

Blackcomb Backcountry Bliss

WORDS BY BRIAN THACKER

Whistler Blackcomb is the biggest ski resort in North America, but step into some touring skis and you have an entire chain of mountain ranges to explore.

I pulled back the shades in my room at the Fairmont Chateaux Whistler, and it was dumping with snow. Falling like giant down feathers, they had already caked the trees on Blackcomb Mountain. ‘Ah, damn,” I muttered under my breath. I’m at the largest ski resort in North America with endless possibilities for fresh tracks, so I should be deliriously happy. But I’m not, because I am supposed to be jumping in a helicopter with Whitecap Alpine Adventures for some ski touring in the backcountry, and Mother Nature doesn’t heed to helicopter flying schedules.

The massive expanse of the Whistler Blackcomb ski area sprawls over 3,000 hectares, but in the surrounding back country there is another 9,000 hectares. To put that in perspective, that’s 30 times bigger than Mt Buller. Stand at the top of Blackcomb Mountain and all you can see, in every direction, is a marching army of peaks. Peaks that were now hidden under a blanket of brooding clouds.

I met the rest of the group for an early start and almost trying to wish for good weather I said, “We just need a small window to fly.” Unlike heliskiing where you are in and out of choppers all day, Whitecap offers ‘heli-assist backcountry tours’ which means getting deposited at the top of a peak then earning laps up high on your own steam. Even on the



35-minute drive to the helipad in the town of Pemberton I was still hopeful, “Look, there’s a patch of almost... blueish sky.”

By the time we reached Whitecap HQ it was raining. Our guide Hayden Robbins met us at the door and uttered those dreaded words: “We are not flying today.” But thankfully, there was a Plan B. We are going to drive up high into the mountains and then skin up to a small overnight hut and find our freshies in the bowls above. As we ascended higher into the range, the rain soon turned back to

snow with big, heavy flakes that weighed down tree branches and had the window wipers on overdrive.

After 40 minutes we pulled over into a parking space overlooking frozen Duffey Lake, where we gathered in a circle for an avalanche rescue briefing and take part in drills to track receivers, learn how to probe for bodies and dig them out quickly. I had done these drills lots of times on heliskiing trips, but I’m always happy for a refresher, particularly when there had been 30 deaths in avalanches

in North America so far that season, including a major one in the backcountry near Lake Tahoe that killed nine people, marking it as one of the deadliest single avalanche events in U.S. history.

At the entrance to the old Steep Creek logging road, where we stopped to put our skins on, was a foreboding sign: DANGER. Avalanche control using explosives without warning. Right, so we didn’t just have to worry about avalanches, we might also get blown up. After sliding up a gradual incline for an

hour, the old road became a narrow track and turned into a somewhat torturous steep climb up through an old-growth forest of Ponderosas. Flakes fell heavily, as if we were inside an ornamental snow globe, while golden lichen dripped from the branches looking like perfectly styled Christmas trees.

Even though it was cold, there were frequent stops to strip off another layer of clothing. “Is it okay if I strip down to my underpants?” I joked. “Sure,” Hayden said. “At least you’ll scare off the bears.”



Left: The terrain is endless in the Blackcomb backcountry.
Above: It is a scenic, but long hike to Beeker Cabin. **Photo:** Brina Thacker.

My energy levels were dropping with each steep stride as I dug deeper into a meditative flow of simply putting one foot in front of the other. I had done ski focused workouts before the season began, but it’s hard to train for this much sheer exertion. And at 63 I’m no spring chicken (I’m staying ski fit so I can get free lift tickets at 80).

What should have been a 10-minute helicopter ride turned into a three-hour grueling trek uphill for six kilometres with an elevation gain of about 700



The saying goes that's the turns are more satisfying when they are earned.

metres. The final climb was a tough one, but then like a beacon, Beeker Cabin came into sight, almost buried in snow, looking like the last frozen outpost on the Wild Frontier. I'd never been so happy to sit down for lunch.

Before every muscle in my body had time to stop aching we were out again and zigzagging up a steep open slope fringed by frosted pines, where in this vast, wild landscape you couldn't help but feel small. When we reached the top of a wide-open bowl the wind slashed at our grins because beneath us was a shimmering expanse of untouched snow like powdered sugar.

The wonderful thing was that there was no rush. No one was going to drop in and steal our precious first tracks. We took it in turns dancing through the deep virgin pow. All that sweaty work culminated into an exquisite sixty-second drop. After that, some smaller bowls were ravished, then it was a dash back through the woods, and a cruisy slide down the logging road. The day finished with a tailgate beer in the car park with many clinks of cans, and tired smiles. They say with ski touring that you "earn your turns" – although there's a lot more earns

than turns. So, is it worth it? My thighs didn't think so, but every soft, sinking turn in powder snow makes it worth it.

There's another popular saying amongst skiers that there are no friends on a powder day. But there is when your friend is a ski guide who knows where all the powder stashes are. And they become a BFF when they take you out half-an-hour before the lifts open to the public. I was heading out early with Whistler Dawn Patrol, which gets you first tracks on untouched snow, and with a maximum of only 24 people, you pretty much get Blackcomb Mountain all to yourself.

The elevation gain of 600 metres took us 12 minutes. The same elevation the day before had taken us almost three hours. As the gondola rose up, we flew over great sheets of untouched shadow-draped powder. But this is not backcountry terrain, this is fresh snow from the night before that had swathed the ski runs in 15 centimetres of powdery perfection.

Our guide was a vampire. Marius hailed from Transylvania (so I made sure I kept my neck covered with my buff). From the moment we stepped out of the gondola

it was a race to do as many powder plunges as we could do before the public turned up and tracked it out. On each run the snow floated beneath my feet as white crystals of light snow splashed behind me like spray from a speedboat. Even when the lifts opened to the public, our Prince of Powder found us untracked splendour in the aptly named ski areas of Jersey Cream and 7th Heaven. When the snow became tracked out Marius took us on dizzyingly deep turns between the trees.

We had earned our turns the day before, but after almost five hours hitting it hard in the powder, I thought I had earned a big lunch. And a glass of champagne or two.

Whitecap Adventures

One day heli-assisted back country tour CAD\$4299 (for four people). whitecapalpine.ca

Dawn Patrol with Whistler Heliskiing

Half day (with first tracks and lift priority) CAD\$399. whistlerblackcomb.com

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