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Snowcat Skiing: What Is It?

By Lachlan Brown

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Backcountry skiers near Golden, British Columbia travel high into the Rocky Mountains in the warm comfort of snowcats. Traveling in groups of 12, lead by two qualified guides, skiers and snowboarders are carried to elevations of almost 10,000 ft., to ski and ride on a glacier or down great alpine bowls. The views across North America's continental divide are spectacular. Soft powder snow and fresh tracks is the expected norm, every run, every day. The small group of 14 skiers and riders make a small mark on the vast landscape.

Intermediate and expert skiers wanting a very special powder snow holiday experience generally have three options: backcountry touring, snowcat skiing and heli-skiing.

Backcountry touring is slow-paced and as relaxed as your want to make it. It usually requires quite a bit of time, a high level of physical fitness, considerable experience and specialized clothing and equipment.

Snowcat skiing is adapted to short holidays and many operators offer 3-day and 4-day full-service tour packages. Snowcat skiing is not normally weather-dependent and there is no "down-time". Every day is a good ski day. Good physical condition always makes a tour more enjoyable, but there is none of the climbing and walking of backcountry touring. Snowcat skiing provides a relaxed vacation that requires no prior experience or special equipment.

Heli-skiing is the "Cadillac" option for backcountry skiing. It is also the most expensive, being about twice the cost of snowcat skiing. It is also weather-dependent. To allow for "down-days", tours tend to be a few days longer than cat skiing tours. Heli-operators usually offer a guaranteed minimum amount of skiing. Significant additional cost can result if guests exceed the minimum, which often occurs with good weather.

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Efficient operation of helicopters is an economic necessity for operators and helicopters are usually shared among groups. This can result in a pace of skiing influenced by factors other than the individual needs of each group. Unless guests pay for a dedicated helicopter, there is little opportunity to "sit out" a run. Typically, skiing groups can be as small as 4 and as large as 12, depending on the type of helicopter used.

Snowcat skiers enjoy a dedicated cat that moves according to the needs and ability of the group. Snowcat rides are warm, quiet, relaxed and very sociable. They give guests an opportunity to converse with their companions, to rest for the next run, and to adjust clothing. Guests wanting a longer rest can sit out a run and visit with the cat driver on the ride back down the mountain. Lunch is grazed on over the course of the day. Guests can leave extra clothing in the cat and adjust what they wear each run. If a guest wishes to quit early for the day, a staff member will take them back to the lodge on a snowmobile.

Heli-skiing operators use vast tenures covering many hundreds of sq. kms. This permits great access

to "good" alpine snow under a variety of conditions. Snowcat operators use much less terrain. However, in Western Canada there are a number of snowcat operators that have tenures as large as 130 sq. km. These operators make effective use of the land and have more than enough area to provide consistently good skiing and "fresh tracks".

A number of operators have remote backcountry lodges. These offer a unique wilderness experience. Guests ride to the lodges in helicopters, by snowmobile or in snowcats. Lodges are very comfortable and typically offer double-occupancy bedrooms with private bathrooms, excellent cuisine, a games room, a well stocked bar, hot tubs and massage facilities. The first run of the day is nearby and guests often ski to the lodge door at the end of the day.

Remote lodges help guests relax and enjoy their vacation. Guests are isolated from telephones, TV and the bustle of civilization. Soaking in a hot tub, with refreshment in hand, guests watch the drifting snow or the last rays of sunlight leave the surrounding peaks. It's a relaxing way to cap a full day of powder skiing. The problem of the day becomes whether to have a massage before or after the hot tub (or perhaps to do the hot tub twice). Lodge life is very informal and there are no decisions about what to wear to dinner. You only brought one pair of sweatpants!

Most snowcat operators cater to 12, 24 or 36 clients, who ski from independent snowcats. Skiing tenures are sufficiently large that groups often won't see one another in the course of the skiing day, even at a distance. Each group determines its own pace. While keeping their group together, guides are expert at finding "lines" to challenge more competent skiers/riders while leading others on a more "mellow" path. Guides set the bounds on every run leaving guests ample opportunity to find "fresh tracks". Safety is always the first priority.

Some guests organize their own group of 12 skiers, so they are ensured a compatible skiing group of people they know. Many operators offer group organizers a significant discount for their efforts. However, most clients arrive singly, or in pairs and operators work hard to find compatible skiing groups for everyone. New friends are made very quickly.

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Most cat skiing operators recommend their clients be at least "strong intermediates". However, depending on the nature of their terrain, some operators can accommodate less experienced intermediate skiers who are in good physical condition. Potential clients should discuss concerns with operators.

Backcountry skiing usually offers consistently soft powder snow. Sometimes, areas of "wind crust" or "sun crust" will develop, but guides try to avoid these and quickly find better snow. There is no tracked and "lumpy" snow to contend with, and "moguls" are unheard of. The short, fat "powder skis" rented by operators are forgiving and easy to turn. People having little "off-piste" experience find they learn very quickly. Again, fitness is a great asset.

"Tree skiing" is a fixture of all backcountry skiing. When the weather is stormy, snowcat skiers and boarders just head for the trees, where the protected snow is softest and deepest and the visibility is best. Skiers with little experience "in the trees" find that the consistent snow and the powder skis not only allow them to "do it", but that it's great fun. Many cat skiers prefer tree skiing to the open alpine slopes.

Snowcat skiers in North America tend to ski between mid-January and the end of March. However, excellent skiing and reduced rates can often be found in December and in April (when longer spring

days can mean more skiing). While a few cat operators offer day-trips, most provide multi-day full-service packages. These require a booking at least a year in advance, although shoulder-season tours can be booked on much shorter notice. Cancellations also accommodate short-notice bookings, sometimes at a reduced rate.

The amount of skiing done in a day depends on the group. Typically, 9 to 15 runs will be skied for a "total vertical" between 9,000ft. and 16,000 ft. Individual runs vary in vertical drop between about 800 ft and 2000ft. Long cat rides are usually broken up into a number of short "hops" that provide short rests between runs but keep guests active. The lack of any skiing "minimums" allows guides to focus on the needs of their group and on finding the best skiing. There is no need to "rack up the vertical".

Overseas visitors might consider combining resort skiing with snowcat skiing. For example, visitors to Kicking Horse Resort in Golden BC could break their visit with a 3-day or 4-day tour at nearby Chatter Creek Mountain Lodges (

<http://www.chattercreekcat skiing.com/>

). Also, visitors to Whistler-Blackcomb

can do cat skiing day-trips with Powder Mountain Catskiing. Many other snowcat operators are located near excellent ski areas.

The Chatter News Web site (

<http://powder-skiing.blogspot.com/>

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) provides a client's view of snowcat

skiing at Chatter Creek. This photo journal provides many pictures and descriptions of different aspects of cat skiing and boarding.

In Western Canada, the BC Helicopter & Snowcat Skiing Operators Association (

<http://www.bchssoa.com/>

) lists snowcat skiing tour operators who operate under its stringent safety

guidelines.

Lockie Brown is a cat skiing client who lives in Vancouver. He has organized annual tours for friends to number of British Columbia cat skiing venues. He has written articles about the snowcat skiing he has experienced at Chatter Creek (

<http://www.backcountrywintervacations.com/ski-articles.html>

) and

elsewhere.

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 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

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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 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.

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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

Chatter Creek Mountain Lodges

near Golden, B.C.

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

<http://backcountrywintervacations.com/>

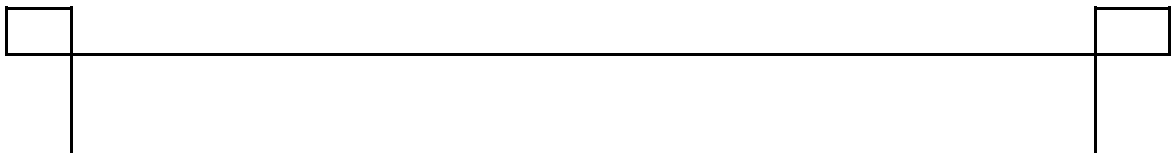
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