

# powder Keg

A **psychiatrist** treats his  
**addiction** to the white stuff  
by **snowcat skiing** in BC

text and photos by  
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The Rockies in Southern BC are renowned  
for their fine champagne powder snow.



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 cloud we were passing through in the upper reaches of British Columbia’s backcountry. At the bottom of the cloud-shrouded hill I returned abruptly 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. Rebellious 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

## Like a surfer I rode out the wave of snow and watched as the mini-avalanche petered out

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 as war whoops signal the charge down snow-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. As one guide so astutely commented, teenagers wouldn’t abuse drugs if they could experience the thrill of this every day.

Our own British Columbia is undoubtedly the powder-skiing capital of the world. Clouds saturated with Pacific Ocean moisture are snared by the powder-skiing gods in the mountains and forced to produce the kind of snow that dreams are made of. Avid skiers the world over yearn to experience what BC’s backcountry has to offer. Most satisfy their

powder skiing urges (or addictions) at snowcat and heli-skiing lodges scattered across the interior of BC. The lodges cater to American, European and Canadian visitors — though the latter are oddly underrepresented.

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 prac-

## white out

### PROWLING THE SLOPES

**Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing** (tel: 800-889-0765; [www.greatnorthern-snowcat.com](http://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.

**Island Lake Lodge** (tel: 888-422-8754; [www.islandlakeresorts.com](http://www.islandlakeresorts.com)) is located near Fernie, BC. The main lodge (aka The Bear) offers double occupancy rooms with shared bathrooms, while Red Eagle and The Cedar have double occupancy with ensuite bathrooms. Island Lake will also accommodate a limited number of non-skiing partners at a reduced rate.

**Selkirk Wilderness Skiing** (tel: 800-799-3499; [www.selkirkwilderness.com](http://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.

### UP AND AWAY

**Canadian Mountain Helicopters** (tel: 800-661-0252; [www.cmhski.com](http://www.cmhski.com)) is the largest heli-ski company by far, with over 10 lodges in different locations throughout BC.

**Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing Resort** (tel: 800-661-9170; [www.wiegele.com](http://www.wiegele.com)) is located in Blue River, north of Kamloops. The legendary Mike Wiegele

presides over the heli-ski resort that now includes a full health spa. The resort offers three-, five- and seven-day packages, as well as non-skiing packages.

**Tyax Lodge Heliskiing** (tel: 800-667-4854; [www.tlheliskiing.com](http://www.tlheliskiing.com)) can be accessed from Lilloet. Their packages are flexible: they offer regular, not just early or end-of-season packages, ranging from two to seven days, and only two groups per helicopter. They also have a more remote lodge, Last Frontier Heli-Skiing.

**Snowboarders** are welcome at snowcat and heli-skiing operations, but they must be prepared to trek across stretches of flat terrain in deep powder. I have seen a retractable ski pole used effectively for this purpose.

tice the fading art of conversation with individuals who share their interest in skiing and adventure.

### CAT FIGHT

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 six to 12 people, though snowcats generally

Skiers get in a 915-metre run in the Chilcotin Mountains.





You'll get in about the same number of runs on a snowcat or heli-skiing excursion.

Foreigners outnumber Canadians on most heli-skiing and snowcat excursions.

have the greater capacity. The snowcat belongs to a 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 like a trivial point but

when conditions can shift from cold with blowing snow to sunny and warm on a given day, it does help 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 even attempt. In my four snowcat trips there were never any 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.

#### ALTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

But it's not just weather that can contribute to the atmosphere of your pow-

der-skiing experience. Snowcat skiing tends to be more social and relaxed, and bonds have time to develop over conversations shared in the cat. The noise and speed of helicopters, plus the stunning scenery, pretty much curtail conversation. In general, heli-skiers tend to be more focused on their "vertical," insider lingo for the number of vertical feet or metres skied each day. Many have compact instruments to give them an altitude reading, although I found that asking the pilot or guide tends to work well.

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 tolerance 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, even to experienced backcountry skiers. Transceivers send out a signal that can be picked up by the others when set to receive. Intensifying sounds or lights help searchers zero in on a buried skier, effectively putting Saint Bernard dogs out of work.

Smaller avalanches do occur, though, like the one I encountered on my last day at Tyax Lodge HeliSkiing — a beautiful sunny day with deep powder on every run. Having accurately appraised the risk in that area, our guide had us ski across an open slope one at a time. I was about

two-thirds of the way across when I had the strange sensation of the ground giving way. Suspecting the cause, I looked back to see a small wave of snow approaching. Much like a surfer I rode the wave out the side and watched as it continued about 50 metres farther before petering out. Not all avalanches are the monsters seen in documentaries.

#### BETTER THAN A SKI-POLE SPANKING

Avalanches, lunches in freezing temperatures and down days aside, the experience of floating across untracked deep powder is one that every enthusiastic and experienced skier deserves. On the day of my mini-avalanche, we skied an awesome 13,411 vertical metres, one ride after another down open bowls begging to be skied. 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.

Harder to imagine, but every bit as real, was the female skier who fell and slid headfirst down a tree well. With skis waving in the air and head out of sight, the image outdid a *Far Side* cartoon. I

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suspect a roaming grizzly bear would have been too shocked to do much more than just stare. The trapped skier was unceremoniously dragged out, laughing hysterically.

Ski guides can make or break the experience and for the most part they are somewhat unusual characters, much the same as their guests. One gruff guide had uniquely managed to turn a tendency of not catering to his clients into a likable trait, once spanking a male client with a ski pole after having to clean snow off the man's boot. It was all in good humour, although you can be sure the skier never asked to have his boot cleaned again. This same guide barely muttered "gully" when I violated the number-one rule of backcountry skiing: never get ahead of your guide. Flying through the air into a big pillow of snow, I reasoned that this

was my punishment — better than a ski-pole spanking I guess.

#### NOVICES NEEDN'T APPLY

Now that your taste for powder snow has been whetted and fears of deadly avalanches allayed, you're probably wondering if you can handle it. Even though some operations say that moderate skiers can manage powder skiing, I think it is more for the experienced. Even with "fat-boy" powder skis (wide skis that provide flotation across powder) you will likely struggle and hold up the group if your ability is limited — which to some heli-skiers ranks up there with armed robbery. If uncertain, it's best to try a day outing from a major ski resort such as Whistler or Panorama, where local heli-skiing and, less often, snowcat operations offer half-to full-day outings. These excursions match people of approximately the same level, ensuring an enjoyable time.

Fitness is another consideration — powder skiing is hard work even with wide powder skis. Compounding the challenge for Eastern skiers used to hard-packed surfaces is that shifting skis laterally to adjust body position is not possible in deep snow, necessitating a new technique for always staying balanced over the skis.

An average snowcat day consists of about seven to 10 runs; heli-skiing is much the same due to the number of groups serviced by the same helicopter. Vertical is greater for heli-skiing but much of those extra metres consist of gradual ski-outs to spots where the helicopter can land.

While you might think that seven to 10 runs sounds easy, it can feel like 20 to 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. **■**

Bowins has already scheduled a fourth trip with Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing.



Brad Bowins is a psychiatrist working in private practice and 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 and snowcat outings. An avid skier since childhood, he hits the slopes most weekends each winter.

