

WORLD'S BEST CAT SKIING?

Powder heaven

By CHRIS STANFORD

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Meadow Creek, B.C., is not exactly a place you might stumble upon by accident. Located at the north end of Kootenay Lake, the little hamlet consists of a few houses, a bar, a garage and just a few hardy souls who call it home.

But that doesn't mean that there isn't a compelling reason to go. In fact every winter, Meadow Creek draws visitors from the far corners of the world — and it's all for one reason alone.

The sleepy town, a couple of hours east of Nakusp, just happens to be the home base for the original and, some say, the best cat skiing operation in the world, Selkirk Wilderness Skiing.

For the past 37 years, ever since SWS founders Allan and Brenda Drury looked across the deep valley and saw the ski potential of Meadow Mountain, the operation has been delivering the deep powder goods to a maximum of 24 skiers at any one time. This is 30 square miles of powder heaven (bigger than Whistler/Blackcomb and Vail combined), and Meadow Creek is its St. Peter's Gate.

The boss and myself made our own pilgrimage to the Selkirks for three days of early-January powder, and to put it mildly, the gods, and SWS delivered.

For those who have never cat skied, imagine run after run of untracked snow, in a group led by an experienced guide, all in a safe environment, while still in the solitude of the Selkirk backcountry.

“This is an amazing mountain that was truly made for skiing,” said SWS owner Brenda Drury, who is carrying on the business with many loyal employees following Allan's passing in 2008.

Since their humble beginnings, when the Drurys put up their Volvo sports car as collateral to get started, the business has grown and grown. They built the luxurious SWS lodge high on Meadow Mountain and have been providing 24 lucky guests with the experience of a lifetime ever since.

But luxury aside, it does come down to the snow.

Following the guides' instructions, most times we were free to find our own lines down alpine bowls and through treed runs that held soft snow like a magnet. We usually skied in pairs, not only to avoid getting off track, but all the better to whoop and holler to as we ripped steeps and deeps and popped off pillows of powder.

And with nary a wait, we found the snow cats ready at the bottom, in preparation for the comfortable 10-15 minute ride back up in the custom boxes on the back, for more of the same.

No lift lines here, thank you very much.

While the cats at SWS can handle groups of up to a dozen, our group was smaller than most, and while many indulge in a five-day package, we were getting our kicks in three.

There was the young couple from New York City, Leyli and Max, who had both been on cat skiing adventures before, and have been coming to the Kootenays for the past few years.

Then there were Toronto newlyweds Joanna and Trevor. Both experienced skiers with racing backgrounds (he spent a little time on the Canadian ski team). They rocketed downhill effortlessly, and handled the steepest hills with ease.

Not surprising, with an annual snowfall of 15 metres, and some 25 centimetres of new snow while we were there, we managed to get turn after turn in conditions straight out of a ski film.

While the weather and snow stability kept us off some of the high alpine slopes that crown SWS's terrain, we still managed to crank plenty of deep turns — the trees were delightful, especially where SWS had thinned them to perfect skiability.

And that's what keeps many SWS guests coming back year after year. That and the welcoming atmosphere provided by Drury and her staff.

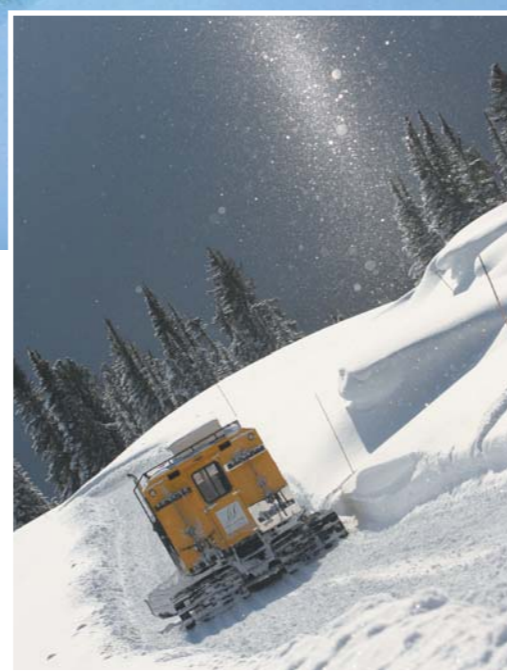
Kevin Johnson, a Seattle physician who was visiting SWS with his student son put it this way: “It's a combination of everything, the snow, the ambience . . . and the food is superb.”

“And as large as this terrain is, every guide knows every inch of it,” he added. While son Nathan was a cat skiing virgin, Kevin was a veteran of 10 previous visits to SWS. He doesn't mind the remoteness. Instead, he treasures it. “It's kind of like splendid isolation,” he said with a weary smile.

For more information on SWS and cat skiing packages, go online to selkirk-wilderness.com, call 1-800-799-3499.



From top left: A group gets ready for another run from high up on Meadow Mountain, overlooking Kootenay Lake and valley. The Selkirk Mountains, known for their prodigious snowfall, provide a dramatic backdrop for a run with SWS. Leyli Zohrenejad, left, and Max Coreth made the trip from New York City and were rewarded with a pile of fresh early-season Selkirk Mountain powder. Mmmm . . . nothing like great food after a hard day of cat skiing. Ice crystals glisten in the air above one of the Selkirk cats. Wish you were here . . . wish we were still there!



Photos by Chris Stanford

