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**Backcountry Skiing: Getting there can be Half the Fun**

**By Lachlan brown**

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Western Canada is a land of mountains, lakes and rivers. There are also deserts (yes, Walter, small deserts), huge forested plateaus and lush farmland, but mountains are a predominant feature. From the Coast Range in the west to the Rockies in the east, from the Cascades in the south, to the Cassiar Range in the north, there is one range after another; the Caribos, the Monashees, and the Selkirks, to name just a few.

The mountains of British Columbia offer untold opportunities for every kind of skiing, including backcountry touring, snowcat skiing and heli-skiing. There are many ski resorts and many backcountry lodges, mostly located near small interior towns, away from the large population centers and international airports.

Getting to a backcountry skiing holiday can involve travel on roads that traverse narrow valleys and high passes. After heavy snowfalls, roads can sometimes be closed while crews clear away debris from slides.

At the end of January 2004, a heavy snowfall caused overnight closures on some BC highways. Two days later, a second storm closed other roads, including the Trans Canada highway. This is a tale of getting from Vancouver to Golden BC in the midst of these storms.

The weather in Vancouver was mild. There had been a recent gaggle of small disturbances, but no big storms. The freezing level was too high. We prayed for snow. We watched the forecasts, but things looked "iffy".

After months of anticipation, our trip to Chatter Creek was nearing. In two days our annual powder-bash would begin. Four days of cat skiing in Rocky Mountain powder!

## Backcountry Skiing: Getting there can be Half the Fun

This year, we had a group of 24 old friends and regular ski buddies. Many had been to Chatter Creek before and knew what to expect. We were all anxiously counting down the days.

Most of us live in Vancouver, Squamish and Whistler. Individually, we had made our arrangements for getting to Golden. Some would fly to Calgary, rent a car and drive together to Golden, a four-hour trip through Banff, Lake Louise and the Kicking Horse Pass. They would arrive in Golden just in time for our 3:00 PM helicopter flight into the lodge.

Others would drive from Vancouver or Whistler, at best a long nine-hour trip. With an early start on flight day, and with hard steady driving, they should easily reach Golden in time. I would leave a day early, stay with one of the group in Kamloops, and have a leisurely drive to Golden the next day.

Missing the helicopter flight to the lodge was to be avoided. No one's budget covered an extra night in Golden and a private helicopter flight.

The flights don't wait. They have to go on time. They would deliver us to the lodge and bring out departing guests. The transfer starts in mid-afternoon (time varies as the winter progresses) and has to be completed in daylight.

Two days to go and the telephone rang. "Hi, it's Merle."

My heart sank. A call this late from Merle McKnight, Chatter Creek's marvelous manager, could only mean trouble. What was wrong?

"We've had a 'dump'! The passes are closed in both directions. No one is getting through. Crews will work all night and the roads should open sometime tomorrow. However, there is talk of yet more snow. Get here a day early. Come tomorrow!"

Good news and bad news! Lots of fresh snow at Chatter Creek, but getting there would be a challenge.

One always heeds Merle's advice! As my group's organizer, it was time to start phoning.

Hours later, everyone had been alerted. Most were changing their plans but some could not or decided to chance it. Not a good plan! Weather in the Interior can be unpredictable.

I called Al in Kamloops. "We'll be there by 10:00 AM tomorrow, let's go right through. We can ski Kicking Horse in the morning, before our flight". "Fine"! Al would be ready.

A few hours later, a mate and I were on the road. After days of drizzle, the day dawned sunny and mild. It was like spring!

The first mountain road is the Coquihalla. It was bare and the sky was clear. There was no hint of a storm. The roads ahead were reported open.

I thought to myself, "I'm never going to hear the end of this! After getting all those people to change

## Backcountry Skiing: Getting there can be Half the Fun

their plans, I'm going to get some rockets."

We were in Kamloops in less than four hours. We picked up Al and six hours later we were in Golden. There had been a delay at Three Valley Gap, where road crews were cleaning up a slide. However, there had been no real problem and the driving had been easy. False alarm! Oh well, we would get a morning at Kicking Horse Resort before our afternoon flight to Chatter Creek.

Morning dawned, and I arose to look outside. My car had become a huge white mound. Not even the tires were visible! It had dumped overnight and it was still dumping! On went the "telly". The road to the east was closed again. The road to the west could close at any time.

Some of the lads were leaving the coast in the "wee" hours, much earlier than usual to give themselves extra time. Would they make it? Would they get through Three Valley Gap and then the high Rogers Pass before things shut down? The road was bound to close, it was just a matter of time.

At 2:00PM, shaking off the Kicking Horse powder, we headed for the airport. The radio advised that all the passes were now closed. Had our friends made it?

As we drove up to the hanger, we saw all sorts of activity. There was Owen, and Jim was there too. The others from the coast had arrived, the last cars allowed through. Great relief!

However, as we assembled to count heads; 17,18,19,20....?? We were missing the four who were flying to Calgary. They were not to be seen.

A cell phone rang. Chris and Kevin were stopped on the Radium road. The Kicking Horse Pass was closed, so they had tried the alternate route. No luck, it was closed too. They were there for the night. Disaster!

Guests fly to the lodge in three flights, one flight of 12 and two flights of 6. If all 20 of us were to fly to the lodge that night, the stragglers would have an expensive private flight the next day.

Merle and her husband Mike came to the rescue. A radio call was made to the lodge.

"Were there six departing clients willing to stay over and fly out in the morning?" Affirmative! No problem! There were many volunteers.

Merle then asked, "Now, are any two people willing to stay tonight in Golden? Then the last flight of 6 will fly in the morning"

Silence. Glum faces. Hands in pockets. No volunteers!

There was more discussion. "Was anyone willing to snowmobile to the lodge tonight?"

Hesitation, then Tony, good old Tony, raised his hand. He would do it. A ninety-km trip on a snowmobile, following a leader at high speed on a cold night with fresh snow on an unplowed road was

## Backcountry Skiing: Getting there can be Half the Fun

not anyone's idea of fun! Tony would have a 90–km blizzard.

Merle explained, "If we sled the luggage to the lodge tonight, and one person sleds too, then we'll put an extra person in the large `bird' and the last flight will go in the morning. There will be no extra charges and everyone that's here will get in tonight.

Perfect! Relief! We would have warm drinks and a meal waiting for Tony.

The flight to Chatter Creek was spectacular, with shafts of late afternoon sunlight striking the surrounding peaks. In 20 minutes, back on the ground, we stumbling through the fresh "powder" to the welcoming door of Vertebrae Lodge. Eighteen glum–faced skiers and boarders passed us on the way. After a great tour, no one wanted to leave. Six smiling faces greeted us at the door. They would get another great meal and an extra night at Vertebrae Lodge, an unexpected bonus.

Two hours later, Tony arrived, a frozen "Michelin Man". It took a while to thaw him out. Next morning, not long after breakfast, we heard the familiar sound of an approaching helicopter. The last four were arriving.

Our group was complete, the weather was clear, there was lots of fresh snow and our Chatter Creek tour was launched. It turned out to be the best tour yet!

Travel to Golden is not usually difficult. This was an infrequent, but very possible case. The roads from

the east and the west both go over high passes, and can pose a problem. The road from the south (Spokane WA) follows valleys and is rarely closed.

For more information on getting to Golden for your cat skiing adventure, look at the "Getting to Golden" page on the Chatter Creek Web site, at

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photo journal on Chatter Creek is located at

Lockie Brown has cat skied for about 10 years, taking groups of 12 and 24 friends to different cat ski venues in British Columbia. He now takes his groups to Chatter Creek near Golden, B.C. For information on Chatter Creek, please look at

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### **The Ultimate Skiing Experience.**

**By Lachlan Brown**

For downhill skiers, "powder snow" provides the ultimate skiing experience. For most skiers however,

## Backcountry Skiing: Getting there can be Half the Fun

good powder skiing is a short-lived and infrequent event. Ski areas in some geographic areas enjoy fairly frequent "powder days" but in most areas, powder days are rare and the dryness and depth of snow is often marginal.

In most ski areas too, when powder snow does occur, it is only a matter of hours before it is completely "tracked out", lumped up and beaten down. Only those few early birds that ride the first chairs in the morning get the ultimate run of the day, in deep, consistent, smooth, untracked snow.

For years, diehard powder snow enthusiasts have headed for the backcountry to "ski the powder" among remote alpine peaks, far from crowded ski areas. Many enjoy the peace and quiet of ski touring and move and ski at a pace governed by their own physical fitness.

Others who may be less ambitious or have less time, but who have ample disposable funds, have headed for the backcountry in helicopters. For about \$1000 per day or more, heli-operators offer small groups of proficient skiers 5 to 7 days of guided skiing on huge pristine slopes, high in the mountains. Guests stay in comfortable lodges and spend their days being shuttled back and forth with their guides, with each run on a fresh untracked slope. Heli skiing has its problems. There are "down days" when storms make flying impossible and there is always the inherent risk of all backcountry skiing: avalanche.

Avalanche risk depends on many factors. All reputable backcountry operators provide highly qualified guides who choose areas for skiing and a safe route down the hill. On days of poor weather or unstable snow, guides may avoid alpine areas and restrict their groups to "skiing the trees". Tree skiing is a fixture of all mechanized backcountry skiing and is preferred by some skiers to the more open "alpine" skiing.

In recent years, a new type of mechanized backcountry ski operator has emerged. Snowcat skiing operators use snowcats to transport skiers and snowboarders into backcountry regions. Snowcats are fitted with a large cab that seats clients in a warm, comfortable environment. A snowcat typically carries a group of 12 clients, two guides and a driver.

Of course, snowcats are much slower than helicopters. They are also much less expensive and guests can expect to pay between \$500 and \$600 a day, including transportation, lodging, meals, and guiding. As slow as snowcats may be, most clients will wear themselves out every day and get just as much skiing as their group can handle.

The great advantage of cat skiing is that "down" days almost never occur. Clients ski every day and bad weather can often mean extra-good snow. Cat skiing is more relaxed and "laid back" than heli skiing as there is no need to share equipment between groups or to maximize equipment usage. Cat skiing is very "client-friendly". Each group has a dedicated machine and it moves at the group's

pleasure. Weaker skiers can feel at ease and not "pushed".

Snowcats provide a relatively quiet, comfortable, warm and relaxed environment in which the trip back up the hill can be almost as much fun as the run down. Guests can "unbutton", dry out, warm up,

## Backcountry Skiing: Getting there can be Half the Fun

converse and browse on sandwiches, cookies, cake and drinks. If a guest gets tired, it's easy to "sit out" a run and ride down to the next pickup with the cat driver.

Snowcat skiing is more restricted geographically than heli skiing. However, that has a drawback. Since they can operate in a larger area, heli-operators may sometimes be less familiar with changing snow conditions and risk factors than snowcat operators who work in a more restricted area.

Most snowcat operators have ample terrain to consistently provide good snow, even in periods of drought, and to ensure that clients exhaust themselves every day. Chatter Creek Mountain Lodges Ltd. operates in a 95 sq. km area and ski between the elevations of 5400ft and 9500 ft. Monashee Powder Adventures advertises an area of 66 sq. km and operate between the elevations of 7800 ft and 3,000 ft.. Baldface Lodge uses over 140 sq km. Guests need not worry about running out of terrain!

Snowcat skiing provides a wonderful holiday for intermediate and advanced skiers alike. Individuals, family groups, groups of friends, business associates can have a "trip to remember". Operators with remote lodges offer a real "backcountry" experience, usually with good food and very comfortable accommodations.

Lockie Brown is retired and lives near Vancouver, B.C., Canada. He has cat skied for about 10 years, taking groups of 12 and 24 friends to different cat ski venues in British Columbia. He now takes his groups to

near Golden, B.C.

For more information, please refer to the Chatter Creek Web site at

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