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The Ultimate Skiing Experience.

By Lachlan Brown

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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 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.

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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.

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

Try A Boutique Ski Hotel

By Chic Retreats

Cheaper flights and a wider range of European ski resorts has created a market for boutique hotels in skiing areas.

Whilst many people still enjoy staying in chalets or apartments when they ski, many people are opting for a little extra individuality and luxury, and where better to get that than a boutique hotel? Small enough to maintain the intimacy of a chalet, but with services that let you truly enjoy your break, boutique ski hotels are becoming more popular by the year.

Dedicated ski hotels have to offer slightly difference facilities for skiing clientele. Aside from needing a perfect location, they also have to be able to store skis, boots and other equipment safely and provide the sort of food and drink that would be expected by a seasoned skier. Comfort and quality are important too, as is access to local après-ski scene, and boutique hotel owners in these resorts are making sure that their guests want for nothing. Blessed with fantastic views, great cuisine and with all your needs anticipated by the attentive staff, these are the sorts of hotels that turn your annual ski trip into a holiday to remember.

A boutique ski hotel offers you the best of both worlds - a chic hotel experience with the convenience and service of a top quality hotel. No more finding out your hotel is miles from the slopes, or fighting to get on the bus in the morning, and no more wondering if your chalet's evening meal is going to be up to scratch. Instead, concentrate on having fun on the slopes in the knowledge that you will come back to an intimate, tastefully furnished, discreetly serviced hotel that will look after your every need.

In France, for example, Concept One Chalet is the perfect blend of design and service, set in the heart of Chamonix and with just five rooms. Austria has the Schloss Prielau, a medieval castle in Zell am See where glacial skiing is available in the winter. Take a look at both of these boutique hotels the next time you're planning a skiing holiday and make it an unforgettable one.

Chic Retreats is a worldwide collection of cool, smart hotels with less than 30 rooms and an eye for design and style. Visit the website at

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