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Mission Impossible – Construction of a Backcountry Ski Lodge

By Lachlan Brown

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How can a 9200sq.ft. ski lodge be built in just six months when it took over three months to finish your downstairs bathroom? Now, place the project at the 5250 ft elevation in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, 90 km from the nearest paved road, and it's easy to think, "Mission Impossible"

In July 2002, the four owners of Chatter Creek Mountain Lodges faced a plot of cleared land and a pile of almost 300 green spruce logs, 100 of them having been peeled by hand. By the end of December 2002, the owners were welcoming 24 clients to their new lodge. The beds were made, the larder was full, the bar was stocked and the hot tub was steaming. Vertebrae Lodge was open for business!

Chatter Creek Mountain Lodges is a snowcat skiing and snowboarding tour operator based in Golden, British Columbia. Chatter Creek offers full-service backcountry skiing experiences for powder snow skiers and snowboarders. Intermediate and advanced skiing groups are expertly guided throughout the 130 sq. km operating area. Guests ride in comfortable heated snowcats to experience skiing and riding on a high glacier, through open alpine bowls and down gladed tree runs.

For two years, Chatter Creek hosted groups of 12 clients in their original Spruce Lodge. Guests enjoyed dormitory style accommodation, outdoor plumbing and a very close relationship with one another and with staff. The "Spruce Goose" became a special place to many guests who fondly remember their early cat skiing days at Chatter Creek.

The new Vertebrae Lodge, named after a spectacular nearby ridge, accommodates 24 guests in 12 comfortable bedrooms, each with private bathroom. The lodge boasts well-furnished sitting areas, and a large dining hall with a vaulted ceiling. It has a well-equipped commercial kitchen, a large drying room for boots and outside clothes, a massage room, a games room with a pool table, a well-stocked bar and an outdoor hot tub, complete with bar service. Quite a step up from Spruce Lodge!

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The Chatter Creek building site posed a challenge. The only building material within easy reach was green spruce from the surrounding forest. There was no sand, no gravel, no cement and certainly no neighborhood lumberyard.

The nearest town is Golden, a 120 km drive to the south. The nearest paved road is 90km away, at Donald. Access from Donald is first by logging road and then by a rough, boggy summer road that climbs the last 17 km. to the lodge. Four wheel drive pickup trucks can make the trip in summer, when the access road has dried out but, in the spring, only tracked vehicles can get through, unassisted.

The owners, all ex-loggers, were prepared for the challenge. They had already brought a small Alaska-style sawmill to the site, to build Spruce Lodge. The "Spruce Goose" had been completed following a two-year part-time effort. It was built of 5in. x 10in. square-sawn spruce beams. The new lodge would be built of round logs, with much longer and higher walls than any in Spruce Lodge, and with a much, much larger roof.

The Chatter Creek cat skiing business had proven so popular and guests were so enthusiastic that the partners knew that they could expand to 24 clients. Certainly, they had the terrain for it: 50 sq miles of glaciers, alpine slopes and bowls, and huge forested ridges. They already had a good network of winter roads for their snowcats, a good basis for an expanded operation. These roads extended from below the lodge site, about the 4900-ft elevation, to the top of Vertebrae Glacier at just under 10,000 ft. They traversed both sides of the Chatter Creek watershed and the numerous ridges that provided thousands of acres of prime tree skiing.

The challenge was to build the new lodge in one short summer. This was not just to be a scaled up Spruce Lodge, but a large comfortable building with a reliable water system, multiple sets of plumbing, a commercial kitchen, fire suppression and a septic system that would meet all the environmental codes. Could they do it in one summer? Financial constraints required it.

All through the early spring, partners Dale and Dan selectively logged the trees they would need, using snowcats to skid them to the lodge site. Friends were brought in to help hand-peel logs with drawknives and peeling spuds. These logs would form the major walls. The remaining logs would be milled to provide beams and dimensional lumber for inside framing and the massive roof structure.

Meanwhile, partner Dave buried himself in plans and cost estimates and fretted about environmental and health and building codes, and lined up suppliers for the mechanical systems. The planning seemed to take forever. There were so many questions!

It was clear from the beginning that some new equipment would be required to assist the construction. The building would have two floors topped by a large attic space. A crane was needed to lift the heavy logs into place. Other techniques were far too slow. Also, the existing mill was far too small and too slow for the job. A much bigger more accurate mill was needed.

A brand new computer-controlled Wood-Mizer sawmill was purchased. Its 45' deck would handle the big logs and the cutting rate would provide the needed throughput. For the heavy lifting, a used 20 ton ex-army mobile crane was found. With a 90 ft boom, it would give plenty of clearance for the roof.

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Getting this equipment to the site in late spring was a challenge. The road was still wet and boggy in many places. The sawmill was loaded onto a Ford F450 that was towed by the bulldozer. With its 6ft. diameter tires it was hoped that the four wheel drive crane could travel on its own. An excavator stood by to help.

It took three days to go just 14km. The crane got stuck time and again. The excavator repaired the road and dug out the crane when its great wheels sunk in the mud. It also offered the odd tow, pulling the crane along as it struggled through the deep mud. The long line of equipment inched its way up the road to the Chatter Creek building site.

Getting the equipment to the site was one challenge, keeping it running would be another. The project relied on continuous operation of the crane, the mill and the venerable excavator. The sawmill was brand new and very reliable. However, the mobile crane was an unknown with limited parts available and the excavator was a doddering geriatric having had constant use for many years. The partners could rely on no one but themselves to keep these machines in operation.

By the second week of July the site was clear and level and the logs were ready. The foundations could be set. No other materials were at hand, so the largest available spruce butts were used, set

upright in pits.

By mid-July, the walls were started and the outline of the lodge could be seen. There would be two bays, a 40ft x 40ft bay for two floors of bedrooms and baths and a 40ft x 50ft bay for the common space.

The common space includes a large drying room and a games room and bar on the first floor and a kitchen, dining hall and sitting area on the second floor. A flat ceiling spans the kitchen to create a mezzanine sitting area overlooking the dining hall. The large attic space over the guest bedrooms provides massage and staff rooms with entry from the mezzanine. An open cathedral ceiling spans the entire second floor dining and sitting area.

The walls would require seven logs per floor. There would be seven long log walls. This meant at least 100 logs to peel by hand. Backbreaking work! Well over twice that number of logs would be needed for milling the interior lumber.

The construction crew included the four owners, two of their "significant others", and old school friends from nearby Golden. The women worked along side the men operating chain saws, falling trees and running the sawmill. Milling went on continuously, day after day. Posts and beams, 2x6's, floor joists, and decking materials were all needed in large quantities.

Although none of the crew was yet 30, their skill with equipment and their construction knowledge was remarkable. They had developed their log-building skills the prior summer on a small bathhouse and a staff bunkhouse and now they were facing an immensely larger challenge with tight time constraints.

The progression of the construction is far too much to report here, but the Chatter Creek Web site

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contains many photographs taken throughout the construction period. In addition, the "Chatter News" photo journal contains a detailed description of the construction process.

The work advanced through the summer and became a race against the weather. Could the roof be completed before the first snow? It was a close finish, but nature won and the first snow came just days before the roof was completed. Valuable days were then spent shoveling snow and chipping ice from the floor of the dining hall.

Late September, and the roof was on at last. Finishing the interior became the next race against time. There were 14 bathrooms and a kitchen to plumb, electrical systems to install and the entire septic system had to be installed. Rooms had to be framed and wallboard installed. Windows had to be put in and ceilings insulated. The building had to be equipped and made livable and endless details awaited attention. The first clients were to arrive on December 27, in just three short months. Nearly everything had to be done by the same small crew of about 12 workers.

For the first year or so, wallboard would remain unfinished and only plastic vapour barrier would cover insulation. Wood paneling for ceilings and roof gables would have to wait.

Except for the kitchen range, there would be no open fire within the building. Also, no chimneys were to pierce the roof of the building. Heating would be provided by an external European-style hahsa, a freestanding, self-contained, external wood-burning furnace. Heat is transferred to the building by a 200ft underground glycol loop. Heat exchangers create hot water for bathing, cooking and the hot tub and hot air for convection heating. A 1,000 gallon hot water tank buried in the crawl space acts as a

heat sink. This maintains an even building temperature as the hahsa fire burns high or low. Small electric heaters in the bedrooms, along with opening casement windows allow guests good control over bedroom temperature.

The finishing phase brought new diversions. Large quantities of materials now had to be brought from Golden. Limited local supply meant many trips to Calgary in search of furnishings and special materials. Four valuable hours lost each way! The tight budget required tireless shopping for bargains.

Everything had to be brought to the site by road. Helicopters were far too expensive. Using a four-wheel drive farm tractor and a 22ft highway trailer, Dale spent many autumn weeks bringing materials to the site. Rising very early each frosty morning in Golden, Dale would tow the loaded trailer the 100 km. north to the base of the Chatter Creek road, hook the trailer to the tractor and crawl the last 17 km to the site. Arrival by noon was critical. The uphill trip could only be made with the road still frozen and hard. If he got stuck, the excavator would have to stop work and crawl off down the road to provide a tow. Hours of work would be lost. As Dale hove into sight, all hands would appear to unload the trailer and Dale would head off, down the road and back to Golden to assemble the next day's delivery. Almost 30 loads were delivered in this weather dependent operation.

In the end, the impossible was done. On December 27, 2002 the last sawdust was swept up, the dishes were washed, the last bed was assembled and made, the bathrooms were stocked and the bar was made ready. The first guest helicopter arrived at Vertebrae lodge at 3:30pm. By 4:30pm, 24

admiring guests were roaming the lodge in awe.

A photo journal of the construction of Vertebrae Lodge can be found at:

Chatter Creek President, Dale McKnight, was heard to comment, "Thank goodness we never really understood at the start just how big and how difficult this project was going to be. We probably would never have started. But we did, and now it's done!" Others in the team had thoughts of their own. Jevan recalled the time he sunk the D4 bulldozer in the mud while working on the road. "Right up to the seat. It took the excavator to dig it out." Lori and Isabelle remembered the bugs. "There were `mossies' around the building and bugs and beetles around the sawmill. We went through boxes of `Croc-bloc', but we were still being bitten."

Vertebrae Lodge stands as a testimony to the hard work, perseverance and ability of the Chatter Creek partners and their crew. It's a magnificent structure that was built under difficult conditions and in a very short time. It represents not only a feat of construction, but also a feat of coaxing some very tired equipment into steady operation. The excavator, in particular, was in constant use feeding logs to the sawmill, leveling ground, digging pits and trenches, burying tanks and piping, clearing the septic field, moving heavy loads, towing stuck vehicles up the access road and building winter roads for the snowcats. Both the excavator and the crane had had their cranky moments but, under Dan's tender care, both these mechanical relics stood the course and, with the sawmill, continue to be used to this day.

Lockie Brown lives in Vancouver, Canada and skis on Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains. He

organizes annual cat skiing tours for groups of friends. He prefers to take his powder-hounds to Chatter Creek. Please visit their Web site at

A new photo journal about skiing and log construction at Chatter Creek can be found at

The Ultimate Skiing Experience.

By Lachlan Brown

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

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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, 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

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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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