing his entrepreneurial career, he has lived in Zurich, London and New York together with his wife and their four children.

Enter the start-up that became zai

zai is located in Grisons, the easternmost canton of Switzerland. Benedikt's zai journey began in 2009 when he called a halt to his international travel, trading in the hustle and bustle of New York's Wall



Top: The zai Wood model combines wood, steel and carbon to offer effortless handling and driving control. Bottom: The zai Stone model brings the stone to the surface and creates the only ski in the world with an upper stone chord.

Street for the familiarity of his childhood and his native Switzerland. There, he joined an iconic sports brand that captures the essence of alpine skiing, namely freedom and adventure. The name zai derives from the Romansh word for "tough," denoting perseverance and a sense of timelessness.

While some companies devise mission statements full of corporate-speak, zai's credo is simple, direct and visionary: You don't do things differently because of

others. You do things because they suit you. His clients share his business and manufacturing philosophy.

When Benedikt left behind the world of finance to pursue his dream of transforming ski manufacturing from the inside out, he knew that ski aficionados would welcome zai as the answer to a longstanding challenge: how to marry form and function to improve both performance and the enjoyment of the sport. zai was born of a desire to furnish an elite clientele



with equally elite alpine skis that would defy the “laws of ski design and material.”

Who ever heard of a ski made out of stone?

Benedikt’s passion, and the dream that became a reality, was founded on strict adherence to an old-world approach to manufacturing: handmade skis – some machine allowed – with an absolute insistence on craftsmanship.

The company currently offers three models of skis, which are made of stone, wood and natural rubber. Indeed when browsing the materials list, you could be forgiven for thinking you were reading a sophisticated interior design catalog. Yet these are the unusual materials that zai combines to produce sleek high-performance skis. Even the model names – such as zai Stone, Wood, Franco and Disruptor – suggest a certain power. Each model employs specific materials for its intended purpose: some lines are designed for speed, others for absorption and durability and, in some

cases, a combination of features that makes a particular pair of zai skis an enduring classic.

In the zai Wood, for instance, the simplicity of the exterior design belies a high-tech interior. It melds together organic and inorganic elements, combining wood, steel and carbon and lending the skis easy agility and excellent handling control in various types of snow conditions.

zai skis reflect Benedikt’s entrepreneurial spirit. The zai Stone is the only ski in the world with an upper core of stone, featuring a technology that makes the stone bendable. Benedikt notes that working with stone requires three characteristics: shock absorption, traction and weight. His future plans revolve around construction of a ski made entirely of stone.

A lifestyle experience

Benedikt is intent on furnishing his customers with not just equipment, but



zai focuses on highest quality and the reducing things to the essentials.



This results in products that radiate a unique aura with their simple esthetics.

At zai Atelier in Bregaglia/Bergell, where the skis are finished



Thus, the name zai also symbolizes perseverance and timelessness.



a lifestyle experience centered on the sport he loves, and loves to share with others. zai offers a series of ski-package events at the five-star Sun Valley resort in the picturesque Valfurva region of northern Italy. Visitors enjoy private slopes, ski guides, and a mountain guide to explore unspoiled places. These are days and nights of hedonistic fun and food, featuring amenities such as spa treatments, fine dining with food by top chefs and a unique wine cellar.

The majority of zai clients are "passionate ski addicts, most of whom are in a position to spend anywhere between 1,900 to 9,800 USD on a pair of skis. At the high end of the range lies the haute couture of skis. Our clients are inspired by innovation, and some live from their wealth, not from their income alone," remarks Benedikt.

Environmentally conscious

As an environmentally conscious company, zai has three-fold motivation for using natural materials: a reduced manufacturing footprint, a focus on sustainable natural resources and effective resource management across its supply chain. The surfaces

of zai skis can be refinished to restore them to a "like new" state, extending their longevity and enhancing their investment value. "Sustainability is the new luxury paradigm," Benedikt explains.

Honesty, transparency and good will

While zai has enjoyed enormous success in the luxury market – the company boasts several kings and celebrities as clients – a few years ago Benedikt realized that he would have to produce a more mass market ski to appeal to a broader demographic. The move from haute couture to prêt-à-porter was facilitated by a 2018 co-manufacturing partnership for certain lines between zai and Italian manufacturer Blossom Skis. It was decided to base the joint venture in Bregaglia, a municipality in the canton of Grisons in Switzerland. To this end, zai relocated its development facility to Zurich, which gave closer proximity to ETH, a university renowned for its studies in science, engineering, technology and mathematics, comparable to MIT in the United States. Germanier and a ETH spin off company, together with some local producers, have teamed up on several research and manufacturing projects. This hub of creativity has been

dubbed an "innovation collaboration." As Benedikt explains: "We don't want to do everything on our own. We believe in honesty, transparency and good will. At zai, we're not afraid of sharing." The company generates approximately 2 USD million in annual sales, accomplished by a handful of people and continues to cooperate with brands such as Moncler and Saint Laurent for which zai manufactures their own unique ski collection.

In zai, Benedikt has found a perfect marriage of form and function, meeting a desire for luxury in the high-end sports niche, while also serving those seeking a more affordable way to express themselves on the ski slopes. Benedikt is devoted to sharing his passion and his life with his customers. An evening relishing a sumptuous fondue dinner in a quaint mountain chalet, followed by an adventurous hike to the slopes the next morning – this is the essence of the lifestyle that Benedikt and zai embody.

**This is what makes
zai unique**





In producing a zai ski, a lot of time and care go into creating the quality and longevity of the final product.