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WHEN SKIING POWDER, *Experience Counts*

BY BRAD BOWINS



(facing page) The result of a good day snow-cat skiing photo courtesy of Selkirk Wilderness Skiing (above) Backcountry fun in deep powder photo courtesy of Great Northern Snowcat Skiing

Attention all advanced skiers. Whether you hail from the west, east, north or south you must try powder skiing while you are young enough to thoroughly enjoy it. Once you've tried it you'll almost certainly be hooked and suffer withdrawal effects without your yearly fix. Addiction to this white powder is all good as it invigorates the soul with only one fix, while exposing you to some of the most spectacular mountain scenery there is!

Snow-cat skiing is arguably the best way to explore this amazing world for first-timers and achieve your repeat highs once you're hooked. Large tractor-like machines typically used to groom hills at traditional ski hills, have large passenger cabs added to take skiers up mountains that lack ski lifts and skiing crowds. Since the snow has not been tracked it is yours to make graceful turns in, or as is sometimes the case, not so graceful falls nicely cushioned by that soft powder. While

some hardcore enthusiasts like to get their powder highs from backcountry ski trekking, this is your vacation and you might as well maximize the downhill fun and minimize the uphill work. Based on my experience and conversations with fellow skiers, heli-skiing is about twice the price, more intense in pace, less sociable, and much more prone to down days due to cloudy and snowy weather. Snowcats run under any conditions so you can count on skiing every single day.

The interior of British Columbia is destination number one for powder ski enthusiasts given the tremendous amount of dry snow falling from November through April, and the Selkirk Mountains tend to have more dry powdery snow than anywhere. The originators of snow-cat skiing wisely selected the Selkirks as the site of their operations. While working at ski resorts in the 70s, Allan Drury noted that some skiers would hitch a ride on the snow-

cat to experience fresh powder. It dawned on him that a ski operation using snow-cats to take skiers up untracked mountains was the future of skiing, hence in 1975 he established Selkirk Wilderness Skiing by Meadow Creek, north of Nelson in the Selkirk mountain range. Four years later a good friend and fellow Canadian, Brent McCorquodale, started up Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing, also in the Selkirks, by Trout Lake south of Revelstoke. I have had the pleasure of visiting Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing six times and Selkirk Wilderness once.

Experience counts with most things in life and this certainly applies to backcountry skiing. Allen and Brent know their terrain like the backs of their hands, or better yet, their ski gloves since most of the year they are probably not going to see the backs of their hands. Knowing your terrain is fundamental to giving guests the most for their money. Conditions in mountains can change by the hour or even less, and being fully aware of where the risky areas are for avalanches and where the best snow conditions are cannot be emphasized enough. Both of these snow-cat ski veterans have imparted their knowledge to their lead guides ensuring that there is uniformity in guiding quality.

Alpine guiding is a job that takes a lot of skill both in terms of knowledge required, experience and customer service. Great Northern and Selkirk Wilderness both have a very safety conscious format utilizing a lead guide with advanced qualifications and a so-called “tail-gunner” to follow behind the guests. Anyone who has fallen and lost their ski or had it become wedged under heavy snow can testify to the value of there being someone with energy and experience coming along to assist. At Selkirk Wilderness a lead guide, Heidi, has achieved the distinction of being one of the most qualified female mountain guides in Canada. I observed this clearly strong-willed individual displaying understanding and assistance to several guests when equipment and other concerns arose.

Where to start in the beautiful Canadian backcountry photo courtesy of Selkirk Wilderness Skiing





While snow-cat skiing I have consistently been impressed by how many females are part of these expeditions and how they do as well, or dare I say better in some cases, than men. At Selkirk half the guests were female and many above 50 years in age. They ripped down slopes with very little hesitation and no shortage of energy.

Using powder skis wide and uniform in width makes powder skiing much more enjoyable, as these skis allow you to float on the snow transforming anxiety into sheer pleasure. I have seen individuals struggle in deep snow, particularly when it is wetter, using their regular shaped skis, while their equally skilled friend sailed along. Those who convert are typically smiling instead of grimacing, and are

less likely to be roaming the lodge at the end of the day saying, “I need a massage.” Remember folks—this is your vacation so diminish the aggravation and anxiety, and increase the enjoyment with powder skis. The “powder” in powder skis gives all the information that is needed, much as “snow” in snow tires does. Both operations also have a variety of powder skis for rent.

While Great Northern and Selkirk Wilderness share many features in common, understandable given their common origin, there are a number of differences that will help you select the lodge that best suits you. Great Northern has a quieter, more intimate atmosphere reflected in one central table where everyone dines together, and loud parties are



(facing page) Endless possibilities with the trusty snow-cat photo courtesy of Great Northern Snowcat Skiing **(above) Looking ahead to the Selkirk Mountains** photo courtesy of Brad Bowins

not encouraged. Selkirk Wilderness has a more vibrant feel to it and the excitement can be contagious. Regardless of whether you select Great Northern or Selkirk Wilderness you will almost certainly leave British Columbia hooked on the white powder and craving your next fix. ^{SH}

For additional information on Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing, phone 800.889.0765 or visit greatnorthernsnowcat.com. Contact Selkirk Wilderness Skiing at 250.366.4424 or visit selkirkwilderness.com.