

TOUGH

AS one contemplates middle age and what it means to be a skier, certain truths emerge that are unlikely to ever change. I realize that I truly suck at racing (and always will), have little interest anymore in the newest technique fetish for carving on groomers, and am getting too old and my skis are too wide to fit comfortably in the troughs of moguls. Terrain parks? Forget it. My thoughts regularly drift to the sweet caress of cottony, featherlight powder as it slices off the tips of my Pocket Rockets, and I instantly feel that age presents no impediment when it comes to skiing deep snow.

Whether it's charging down vertical walls below Spanky's Ladder at Blackcomb or the Backside at Lake Louise, exploring the vast alpine bowls around Rogers Pass or skiing previously unskied lines in the vast glaciers of the Coast Range, powder skiing thankfully seems to reward experience as much as it does physical effort. Last winter, I added another mental video to my personal memory bank—a ski experience as rewarding and as quintessentially Canadian as one could ask for.

I had heard about an off-the-beaten-track cat-skiing operation based out of the remote hamlet of Meadow Creek in B.C.'s Selkirk Mountains for several years. White Grizzly Adventures sounded too good to be true—a snowcat-skiing operation geared strictly at expert skiers. Started by a husband and wife team who had traipsed through the mountains of western Canada for 10 years, operating a totally unique tour operation called Ski Plus Tours, White Grizzly shows what happens when you have skiers with a true passion for the sport in control of the show.

Brad Karafil, originally from Calgary, and his wife, Carole, from Quebec, started their business on the premise of finding the best possible snow conditions for a dedicated clientele who didn't mind climbing onboard a van or bus after a day of skiing at Lake Louise, say, and then driving several hours to Island Lake Lodge near Fernie on the rumour that a major dump might be hitting the Lizard Range that night. As time progressed, they would offer their guests unreserved seats at cat- and heli-ski operations, as well as skiing at some of Canada's best-kept-secret resorts. And they got to know a lot about what was out there in terms of terrain, lodging, amenities and what it takes to make dedicated powderhounds happy.

The Karafil's found something that you don't get told in the brochures. Though heli- and cat-skiing operations promote an experience that looks as though it borders on the extreme, the fact is that it seldom really ever delivers due to, in some cases, avalanche conditions, or perhaps limited terrain or snowpack, but more often than not because groups are unevenly matched in ability levels. In the rush to never turn customers (and their money) away, a lot of guided skiing operations ski a lot of tame, if not lame, terrain. That led to the Karafil's second venture—their own cat-skiing lodge way out in the middle of nowhere, namely, the Selkirk Mountains of B.C. ▶

The challenging terrain at White Grizzly's cat-skiing operation is reserved for powder purists only.

by Steven Threndyle

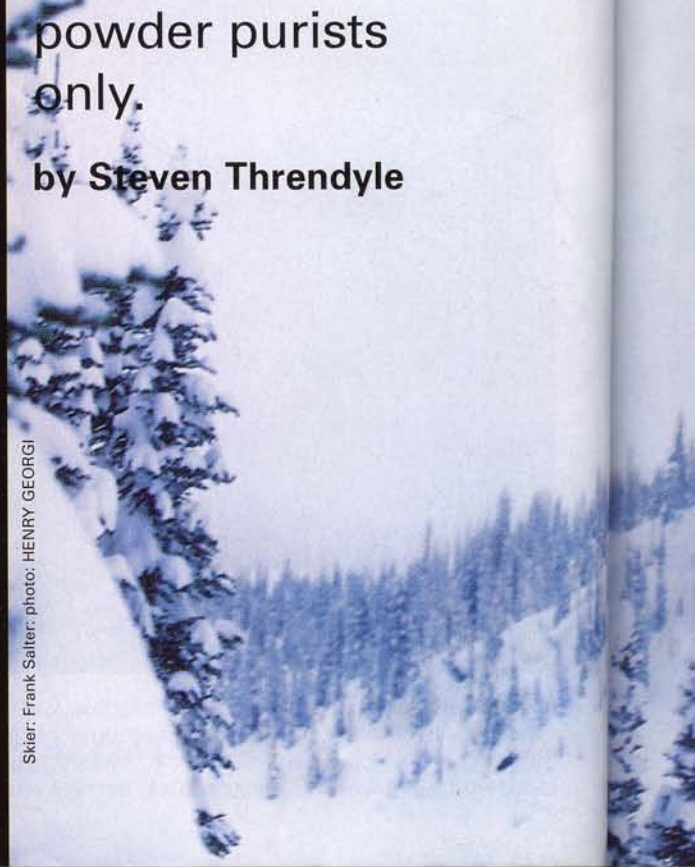




Photo: STEVEN TRENDYCLE



Photo: HENRY GEORGI

LOVE



DIAL P FOR POWDER

WHITE GRIZZLY ADVENTURES, MEADOW CREEK, B.C.

www.whitegrizzly.com, 250/366-4306

Suggested prime season package: 6 days/\$2,750

Vertical: 30,500 vertical metres guaranteed (the same as heli-ski operators, Karafil points out)

Unique features: aimed primarily at expert skiers; only takes one group (12 skiers) per week; glades and north/east-facing aspect keeps snow in prime condition.

GREAT NORTHERN SNOWCAT SKIING, TROUT LAKE, B.C.

www.greatnorthernsnowcat.com, 800/889-0765

Suggested prime season package: \$600 per day

Vertical: 3,700-5,800 metres per day

Unique features: quick 20-minute cat ride after each run; 80 square km of terrain; high percentage of repeat clientele.

ISLAND LAKE LODGE, FERNIE, B.C.

www.islandlakelodge.com, 888/422-8754

Vertical: varies, depending on conditions and package

Unique features: has recently purchased Powder Cowboy Snowcat Skiing to offer more terrain/diversity; operates three snowcats; 36 skiers per week; prime weeks sell out quickly.

SELKIRK WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE, MEADOW CREEK, B.C.

www.selkirkwilderness.com, 250/366-4424

Suggested prime season package: 5 days' skiing/6 nights' accommodation, \$3,475 plus tax

Vertical: up to 5,500 vertical metres per day

Unique features: the oldest cat-skiing operation in western Canada; has some mellow terrain for less-experienced skiers.

MONASHEE POWDER ADVENTURES, CHASE, B.C.

www.monasheepowder.com, 888/353-8877

Suggested prime season package: \$500 per day

Unique features: remote location; a true "backcountry wilderness" lodge that requires snowmobile access.

CAT POWDER SKIING, REVELSTOKE, B.C.

www.catpowder.com, 800/991-4455

Suggested prime season package: varies—spring day packages can be had for as little as \$300 per day; unique long-term multi-year program protects against price increases in the future.

Vertical: 610-1,830 vertical metres per run (longest run is the ski-out to the base of the area)

Unique features: skiers stay at the full-service Powder Springs Inn based in rip-roarin' Revelstoke; skiing occurs on slopes above Powder Springs Resort.

BALDFACE POWDER SKIING, NELSON, B.C.

www.baldface.net, 250/352-0006

Suggested prime season package: \$550-\$600 per day

Vertical: 3,700-4,300 metres of vertical per day

Unique features: skiers stay in Nelson, take a boat ride across Kootenay Lake and then board a snowcat before commencing skiing.

BACKCOUNTRY SNOCATS, WHISTLER

www.snowcats.ca, 604/932-2166

Unique features: Location! Whistler-based day cat-skiing

When asked what White Grizzly adds to the menu of western Canadian skiing, Brad Karafil says, "Steep, deep and trees." These three words will send prospective clients either throwing down their plastic, saying "This had better be good!" or running off to Big White for a more mellow skiing experience. "If you have to ask if you can handle it, then you likely can't" is Karafil's attitude. And if that isn't no-bullshit in a snowsports world where intermediate runs are routinely awarded black-diamond status, I don't know what is.

I've always felt that tree skiing is equal parts Zen and adrenaline, co-existing peacefully in terrain that can be truly intimidating. The beauty of tree skiing is that although you may work the same thicket of trees for a half-dozen runs, these lines never get boring. There are always new spaces to explore with split-second timing. Does it close out, or not? To ski fast yet in control, ducking under boughs groaning under a half-metre of fresh powder, swerving around thick tree trunks, launching off submerged stumps, skiing through giant stands of Douglas fir, western red cedar, mountain hemlock and Engelmann spruce where openings magically appear just where you want them at the very moment your brain is screaming "BAIL!"

Snow in the high alpine might be fickle. What looks like knee-deep fluff might be the worst windpack imaginable. And, of course, there's the safety factor. Though point-release avalanches can occur in the trees, a huge Class Four boomer is unlikely, unless you're skiing below an ominous face. The best part is that in more than 30 years of tree skiing, I've seldom skied snow in open terrain that's even close to being as deep as it is in the trees.

Still, it's pretty difficult to screen out calls over the phone, especially when prospective clients are pumped from perusing White Grizzly's website or reading stories in magazines. "We'll send people over to Selkirk Wilderness, or tell them to hone their technique at Fernie, Red Mountain or Whitewater before coming here. In fact, that would almost be the ideal situation, for somebody to warm up with a few days at one of those other mountains where you can get excellent lift-accessed powder skiing, and then come to White Grizzly for a three-day package to try us out."

Short of renting a private A-Star helicopter and a guide for a week, White Grizzly certainly offers the most demanding guided skiing that I've ever experienced. Those looking to carve wide-open turns in the alpine will have to look elsewhere; there are some tremendous bowls on both sides of the valley, but Karafil's cats don't go above the trees. Mercifully, some gorgeous bowls with rewarding pitch allow skiers and riders to blast along unchecked, with plenty of opportunities for air-time over submerged boulders and stumps with pillow-soft landings always waiting upon touchdown.

The landings aren't the only thing that's soft at White Grizzly. Though the skiing is hard-core, the rest of the White Grizzly experience certainly isn't. The food is hearty and creative, and the lodge is so damned cosy that you're yearning to turn in an hour or so past dinnertime.

In order for their business to thrive, and to spend their winters doing what they love most (Brad admits that "I need these skiers to help support my powder skiing habit!"), the Karafil's need 200 strong, expert skiers to visit their remote cat-skiing operation each winter. Statistics show that last season there were more than 85 million skier-visits in North America, and that more than 15 million people on this continent alone are skiers or snowboarders. This would seem like pretty good odds.

But that's like saying that there are 30 million North Americans who play slo-pitch or baseball. And only one Barry Bonds. Karafil says, "We're there to ensure the quality of experience for the best skiers. We do not want to have people slowed down by others who can't handle the conditions." In four seasons of operation, they have sent several skiers to other nearby lift areas in an attempt to keep the advanced skiers satisfied "and to salvage their vacation, too. Nobody enjoys being in over his head."

The best are definitely out there, though. Young, aggressive, hard-charging skiers whose home mountains might be Alpentel, near Seattle, or Le Massif, outside of Quebec City. Telemarkers who rip it up on hut-based trips in the Selkirks and Canadian Rockies. Snowboarders from damned near anywhere. They might be young at heart, like Roy, a retired investment banker. Or how about a guy who rents a house at nearby Red Mountain and skis 80 days a year, and comes up to White Grizz when the powder's played out at his home mountain? That's the kind of rugged, confident skier that the White Grizzly experience caters to. ■