

BRITISH COLUMBIA POWDER

STORY BY DR. BRAD BOWINS

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Descending a steep deep-powder-covered hill, I entered the zone — trusting my experience to turn my skis while I could barely glimpse the skier ahead of me. Snow and sky merged and I imagined I was skiing on the clouds in the upper reaches of British Columbia's backcountry. At the bottom of the cloud-shrouded mountain it was back to reality, as a small group of skiers and our shared snowcat suddenly reappeared.

Snowcats are the tractor-like



machines that ski resorts use to groom runs and sadly, more often than not, compact that fine powdery snow. Rebelling against their powder-destroying cousins are a handful of the big machines that have been converted into snow-buses of sorts. Skiers ride in comfort, exchanging stories about the last run as the big cat prowls up the mountain in search of more powder. Finding its prey, it sends the thrill-seeking skiers out to carve up the hill charging down snow-



(Left) British Columbia is the powder-skiing capital of the world (inset, facing page) Experience the thrill of being alive photos by Brad Dawber **(above) Your chariot or in this case cat awaits** photo courtesy of Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing Ltd.

filled bowls and evergreen glades.

With so much energy reverberating over the mountain, the excitement is contagious. Even apprehensive skiers forget their fears as they carve a few turns, sending up a spray of fine white mist. Not surprisingly, these skiers are the ones shouting the loudest as fear is replaced by the thrill of being alive.

Avid skiers the world over yearn to experience what BC's backcountry has to offer. Most satisfy their powder skiing passion (or addiction) at snowcat and heli-skiing lodges scattered across the interior of BC. The lodges cater to American, European and Canadian visitors.

Hearty breakfasts and dinners are provided at the lodge, while lunch is offered on the slopes. Bedrooms vary in quality from shared bunks to luxury suites, but for the most part they tend to be somewhat modest. Few guests, however, spend much time in their rooms and the common areas are well equipped with magazines, pool tables and other games. In addition, guests

have a chance to practice the fading art of conversation with individuals who share their interest in skiing and adventure.

Newcomers often have difficulty deciding between snowcat or heli-skiing. After evaluating my own experiences and listening to the opinions of fellow skiers, I've come up with a set of criteria. First and foremost, price. Heli-skiing is almost twice as expensive as snowcat skiing due, of course, to the high cost of purchasing and maintaining helicopters. Another consideration is terrain coverage. Helicopters can obviously cover a larger amount of terrain, but the area accessible to snowcat operators is surprisingly vast and skiers rarely ski over their own tracks.

For my part, group size and the number of groups sharing the vehicle are also factors to consider. Group size for either type of skiing typically ranges from 6-12 people, though snowcats generally have the greater capacity. The snowcat belongs to a



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specific group for the day, whereas two to four groups might be shuttled up the mountain by one helicopter. Lodges accommodate varying numbers of guests, with some snowcat lodges restricting the number to one group of 10 to 12 skiers.

When considering how much equipment can be carried each day, snowcats are also the favoured option. Unless you're with a group that has chartered a helicopter, you have to wear everything you'll need for the day, since the helicopter has weight and space limitations. Snowcats don't have these restrictions, so you can leave a backpack in the cab. This might sound trivial, but when conditions can shift from cold with blowing snow to sunny and warm on a given day, it helps to carry clothes and equipment for different scenarios.

And then there's lunch. When the weather is sunny and warm, standing outside and eating sandwiches is great, but it can be a less-than-thrilling experience in freezing temperatures. Given the number of groups per helicopter and the extent of terrain covered, it is much more likely that you'll be eating outside when heli-skiing. Snowcat lodges commonly have mountain-top shacks that provide some shelter from the cold and, in extreme conditions, the snowcat itself will suffice.

However if you're heli-skiing, you probably won't have to worry about lunch in bad weather; down days due to weather can be quite common. Snowcats can go through conditions a helicopter could never attempt. In my four snowcat trips there were never down days — not even close. Whereas, in my one heli-skiing outing, two out of four days were down and we did little more than sit around or go snowmobiling.

But it's not just weather that contributes to the atmosphere of your powder-skiing experience. Snowcat skiing tends to be social and relaxed,



Smiles and sunshine abound photo courtesy of Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing Ltd.

and bonds have time to develop over conversations shared in the cat. The noise and speed of helicopters curtail conversation.

Beyond the decision between snowcat and heli-skiing, the concern that often comes to mind is safety from avalanches, the dread of any backcountry skier. While risk toler-

ance has to remain an individual decision, a great deal of effort goes into assuring safety at both snowcat and heli-skiing operations. Lodges employ highly qualified and certified guides who are intimately familiar with the local terrain. Avalanche transceivers are supplied by every snowcat and heli-skiing operation and training is given at the beginning of each stay.

At Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing — with whom I've skied three times with a fourth trip planned this year — tree skiing is a major draw. Sailing between snow-blanketed evergreens, feeling the spray of fine champagne powder billowing up from your skis and down from disturbed branches is an experience that most skiers can barely imagine.

Fitness is another consideration — powder skiing is hard work even with wide powder skis.

An average snowcat day consists of about 7-10 runs. While you might

think that 7-10 runs sounds easy, it can feel like 20-30 at a ski resort. But the rewarding feeling that settles in on the ride back to the lodge completely eclipses the fatigue. All you can think of is what the next day will bring — powder, powder and more powder. ❧

Prowling the slopes — Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing Ltd. (tel: 800/889-0765; www.greatnorthern-snowcat.com) is an hour-and-a-half south of Revelstoke. Their private mountain lodge offers single or double occupancy rooms, all with private bathrooms, as well as a sauna and gourmet chef.

Selkirk Wilderness Skiing (tel: 800/799-3499; www.selkirkwilderness.com) is considered a snowcat ski pioneer. The family-run lodge generally offers five-day ski packages. A courtesy bus runs skiers from the town of Nelson to Selkirk's base station in Meadow Creek.

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