

CAT-SKIING: If you go

■ There are a variety of packages available at White Grizzly, starting with a day rate, including guided cat skiing and lunch, for \$280. Full single-day rate, including guided cat-skiing, lodge and three meals, is \$429. There is a special stand-by rate for last minute bookings

■ "Fat" skis and powder snowboards are available for rent.

■ For information contact White Grizzly Adventures at 1-800-843-5557 or check them out on the Web at www.whitegrizzly.com



Dan Hudson photo

Andrew Shepherd blazes through the powder during a cat-ski adventure. There's no fear snowfall will halt his fun.

Make tracks for powder rush

Cat-skiing: the benefits of heli-skiing without depending on weather

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Eighty-three per cent of the people polled in a road safety survey considered themselves to be above average drivers. This, of course, contradicts the very meaning of the word 'average,' but it does tell us something about how people see themselves.

And when it comes to skiing and snowboarding, the same principle seems to apply. Everyone likes to consider themselves better than the average.

If you put in over 100 days a year, then you probably are above average. As for the rest of us, well, let's not fool ourselves. However, if you are a dedicated weekend warrior who has fun in powder and likes a bit of a challenge, you should check out what cat-skiing has to offer.

The No. 1 myth about cat-skiing/boarding is that you need to be an expert extreme skier or snowboarder. The reality is, each cat and heli operation has a different flavour, much as each ski resort does.

What exactly is cat-skiing? It's a guided, back-country mountain adventure with small groups of people.

It is similar to heli-skiing except you never leave the ground to find fresh terrain. Instead, clients are taken up to the top of runs in a snowcat with big tank-like tracks.

There are two advantages of cats over helicopters. First, it's less expensive. Second, cats don't get grounded if it is snowing. If you have a cat-ski holiday planned, you can be pretty sure you'll get in your powder turns.

One place to try those turns is at White Grizzly Adventures — you can expect terrain most downhill enthusiasts would find rewarding. The only stipulation? You need to be confident in the trees.

Getting to White Grizzly is a bit of an adventure in itself. From Calgary, it is about a nine-hour drive. The lodge is in the community of Meadow Creek in the Kootenay Valley, about halfway between Revelstoke and Nelson, off Highway 31. It's a windy road and it was snowing the day I drove, but I just took my time

and enjoyed the trip.

When I arrived at the lodge, my buddies — skier Andrew Shepherd, and snowboarders Craig Kelly and Heath Lockhurst — were already kicking back and enjoying a beer in front of a big stone fireplace.

Our hosts, Brad and Carole, made me feel at home the minute I walked in.

The five guest-room, round-log pine resort provides accommodation for a maximum of 12. Before long, we joined the other guests for a hearty, home-style meal after which our guide, Gord, discussed safety issues and passed out avalanche transceivers for the following days on the snow.

After dinner, Andrew, Heath, Craig and I sat around the lounge and exchanged skiing and snowboarding stories. This only got us more stoked about the anticipated days of powder ahead of us.

For a while, I lay awake in bed, too excited to sleep, but I must have drifted off, because the next thing I knew pots were banging on the stove and the smell of fresh coffee filled the air. We had a big breakfast, then everyone drove up the road to the cat staging area. Gord walked us through a transceiver training drill and we were soon on our way up the mountain.

It was snowing lightly when we filed out of the cat at the summit. Judging by the amount of snow on the cat track, it had snowed all night. We were in for a great day.

Our first run was 2,500 vertical feet of deep pow. Periodically, Gord would stop on a ridge, collect the group and point out the direction in which we were heading. Every turn was a face shot. By the time we reached the bottom, everyone had a smile on his or her face.

Gord asked, "How was that for a warm up run? ... Are you ready for something a little more challenging?"

The next run started from the same place, but we took a different line. We soon hit a big open slope with lots of knolls, jumps and

brumes. Andrew got huge air off the top and continued to catch air at every opportunity. I saw Craig tweak out a nice "method" off a pillow-like knoll then disappear behind a comet tail of powder as he slashed deep turns. Heath followed suit, working his way down a natural half-pipe-like gully.

The next section was a low-angle woods where we partnered up for safety. Before long, Heath and I were off on our own with no one else in sight.

We were feeling slightly lost, but Gord had assured us to keep descending down the fall line, which we did.

It was really fun making our way through some dense sections and opening it up through the wider-spaced areas.

Just as Gord had promised, we eventually came to an opening and the Cat track.

Two by two, everyone appeared like snow-covered ghosts from the forest.

Each run was a new adventure. On one descent, Heath found a nice cliff drop and Craig rode a cool pillow line. Andrew amazed us all day with his cat-like prowess, somehow always landing on his feet.

By the end of the day we had experienced about 12,000 vertical feet and were anticipating a long soak in the lodge's hot tub.

Cat skiing, like any ski vacation, can bring with it a variety of snow conditions, avalanche stability conditions and weather.

Each of these factors, along with the ability of your group, will determine the kind of terrain you will be exposed to.

There are, of course, no guarantees when it comes to these factors, but you can pretty well be assured you will be in for an adventure.

It snowed continually during our stay. If we were at a heli operation, we probably wouldn't have gotten off the ground.

As it was, we rode great powder every day.