

SHREDDING SELKIRK

with lisa filzmoser, shin campos,
and “juicy” tarvainen

BY MELISSA LARSEN, PHOTOS BY MARK GALLUP

ONCE UPON A TIME, a long time ago, in a far away Southern California wasteland filled with big-pants-wearing, table-jibbing, pseudo-punk shred bros, an under-qualified, small-town girl randomly ended up with a job as an editor of a major snowboard magazine.

Shin sends a soulful Method on Meadow Mountain.



Now this girl, being young and naïve, loved to say things like, “Stories about snowcat and heli trips are elitist and stupid.” And she believed these statements to be absolute truths. Because she thought magazines should be made for “the common man”—soul snowboarders, like the ones in the ski towns where she came from. Snowboarders who weren’t sponsored by shred companies and rich parents. Snowboarders who washed dishes and slept on couches and clipped lift tickets. And since none of these shreds could ever afford to go on a backcountry cat-heli trip, writing about them was the moral equivalent of describing a decadent, overpriced meal to a poor, hungry man. Citing these reasons, she even turned down opportunities to go on cat and heli trips for the mag herself. Because she was keeping it real.

That girl was an idiot. She’s gone now. Bound and gagged, screaming uselessly up from the bot tom of a concrete well in the basement of my soul. And good riddance. Because if she were still around, what would she think was “core” enough to write about? With the exorbitant prices of snowboard equipment, ski-town rent, and the cost of lift tickets alone pushing up to (or past) \$80 a day at most major North American resorts, it’s a mystery how anyone can afford to shred anywhere these days. If you listen closely enough, you can actually hear ski-bum culture gasping its last dying breath.

This was the justification I used, anyway, when I accepted an invitation to join the Helly Hansen team (Lisa Filzmoser, Shin Campos, “Juicy” Tarvainen) in the Selkirk mountains for my first-ever snowcat/backcountry lodge

SHIN TO PHOTOGRAPHER MARK GALLUP: **“IT’D BE COOL IF YOU LEARNED HOW TO SHOOT SOMETHING BESIDES POWDER TURNS.”**
 GALLUP TO SHIN: **“MAYBE IF YOU LEARNED HOW TO GRAB YOUR SNOWBOARD, I WOULD.”**

experience last March. I figured, if you’ve got enough cash to go on a legitimate snowboard vacation in this day and age, why would you even bother going to a resort? Why wouldn’t you throw down a little more and go somewhere with no crowds and guaranteed pow? (And, hell, while you’re at it, why don’t you buy me something special? Just ‘cause you can. Sugar needs a new pair of boots.) And if you could afford a week of snowcat skiing, you’d want to know which places were best, right? Why, I would be doing a “service” article. Yay!

Smug and self-righteous, I set off for the BC Interior thinking I would finally get to make up for all those times where I said I’d rather sleep in my car in a resort parking lot than go on a cat trip (I know—idiot), but probably wouldn’t come away with anything more exciting to write about than the standard, boring-ass backcountry cat-heli-op story.

You know the one: *We went. All the bros were there. We shredded untracked, neck-deep powder all day, every day, and didn’t have to hike for it once. It was awesome. Too bad you’ll probably never know what it’s like, you poor fuck. Ha ha. The end.*

Turns out, I’m still an idiot. I spent the first few days at the Selkirk Wilderness Skiing lodge taking copious notes, hoping some little event I found momentarily

amusing would still be entertaining when it was retold in print eight months later: *Day 3: The tension emanating from the table of regular Selkirk ski clients is palpable this morning. Will the serious guy with the altimeter watch who’s insisting that everyone “ski faster” so they can make more laps and clock “20,000 vertical feet” by the end of the day get taken out by the woman who can’t ski powder and is slowing everyone down, and is currently wielding her butter knife like she might use it to stab him in the face? One can only hope.*

The Gallup/Shin Show, quote 137: Shin to photographer Mark Gallup: “It’d be cool if you learned how to shoot something besides powder turns.” Gallup to Shin: “Maybe if you learned how to grab your snowboard, I would.”

But as the week wore on, I found myself leaving my journal in my bag. I would sit instead by the fire in the common room and watch the ski guides, lodge staff, and long-time “clients” (friends) stand around the bar laughing and talking, and marvel at how there was so much love flowing between them, you could virtually see it in the air. And I kept getting drawn back to this one photo on the wall of a man with the most incredible eyes. Eyes that crinkled with kind-hearted mischief. Eyes that seemed to ask, “Are you ready to go? Let’s do this.”



Shin gets his grab and Gallup gets his shot... Everybody wins!

MOMENTS



Jussi "Juicy" Tarvainen

And then slowly I started to understand. I had come into the trip with so many pre-conceived notions of what it was going to be like that I almost missed the real story going on around me. And the story was beautiful. So beautiful that I have to acknowledge here that I am an unworthy storyteller, unfit to recount a tale I came in at the end on, that has so many great parts, of which I know only a paltry few.

It is the story of the lodge's founder, Allan Drury—a lifelong skier who, in the early '70s, watched a snowcat take a group of ski instructors up a mountain before its lifts opened and had an idea. A geologist by trade, Allan had flown into the mountains in helicopters through his job and thought it was great but expensive and limiting as far as accessing remote peaks went, since a lot of people are afraid to fly.

So Allan and his wife, Brenda, spent three years looking at topographic maps and researching weather patterns, trying to find the perfect place to base a snowcat-accessed backcountry skiing operation. Finally, they settled on Meadow Mountain, located in the Selkirk range in the Kootenays. And in 1975, the world's first cat-skiing operation was born.

But Allan, who it is said had as many innovative ideas as a night sky has stars, was much more than a ski pioneer and mountain-man visionary. Apparently, he was one of those rare breeds of great men who inspire souls and fire imaginations. Unfortunately, we never got to meet him. Or, at least, we never met him in person. He passed away, from cancer, two months before we arrived. And though the loss obviously weighed heavy on the minds of those who knew and loved him, all were quick to point out that Allan was someone who was passionate about life up until the moment his ended. And it was his life, not his death, that would be honoured and remembered at Selkirk. In his eulogy, it was even written that "he did not want his death to cause any interruption of the ski operation because, as he said the day before he died, 'My spirit will be on Meadow [Mountain], and I will want some company there.'"

But his spirit was not only in the mountains. It was hiding in every nook and cranny of the beautiful lodge he built, and it was alive in the stories told by his family and friends—stories about the infectious nature of Allan's passion for skiing and how that enthusiasm could lead even the most timid skiers into terrain they would never attempt to ski if he were not there beside them, cheering them on. It led the skiers in our crew to a place simply called Allan's Cliff that—we found out later—was so named because apparently every time they rode by the ridiculously huge thing in the snowcat, Allan would say that someone really needed to jump it. And one of them did. And I'll tell you what: I'll never talk shit about "backcountry/freestyle" skiers again.





Lisa Filzmoser lays one down then drops.

“Follow me!” That was one of Allan’s favourite things to say,” an old-time Selkirk visitor told me over beer one night. “He’d say ‘follow me!’ and you’d follow him because you trusted him. And he’d never take you anywhere that would get you killed, but he’d sure give you a scare. I followed him once off of something that was probably only 10 feet but felt like 50. I’ve never been so proud. But he did that for everyone.

“There’s a Yiddish expression. A word: *mensch*. It’s what you say about a man when you’ve said so many good things about him that there’s nothing left to be said. A *mensch* is a true person, a fundamentally decent human being whom you only expect great things out of, and great things are all that you get. Few people really deserve this title. Allan was a *mensch*. It was an honour to know him.”

Few things are more effective at making you realize what an asshole you’ve turned into (or maybe always have been) than stepping into the presence of a *mensch*. Even in spirit, he touched me. Or rather, he gently reached over and smacked me upside my big, stupid head. Then he turned it to look at our lead guide Jason, a man who used to wash dishes in the lodge as a teenager and never left and now, years later, says things like, “A bad day is one where you cross someone else’s tracks.” A man who,

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when you’re standing around in the snow, freezing your butt off while pro shreds and pro photographers engage in the business of taking photos for stories such as these, grins and whispers things like, “I think we have time to take a lap in the cat,” and then proceeds to take you on three of the most fun tree runs you’ve ever done in your life.

And if Jason is the prodigy, I’m sorry I never met the mentor. Because if 80 per cent of a place’s customers are repeat clientele—most of whom have been returning to Selkirk for more than 20 years—besides being an incredible person, Allan must have been one hell of a guide.

So this whole time I thought snowcat lodges were merely playgrounds for the pampered, really they’re playgrounds for the people who run the snowcat lodge. They’re just another place where people who love the mountains come to celebrate life, and where everyone else gets to spend a week of theirs experiencing what that means. And that is a beautiful thing.

I’ll never know if the same thing can or can’t be found at other snowcat lodges. Because if I ever get the chance to go do something like this again, I’ll be going back to Selkirk. Because—besides having the looming legend of Allan Drury snap me out of my narrow-minded head space and show me that perhaps the best that we can hope for in this life is that when we pass, we leave behind a legacy half as grand and are half as loved as that man was—the snow was some of the best I’ve ever ridden. Neck deep. And we lapped it. And we didn’t have to hike for shit. It was awesome. And I don’t care if you have to beg, borrow, steal, or get a job working in the lodge kitchen to do it. You should experience it for yourself. The place is the real deal. You’ll be glad you did.

For more information on Selkirk Wilderness Skiing, go to selkirkwilderness.com.