



# Fresh tracks

Blast through BC's best powder on a snowcat excursion in the Selkirks

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY *Dr Brad Bowins*



Snowcats run in any conditions, even those that would ground heli-skiers.





Attention all advanced skiers — regardless of where you live, you must try powder skiing while you're young enough to thoroughly enjoy it. You'll be exposed to some of the most spectacular mountain scenery there is.

And, once you've tried it, you'll almost certainly be hooked.

Snowcat skiing is arguably the best way to explore this amazing world for first-timers. The large tractor-like machines typically used to groom hills have added large passenger cabs to take skiers up mountains that have no lifts — and no crowds of skiers.

Since the snow hasn't been tracked, it's yours to carve out graceful turns in, or not so graceful falls, nicely cushioned by that soft powder. Some hardcore powder enthusiasts get their highs from ski trekking. But this is your vacation, and you might as well minimize the uphill work and maximize the downhill fun.

Based on my experience and conversations with fellow skiers, heli-skiing is more intense in pace than snowcat skiing — but it's also twice the price 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.

It was while working at ski resorts in the '70s that Allan Drury first noted that some skiers hitched rides on the snowcat to get to fresh powder. It dawned on him that a ski operation using snowcats to take skiers up untracked mountains was the future of the sport, so in 1975 he established Selkirk Wilderness Skiing, north of Nelson, British Columbia.

Four years later, a good friend, Brent McCorquodale, started up Great Northern Snowcat Skiing, south of Revelstoke, also in the Selkirk mountain range. And I have had the pleasure of skiing with both outfitters, particularly the latter.

Knowing your terrain is fundamental to giving guests the most for their money; and Drury and McCorquodale know the Selkirks like the back of their hands. Conditions in the mountains can change by the hour, and being fully aware of avalanche risks and the best snow conditions is critical. Both of these snowcat veterans have imparted their knowledge to their lead guides, ensuring that there is uniformity in the quality of guiding.

Given the tremendous amount of dry snow falling from November to April, the interior of BC is the number-one destination for powder enthusiasts. And the Selkirk mountain range tends to have more dry powdery snow than anywhere in the province.

### **POW, RIGHT IN THE KISSER**


On my last day at Great Northern this year, there was a tremendous amount of snow — in fact, it was close to hampering our movements (anything above a metre is hard to get through, even if it is powdery). Surveying the weather and other signs, McCorquodale selected morning runs at Great Northern Mountain that yielded soft powder producing the renowned “face-shots,” where snow billows up from your skis and gives you a snowy kiss.

Despite the great quality of the runs, he then decided to move us over to Thompson Mountain generating questions among the guests. But the large open bowls with fine deep champagne powder quickly put an end to any questions. Below the bowls, we entered a section of forest scorched by a natural burn, and skied between blackened trees to a sheltered area where we savoured a tasty and much deserved lunch.

Following a few more runs down open bowls that most ski resorts can only dream of, McCorquodale once again moved us over to Great Northern Mountain so we could ski to the lodge. Snow that had been soft and billowing earlier in the day was now heavy and unyielding. It was clearer than ever why we had switched mountains mid-day.



Tour outfitters rent wide, straight “powder” skis that improve control.



The Selkirk mountain range gets BC's driest and most abundant powder.

*One word of advice: arrive early, given weather-related closures at smaller airports such as Castlegar — also known as “Cancelgar”*

Alpine guiding is a job that takes a lot of skill in terms of knowledge, experience and customer service. Great Northern and Selkirk Wilderness both have a very safety conscious format that uses both a lead guide with advanced qualifications and a so-called “tail-gunner” to follow behind the guests. Anyone who has fallen and lost a ski or had it wedged under heavy snow can testify to the value of having the assistance of someone with energy and experience.

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.

I have consistently been impressed by how many women are part of these expeditions and how they do as well, or in some cases, better than men. At Selkirk, half the guests were female, many over 50. They ripped down slopes with little hesitation and no shortage of energy.

### **SENSE AND SENSIBILITY**

One of the most common themes to questions I get about backcountry skiing concerns the risk. Even repeat guests can experience nervousness prior to skiing, particularly if they let their mind wander on the dark side. I suspect that there are many advanced skiers who are interested in trying powder skiing, but who hesitate when they focus on the risks and danger.

Here again, experience counts — Selkirk Wilderness and Great Northern have excellent safety records. All guests are assigned avalanche transceivers and instructed how to use them. On any slope judged anything less than fully safe, skiers descend one or two at a time to make sure there are many able bodies to assist if something does go wrong.

Of course, with any adventure involving nature and the elements, the risk can't be reduced to zero,

so individual comfort levels play a role. Those who try it out are usually reassured after their first day or two — assuming that the operation is as safety conscious as these.

Another major element when you're talking about comfort is the use powder skis. Unlike parabolics, these skis are wide and uniform in width and allow you to float on the snow. I have seen individuals struggle in deep snow, particularly when it's wet in regular skis, while their equally skilled friends sailed along. Those who convert are typically smiling, and are less likely to be roaming the lodge at the end of the day saying, “I need a massage.” Both outfitters rent them, so there's no need to invest in a pair.

## **POWDER PLANS**

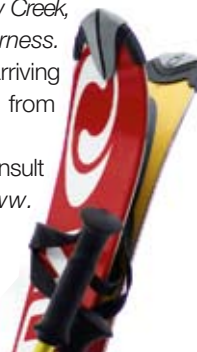
**Air Canada Jazz** ([www.flyjazz.ca](http://www.flyjazz.ca)) flies into Castlegar from Calgary and Vancouver daily.

A six-day, seven-night package with **Great Northern Snowcat Skiing** (tel: 800-889-0765; [www.greatnorthernsnowcat.com](http://www.greatnorthernsnowcat.com)), arriving Saturday and departing Saturday, is \$4970 (reduced to \$4265 in late-March).

For a few weeks each season, Great Northern offers three-day, three-night package (arriving either Saturday or Tuesday) which range from \$2235 to \$2615 (or from \$2500 to \$2935 for a three-day, four-night package).

At **Selkirk Wilderness Skiing** (*Meadow Creek, BC*; tel: 250-366-4424; [www.selkirkwilderness.com](http://www.selkirkwilderness.com)), a five-day, six-night package arriving Sunday and departing Saturday, ranges from \$3190 to \$4140.

For more on travel to the region, consult **Tourism BC** (tel: 800-HELLOBC; [www.hellobc.com](http://www.hellobc.com)).





Part of reducing a guest's anxiety also has to do with managing unforeseen problems — like late arrivals, lost luggage and road blockages. The staff at Great Northern and Selkirk Wilderness have seen it all and make every trip seamless.

On my way to Selkirk, I arrived very late due to a flight delay. Telephone service was down around Meadow Creek that day so I was unable to advise them of my situation. When I arrived around 9PM at the home of Allan and Brenda Drury, arrangements were made for someone at the lodge to take me up with a snowmobile.

### PROWLING FOR POWDER

While Great Northern and Selkirk Wilderness share many features in common, there are a number of key 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 not encouraged. Selkirk Wilderness has a more vibrant feel to it and the excitement can be contagious. One evening a five-hole mini-golf course was set up and teams competed. With a young golf pro as a partner, I shared the victory spotlight on this festive evening.

Selkirk Wilderness runs two snowcats, which each take about 12 to 13 guests; Great Northern only uses one snowcat with a larger cab capable of handling 16 guests.

Access to the lodge is another difference — Great Northern is situated at a lower elevation enabling you to drive right up to the door whereas at Selkirk a snowcat, or snowmobile for those arriving late, takes you up to the lodge from the Drury's home.

Great Northern Snowcat Skiing and Selkirk Wilderness Skiing are situated amongst spectacular and inspirational mountain scenery. Less inspirational is getting to these lodges given that they are not located close to any international airport. The booking staff at both lodges will gladly advise you regarding travel arrangements.

One piece of helpful advice I offer is that you consider arriving earlier given weather-related closures of smaller airports such as Castlegar, affectionately known as "Cancelgar," and possible problems with roads. Spending some additional time in this amaz-

*Brad Bowins is a psychiatrist working in private practice as well as at the University of Toronto Health Service. Lured by ski videos of steep and deep powder, he made his first foray into backcountry skiing almost a decade ago and has tried both heli-ski and snowcat outings. An avid skier since childhood, he hits the slopes most weekends each winter.*

Skiers get to carve first tracks any time of day.



ing area of an amazing province is well worth it. Nelson south of Selkirk Wilderness is a very progressive town with great restaurants, good hotels, fine shops, and a somewhat modern-day hippy culture.

Whitewater is a relatively small ski area located nearby with some interesting glade skiing if you have not yet had your fill of skiing or wish to warm up prior to powder skiing.

North of Great Northern you'll find Revelstoke with an amazing railway museum. Lord Revelstoke played a crucial financial role in the completion of the railway linking Canada from east to west, with the connection point being just west of the town named in honour of him. Revelstoke also has comfortable accommodations, good restaurants, and a new ski hill with the longest vertical of any mountain in North America.

Add-ons in Nelson or Revelstoke can enhance your overall experience and give you a safety buffer for flights. Either way, you will almost certainly leave British Columbia hooked on the white powder and craving your next fix. 