

Golden



FOR hardcore skiers, this B.C. town offers a tasty triple scoop of cat, heli and resort skiing. BY GEORGE KOCH

My best skiing memories are of storms. Maybe it's because virtually nobody's out and about, maybe it's that added *frisson* of existing on the edge of something or other, perhaps it's the aura of mystery created by the fog and swirling snow. Or maybe it's the sheer surprise, an unexpected free bonus gift abruptly ending a cycle of hard bumps and icy

groomers. One way or another, I couldn't believe my good fortune in late March of last season, arriving at Kicking Horse after a long Rockies snow drought and pounding powdery laps with one of the resort's pinnacle skiers, Andy Walton.

Andy spends late seasons heli-guiding up in Alaska and the rest of the winter in Golden guiding and teaching hardcore ski

Choices



lessons through the resort's Big Mountain Centre. Having skied Kicking Horse since its transformation from the Whitetooth ski hill 10 years earlier, I thought I knew the mountain. But Andy had a mental map of every twist and hidden pocket in the tortuous topography spilling off the three great ridges—CPR, Redemption and Terminator (now T1)—framing

the big alpine bowls that Kicking Horse has made its skiing world signatures. Andy spoke incessantly of "blown-in snow." Where other resorts figuratively (and perhaps literally) shovel extra snow onto their weather plots, at Kicking Horse it's the opposite. What gathers in upper bowls and chutes is double or triple the recorded and reported snow depth.

We exited the resort's famous full-vertical gondola to be pumelled by inch-sized flakes hurtling past our faces, the wind ripping them across the ridgetop then punching them downslope into the ranked rock-lined gullies beneath CPR Ridge. You couldn't even see the Eagle's Eye restaurant barely 50 metres away. Andy and I slid along the top until we found



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a line with enough rocks and trees to provide definition. "People often have a hard time comparing notes about where they've been skiing," yelled Andy over the storm. I thought he was talking about the featureless murk, but he continued, "Most of these lines have at least four names: the ski patrol's technical term, traditional names from the old ski touring era, another set of nicknames from today's young freeriders and, lastly, the official trail map name, which itself has been evolving."

By the next lap our previous tracks were virtually unrecognizable. It seemed as if we were sharing the whole mountain with about 30 people. The day became a succession of 5,000-vertical-foot circuits: CPR to the Stairway to Heaven quad, perhaps a short lap back to the chair down the newly gladed area on the frontside, then one of the innumerable Feuz Bowl lines. As on CPR, traversing along Redemption Ridge shortens the fall line but brings progressively more trees and rocks to see by. One tip: if you're not intent on dropping into one of the uppermost lines, you can get some

fall-line turns down Blue Heaven, then veer hard left and make a flatter, slower and less-crowded traverse than by staying on the ridgetop like most people. By the third or fourth lap there was enough new snow that we were actually breaking off little sluffs in the gullies, creating a bottomless-powder effect by skiing along within them.

The day's pinnacle run was a line with only one or two names, because it's not on the trail map and it wouldn't have been skied in the old days. You traverse along Redemption Ridge and traverse some more, resisting the urge to drop in sooner. You thread the needle between closed zones, bootpack a few steps, make a few ginger turns to avoid toppling into the abyss, then hook hard left. And there you have it: a perfect steep fall-line gully that's almost never skied.

The construction of Kicking Horse a decade ago became the coming-out party for Golden. The resort and the historical railway and logging town have evolved in symbiosis. The area's recreation was always phenomenal, but the

amenities were on the rustic side. Trying to dine with enjoyment after 7:00 p.m., say, wasn't easy. Today the overall tourism offering is much more varied and sophisticated summer as well as winter. One evening, photographer Henry Georgi, Colorado pro skier Sven Bruno and I had a phenomenal dinner at The Island, a new restaurant in a log building beside the Kicking Horse River. All kinds of other places have opened as well, while some of the pre-existing establishments have evolved with the times.

Up at the resort is Corks, a great if slightly out-of-the-way place in the basement of the Copper Horse Lodge, which serves phenomenal tapas in a nice après-ski atmosphere. And for down-home comfort and informality, it's hard to beat the Auberge Kicking Horse B&B, run by Henry's friend Marie-France (M-F) Lessor, which has housed skiers from around the world. The journey to Golden is also slowly becoming easier, as the unconscionably drawn-out upgrades to the Trans-Canada Highway are at last making themselves felt.

Two nights later the storm broke and the following morning every sentient being in the Columbia Valley with anything beyond barrel staves to slide on materialized at the Kicking Horse base area. It was powder-crazed mayhem from ages 8 to 80. Although the obvious lines were trashed almost the instant they opened,



there was great skiing all day long.

Thanks to Andy's two days of previous storm-bound tutelage, navigating in dazzling March sunlight was a snap, and I found numerous tricky stashes that remained unruined even on a huge powder day. The best run of the day, though, was perhaps so obvious it went overlooked: right down the middle of the main line of Whitewall at the top of Stairway to Heaven, called Prosperity. The entry was packed but as soon as I ducked under some rocks I had 60 cm of blower right down the face.

Henry and Sven later peeled off to hike the shoulder of Terminator Ridge and ski into Super Bowl, while the rest of the group melted away. Last season Super Bowl was a much-travelled though past-the-boundary sidecountry zone with an easy route back into the ski area. This year it's officially in-bounds, along with the peaklet beyond known as T2. Some local aficionados might be choked at the resort's move, but Super Bowl was an accident waiting to happen—easily accessible from the resort and frequently skied by people with neither avalanche transceivers nor knowledge, yet it remained uncontrolled. Now it should be safe for all.

Canadian Olympic Skicross team member Dave Duncan and I meanwhile went off in search of the original glades that existed in the Whitetooth era. Sliding past the original

Whitetooth day lodge (now the resort's admin building) and up to the ancient, deserted Pioneer double chair, we looked at each other and spontaneously exclaimed "Hot Tub Time Machine!" It really was like stepping into another era. The chairlift creaked and moaned ardently up the fall line. Yet the old glades were super-fun and the lower cruiser underneath the chairlift was perfectly groomed. The '70s really were great!



The Pioneer Chair session triggered further reflection on how much Golden has evolved over the past decade. To those drawn by Kicking Horse's rugged terrain, long steep slopes, physically demanding ridgeline approaches, tight entries and variable snow, their minds should naturally be drawn to more distant, powdery options—heli-skiing and snowcat skiing. The Golden area has some of the best of both.

Closest by and advertising its presence with its red Bell helicopters flying daily over the resort is Purcell Helicopter Skiing. Some years heli-skiing is less about the steep and deep and more about the safe and sheltered, and last season's snowpack in B.C.—thin and fickle, with nasty sliding layers—made it one of those times. The province's heli- and snowcat operators remained on edge, and one had a snowcat buried by a natural avalanche while building a snow road. What was needed last season was not merely treed terrain, but

completely secure drop-offs and pickups.

Luckily Purcell has just such a zone in the Bellavista drainage several ridges northwest of the ski hill. Late last season I got to ski with Purcell's father-and-son owners, Rudi and Jeff Gertsch. Our repeated laps along the gentle open ridgetops and then down through the trees weren't about conquering the mountain but about nice, enjoyable, safe skiing—and nobody minded. The Gertschs have a wonderful spacious tenure in the northern Purcells plus a chunk of the eastern Selkirs. From Bellavista we had absolutely staggering views of the Selkirs—a whole other level of relief, rockiness, tortuously twisted glaciers and seracs. The Purcells are much more skiable, as I noticed from overhead on the flight out, offering a friendly ratio of snow-covered slopes to cliff walls and rocky pinnacles.

Over the decades, Purcell has made a specialty of catering to first-time heli-skiers, many of whom are ski-weekers staying in Banff and Lake Louise and come in by bus for the day. Rudi and Jeff's endless patience, delight in imparting knowledge and friendly terrain make it a great place to kick off one's heli-skiing career. But they also do private packages for serious repeat skiers. Private groups fly right from Kicking Horse rather than the Gertsch's main heli-base by the highway above Golden. When snow stability allows, Jeff teaches steep clinics in a heli-ski setting. And if there's demand, Purcell will keep on flying right into May, which can offer some of the season's most exciting skiing.

As we lunched following one of our Bellavista laps, Rudi recalled one such experience. "We did a helicopter Haute Route," he said. "I had an incredibly strong group, and the late-season conditions were unusually favourable. Most of the other heli-operations had shut down. We started way down in the Bugaboos, in CMH tenure. We flew and skied our way up through the Bugaboos and into the Bobbie Burns. The following day we skied through the middle of the Selkirs and over to Revelstoke. Then we skied and heli'd our way around the top of the national park, across the Kinbasket Reservoir, and then back down southward along the Rockies back to Golden." The multi-day epic spanned hundreds of kilometres and totalled well over 100,000 vertical feet of skiing, a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the guests and, Rudi said, one of the best weeks he's every guided.



Barely half an hour's drive northwest of Golden is the base for another fantastic heli-operation, Great Canadian Heli-Skiing. Operating out of Heather Mountain Lodge just off the highway, Great Canadian provides exclusively small-group heli-skiing using A-Star helicopters. Owners Greg and Maaike Porter have made it their life's quest to encourage ever-reluctant Canadians to

try the apex form of skiing sitting in their own backyard. The Porters recently came up with a heli-skiing "season's pass" aimed at regional skiers. Pre-paying a round sum of money earns you a set number of days spread however you like across the season.

Great Canadian emphasizes lots of skiing. Every package comes with unlimited vertical, and 17-run days occur routinely. The fly-in approaches are generally short, and the long drainages of the northeast Selkirs plus a chunk of the northwest Purcells making up the Porters' tenure allow multiple runs of untracked without long transits. Great Canadian also has a unique way of utilizing its two aircraft: once the total complement of six four-skier groups start cycling laps in the same drainage, either heli will lift whichever group happens to arrive at the pickup. That minimizes wait times for faster groups while allowing others to ski at their own natural pace.



Golden is also home to one of Canada's finest snowcat skiing operations. Ten years ago in January, Dale McKnight and Dan Josephson, a pair of burly young loggers from Golden, hewed a rough lodge and hacked some snowcat roads into a zone of monumental terrain in a remote new tenure 100 km north of Golden. Chatter Creek almost instantly became the stuff of legend: nearly 250 sq km of terrain, gigantic runs of 3,000+ vertical feet, snowcat skiing's highest drop-off at nearly 10,000 feet elevation and the only glacier skiing in snowcat country. Plus, *bien sur*, the standard vast tree-skiing slopes forming the snowcat genre's core.

Chatter has lived up to its formidable reputation season after season, growing to two beautiful log lodges in addition to the original "Spruce Goose" that now houses staff. Today Chatter runs three snowcats and accommodates 36 guests. (Plus they offer joint snowcat-heli packages with Great Canadian.) Uniquely in the snowcat world, one can add single-run or full-day small-group heli-skiing accessing an even larger surrounding area.

Adding to Chatter's attraction is its easy accessibility from Calgary (despite its physical remoteness). A downtown lawyer or oilpatch engineer can work until noon, drive out to Golden in under three hours and be helicoptered to the Chatter lodge for a sumptuous sit-down dinner by about 6:00 p.m. After three or four days of skiing, the steps are reversed and they're back home in Calgary by early evening. No full days are lost to travelling. That's been a big source of Chatter's success. Another is its long season, typically early December until well into April—the skiers stop coming well before the snow goes. One pack of Calgary and Fernie-based friends of mine visit Chatter every December and have come away with year after year of great tales of steep-and-deep tree skiing. ■

ON THE MENU

KICKING HORSE RESORT 866/754-5245

www.kickinghorse.com
(See Big Mountain Centre)

- Corks Restaurant and Bar in the Copperhorse Lodge: copperhorselodge.com
- The Island: www.islandrestaurant.ca
- M-F's Bed & Breakfast: www.aubergekickinghorse.com
- High-end catered chalet accommodation: www.brambleski.com

PURCELL HELICOPTER SKIING 877/435-4754

www.purcellhelicopterskiing.com

- Steep Clinics planned for spring 2011, and as snow stability allows

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- Season's pass: www.canadianheli-skiing.com/seasonpass.html

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