



The resort has the highest vertical in BC's interior and gets 560 centimetres of powder a year.

# close to heaven

Could **Sun Peaks**, BC's novice-friendly **glades** and great **powder** make it the next **Whistler?**

by Dr Brad Bowins

A name says a lot about a place. And the name Sun Peaks is definitely a better choice than Tod Mountain. Not only is the latter a little boring, but the German translation of "Tod" is death. With a name like that, marketing this BC ski resort in Europe would mean focussing on the kamikaze fringe of extreme skiers. This would be a shame, because Sun Peaks is the perfect family ski resort — with a twist. That twist is the spectacular and relatively safe backcountry skiing just beyond the inbounds ski area on Tod Mountain.

With its short runs, fairly gradual inclines and soft powder snow, no setting could be more ideal for the novice backcountry skier. The resort has the highest vertical in BC's interior and gets 560 centimetres of powder per year. Locals often purchase an inexpensive backcountry pass which allows them to use the resort's lifts to reach the top of the mountain where they make a short hike to runs they can call their own.

If you're thinking, "I'm on vacation, I don't want to hike," you can leave the trudging to the locals and sign up for a day of snowcat skiing. After all, who really wants to burn all that energy clambering uphill, when the real fun is kicking up a spray of soft snow down powder bowls and glades?

That's just what I decided to do last March when I visited Sun Peaks, an hour north of Kamloops. The mountain is still relatively off the radar despite having the second-largest skiable terrain in BC and Olympic Gold medallist Nancy Greene as its Director of Skiing.

*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 and snowcat outings. An avid skier since childhood, he hits the slopes most weekends each winter.*

Untouched backcountry skiing is a short hike from the lifts.

ADAM STEIN/SUN PEAKS RESORT

## at your peak

At **Sun Peaks Ski Resort** (tel: 800-807-3257; [www.sunpeaksresort.com](http://www.sunpeaksresort.com)), lift passes for three days or more start at \$54/day for adults, \$46 for teens and \$27 for kids six to 12 (tots five and under ski free). Sun Peaks snowcat skiing tours run from 8:30AM to 3PM and include lunch and lift access for \$250. Accommodations range from B&Bs and chalet rentals, to slopeside condos and hotels. Visit the website or contact the resort for options.

**Cahilty Lodge** (tel: 800-244-8424; [www.cahiltylodge.com](http://www.cahiltylodge.com)) is Olympic Gold medallist Nancy Greene's ski-in, ski-out condo-hotel. Rates start at \$139 for a hotel room and \$149 for a studio with kitchenette.

Ski-and-stay packages for two at the **Delta Sun Peaks Resort** (tel: 866-552-5516; [www.deltahotels.com/hotels/hotels.php?hotellid=38](http://www.deltahotels.com/hotels/hotels.php?hotellid=38)) start at \$199 per night.

There's a new shuttle service to the resort from Kelowna Airport. You can fly non-stop from Toronto on **WestJet** (tel: 888-937-8538; [www.westjet.com](http://www.westjet.com)) or **Air Canada** (tel: 888-247-2262; [www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)). There is daily service to Kamloops Airport from Vancouver and Calgary on Air Canada Jazz.

For more information, contact **Tourism BC** (tel: 800-435-5622; [www.hellobc.com](http://www.hellobc.com)).

Greene and her husband Al Raine arrived at Sun Peaks in 1995, fresh from a successful hotel in Whistler and years as that resort's unofficial ambassadors. What they found was a total population of 10 residents and the first phase of development on the newly renamed Sun Peaks ski resort. There was plenty of untapped potential, and they opened Cahilty Lodge, a ski-in, ski-out condo hotel.

Ten years later, Sun Peaks has eight hotels and three ski mountains — Tod Mountain, Sundance and the recently opened Mount Morrisey. Nestled at their base is the efficiently laid out and picturesque Sun Peaks Village, designed, like so many ski resorts in North America, with gabled roofs and colourful facades.

There are a number of B&Bs, rental chalets and lodge-style hotels, but I made the 250-room Delta Sun Peaks Resort home during my stay. The centerpiece of the village, it's the largest full-service hotel and it includes a conference centre, spa, fitness room, many rooms with balconies and an elevated outdoor heated pool where you can float while admiring the surrounding mountains.

### PURR-FECT POWDER

But the view from the village wasn't what I had come here for. I took the lift up to meet with our small group of snowcat adventurers. One was a snowboarder who runs helicopter tours in Hawaii who came to celebrate his 40th birthday (aided by several cans of beer in his backpack). There was also a couple from BC: the woman was a moderate skier who was brave enough to give backcountry skiing a try, and her husband was an employee of Intrawest (the big ski resort development company) vacationing at a competitors' mountain. Their choice of resort and backcountry outing says a lot in and of itself. Adding further variety to our diverse group was our Quebecois guide. Although somewhat out of place with his heavy accent, he certainly knew the area like it was his home.

The vintage snowcat was a sight to behold. This was no sleek, silent tank like its modern-day descendants. It started up with a throaty roar, like a muscle car

from the '70s, and stood vibrating as if to pump up its virility. Only four guests, a guide and driver can comfortably fit. Plans for the 2005-2006 season include a modern snowcat capable of handling many more guests.

The day we went out couldn't have been more perfect for powder skiing — clear blue skies, a comfortable temperature not warm enough to melt the snow and deep powder thanks to a badly needed snowfall a few days prior. We enjoyed runs down glades where the evenly spaced trees enabled each of us to find a line with untouched powder.

A couple of runs were on the open peak of Tod Mountain and, after lunch, the guide decided that we were fit and — in the case of our Hawaiian guest — sober enough to complete an uphill trek to a pristine slope rarely skied. The run started off with an open section between

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two clusters of trees; the softest powder imaginable billowed from our skis. Past the midway point, the trees closed in to provide an electrifying obstacle course all the way to the bottom. This run was so rarely skied that the snowcat driver had a hard time finding us at the bottom and had to be guided over by radio.

In total, we completed 13 runs that spectacular March day, witnessed some of the most impressive mountain scenery imaginable and had the equivalent of a day of heli-skiing at a fraction of the cost — not bad at all. At the end of the day, we returned to the main ski area, which was already closed, and enjoyed a deserted run to the village. The next day brought a snowstorm and greatly reduced visibility, a reminder of how lucky we



ADAM STEIN/SUN PEAKS RESORT

Ski Canada magazine voted it Best Family Ski Resort and Best New Mountain in 2003.

Dr Bowins took a snowcat outing to the out-of-bounds glades on Tod Mountain.



BRAD BOWINS

were to have had that glorious day.

Weather in the Rockies is unpredictable and can change rapidly. Snow is to be expected and desired given that it greatly improves the quality of the ski experience. Eastern skiers more familiar with hard-packed icy stuff may find it hard to ski on (or, as it sometimes seems, skate over) BC powder. These folks will be pleased to hear that there are lessons and powder clinics available so that you can toughen up and manage the soft stuff. Newer parabolic skis, typically wider and easier to turn with, go a long way to improve flotation.

When conditions are snowy and cloudy, visibility is greatly diminished and contour is reduced due to flat light. To enjoy skiing on days like this, the rule is to head for the trees. The darker colour and height of evergreen trees casts enough shadows to give the terrain enough contrast and definition to reduce the anxiety of not being able to see where you're going. An outstanding feature of Sun Peaks is that a great deal of tree skiing is to be found even from the top of Mount Morrisey and Sundance. Many of the runs are gradual but a few

will challenge experienced skiers. These two mountains are recommended for overcast days.

### FAMILY FUN

For the most part the runs at Sun Peaks are best suited to beginners or moderate-level skiers, although there are definitely some challenging mogul runs from the top of Tod Mountain. Given the range of options, the resort is ideal for those who want to challenge their ability in a safe and gradual way. There are none of those trails that start off as easy green runs and turn into a

double black-diamond mogul plunge, which exist at some other resorts.

As anyone with kids will tell you, children often grow tired of doing the same thing — even skiing. Sun Peaks caters to the younger crowd with a Kid's Adventure Park offering tobogganing, miniature snowmobiles, a tube park and bungee trampoline. Kids love being strapped in to jump and flip on the trampoline without the fear of flying off. I'm sure the same applies to adults, but kids monopolize this ride.

For both kids and adults there are  
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other alternatives to skiing including skating, dogsledding, sleigh rides, snowmobiling and snowshoeing. In the unusual event that a guest chooses shopping over outdoor fun, Kamloops is only 45 minutes away.

Large Western ski resorts, such as Whistler and Banff, draw the most skiers, certainly foreign skiers, in part due to their proximity to large cities. I, however, found getting to the resort a breeze. I flew from Toronto to Vancouver and had transferred in less than an hour to a smaller aircraft for the 45-minute flight to Kamloops. Much of the time lost with the transfer flight was made up for by the speed of luggage collection and car rental service when I arrived.

The same user friendliness applies to the airport in Kelowna, which services the ski resorts of Big White, Silver Star and Apex. Ski resorts in BC's interior offer affordable ski-in/ski-out accommodation, moderate temperatures, surprisingly easy access, consistent snow conditions and lots of powder. It's no fluke that the undisputed powder ski capital of the world is the interior of this great province.

Beyond the user friendliness of Sun Peaks and other resorts in the area, there's the appeal of the simple friendliness of staff and guests. There is none of the urgent city stress present at some of the larger resorts — stress that rubs off on everyone. Without any hesitation, German guests struck up a conversation with me about my waterproof dive watch when I entered the pool. At an art store in the village, the young clerk readily talked about the resort and surrounding area. I soon discovered that she was managing her father's store, and also that she was one of the best ski racers in the country who has a real shot at entering the next winter Olympics. Her predecessor, Nancy Green, is also very down-to-earth. She offers mountain tours to anyone who shows up at the appointed time. With all that Sun Peaks has to offer, it comes as no surprise that it has grown so rapidly. Hopefully, with future expansion, it will not lose the charm captured by its name. ■