

Making tracks in the Selkirks

It's the perfect day -sailing across stunning ridges and blissful Alpine peaks

BY BOBBI BARBARICH, SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE MARCH 13, 2011

He started coming to Selkirk Wilderness Skiing "He twenty four years ago," says trail guide Carla Aldinger. Delicately dropped by a Stellar Heli Skiing helicopter, we're standing on Mount Davis, teetering 2,636 metres in the air. Sparkling snowflakes swirl around her face but I can still see miles of Selkirk Mountain peaks in her goggles. Both Selkirk Wilderness Skiing and Stellar Heliskiing have separate tenures in the renowned Selkirk Mountains, but the two companies have a strong relationship deeper than Selkirk snow.

It's a phrase I've heard several times this week: a client started coming to Selkirk Wilderness years ago, implying that client makes a yearly trek deep into the powder packed peaks of British Columbia's Selkirk Mountain range above the Columbia River basin. As a new patron of both Selkirk Wilderness and Stellar, it's also a phrase I'm starting to understand.

In a province with 18 cat ski operations, Selkirk Wilderness manages a mythical presence among them. Aldinger guides at both Stellar and Selkirk Wilderness, as does Jason Remple, our lead guide and a tiny speck currently drifting 1,000 metres into the white valley below us. With Aldinger's comment, I realize I'm hard pressed to sail from these stunning ridges without learning of Stellar's history, engendered by Selkirk Wilderness, which in turn began the history of catskiing alone.

Selkirk Wilderness was the first snowcat skiing operation anywhere. In tenure chosen by a ski-loving geologist's discerning eye, Allan Drury founded Selkirk Wilderness around Meadow Mountain, located a meandering 45-minute drive along Kootenay Lake north of Kaslo, BC. Hidden deep in the mountains, Kaslo perches on the edge of the massive lake, hugged by the Purcells to the east and Selkirks to the west. Only 1029 people live here, and around them lies a quiet, perfect skiing dream: blissful alpine peaks consistently covered with blower powder.

When Drury worked as a ski instructor in Aspen and Sun Valley, he watched patrons ride both up and down the mountain on the back of snowcats. A formidable skier, he imagined the ride down would be better on skis. In 1969, Canadian Mountain Holidays founder and famous mountaineer Hans Gmoser asked Drury to join a promotional heli ski trip in the Bugaboos. Spurred by these experiences, Drury surmised using snowcats to access high mountain terrain in BC's southern interior was the next ski industry development.

Drury scoured the Selkirk's alpine terrain for perfect fall lines, infinite snow and good accessibility. Three years after heli skiing with Gmoser, Drury and his wife Brenda moved from Calgary to Meadow Creek, a tiny logging town near Drury's impeccable terrain. They opened their own home to cat skiers in 1975, and were the only cat ski outfit in BC for several years. Yet being the first in a competitive, unpredictable industry does not guarantee the best. Terrain, snow conditions, customer

service and something intangible all factor into whether a cat ski operation will survive, much less inspire others to follow suit.

"Meals are served at 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., but if you ever need anything to eat, just go to the kitchen and ask our kitchen staff," urges Russ Turner, lodge manager and 12-year Selkirk Wilderness employee. Asking a stranger for something to eat is an intimate feeling.

But Kate Riddell, chef since 1993, encourages guests to come to the kitchen. It's made abundantly clear: this kitchen, with a panoramic view of snowcapped Purcells across the valley, is not a restaurant kitchen. It's a home kitchen, and you can ask the cook for something to eat at anytime.

The same policy goes for the bar. Turner leads me behind the oak. He explains the honour system, a list for guests to tally their own refreshments. Without a bartender, I pour a beer, pull up a stool and fall into conversation with a guest relaxing after an inspiring day on the slopes. I feel like I've come home for the holidays.

A big yellow cat crawls onto the rounded ridge between Meadow Mountain and Pyramid Peak. Wind gusts from the valley below. Remple's face, save for a modest grin, is mostly hidden by goggles. He cautions his crew to wait, bated breath, until he slips over a crest and alongside the frozen lake below us. Content to gaze at Duncan Reservoir far to the east, we each wait our turn to carve perfect lines through the snow.

Lindsay Richards and Tom Roberts, both retired doctors from Missoula MT, have stood here two dozen times. The last five have been with their daughter, Anna. Richards' and Roberts' loyalty to Selkirk Wilderness began when Anna was seven years old. "It was the first trip we'd taken away from our two children," he serenely recalls. "When we got here, the sun was shining, there was spring mud everywhere ... It didn't look like winter at all. We wondered what we'd got ourselves into."

But Drury's snowcat ferried them 10 kilometres into the hills, to a cozy lodge perched halfway up Meadow Mountain, and a world away from what was an early spring that year. Those first five days of skiing Selkirk Wilderness's expansive terrain, peppered with swooping meadows, powdery steeps and gnarled chutes, changed how Richards and Roberts planned their holidays. Immediately after their soul fortifying ski adventure, Richards and Roberts booked the same week in the following year, and have done so every year since 1987.

Richards' and Roberts' story is not uncommon. Clients' consistent patronage makes Selkirk Wilderness a bit of a secret. Most of their advertising is via word of mouth, from those who swear it's changed their lives. Drury chose an area where his snowcats could crawl up to 2500 metres to access more acreage than Whistler-Blackcomb, Lake Louise, Silver Star and Big White combined.

Guides work here for many years, knowing where the best snow lies under what conditions, and for which clients. Skiers and boarders can choose fresh stash for up to three weeks after a snowfall-but a consistent 15 metres of snow per year and only 24 guests per week keeps tracks uncommon. With little wind and precipitation cooled by nearby glaciers, the Selkirks feature deep snow so reliable ski bums the world over envy it.

And once they start coming, clients always come back.

Selkirk Wilderness devotion is felt in the friendly banter in the dining room, where guests mix their tables with the staff that become friends through the week. Because of this experience, Selkirk Wilderness once enjoyed a three-year wait list totalling 300 people. Drury passed away in 2008, just as the recession dropped client numbers -but the clients actually comforted the staff, and Brenda Drury feels Selkirk Wilderness has healed. With their determined loyalty to Selkirk Wilderness and Selkirk Wilderness's steadfast atmosphere, clients now follow Remple, and have been doing so for over half of the company's existence.

I catch up with Remple on a snowcat track, the lodge squatting several hundred feet below us on our final run. He subtly nods to me, whispers 'let's go' and whisks me into the trees. Hooting, the rest of our group follows suit. He pops and jumps over rollers, slips between spruce and pauses to be sure I'm behind him. Down we bound, echoes of everyone behind us.

Remple recalls how Selkirk Wilderness and the Drurys changed his life, morphing from dishwasher to lead guide. Growing up in tiny Meadow Creek, he started at the lodge when he was 16. He's now the Selkirk Wilderness mountain operations manager and owner of Stellar Heli Skiing, a dream Drury helped Remple conceive.

"Allan was obviously a big ideas guy," explains Remple. "We spent a lot of time together, out in the field, staring into the mountains he hand picked. I remember him saying, 'It'd be nice to ski over there. You should do it.' He believed in me and he helped me do it."

Now, with a solid foundation in ski industry history and a stronghold in the future, Selkirk Wilderness Skiing, Stellar Heli Skiing and the celebrated Selkirks are a place to call home ... At least for a week.