



TIRED OF THE LONG QUEUES AND CROWDED SLOPES OF TRADITIONAL SKI RESORTS, **GRAEME MCRANOR** GOES CAT-SKIING IN WESTERN CANADA AND GETS HIS REWARD IN SUPERIOR TERRAIN AND VIRGIN SNOW

Pure



Powder

WEARY OF LOOKING for great skiing conditions? Bleak at the prospect of disappearing alpine glaciers? Longing for leagues of blessedly deep, untracked powder?

Then head to western Canada's Selkirk Mountains for the thrill of cat-skiing (so named for the snow caterpillars that transport skiers uphill), where lift lines are nonexistent and every run means fresh tracks. Yes, every run — at anywhere from 10,000 to 18,000 vertical feet per day in open bowls, steep chutes, glades and plenty of trees

to navigate. And enough powder to turn even the best-conditioned leg muscles into oodles of noodles.

Like its more expensive cousin, heli-skiing, cat-skiing allows access to vast and infinitely superior terrain compared with traditional slopes and the search for the quickest-moving chairlift line during breaks from the on-piste battle for over-groomed real estate.

But unlike heli-skiing, because the snowcats access the runs on the ground, weather is never a factor, which means

no wasted days with your face pressed against the lodge's window, praying for a break in the clouds.

It was in the late 1960s that Allan Drury and wife Brenda arrived in Meadow Creek in south-eastern British Columbia and realised that the mountains they surveyed had ended their quest for the ideal site for what was to become Selkirk Wilderness Skiing. Claiming it as the longest-established operation of its kind, Drury pioneered the business after watching a skier-filled snowcat substitute for an uncompleted chairlift in Aspen, Colorado.

Today, says Drury, 95 percent of all heli- and cat-skiing operations are based in BC, drawing clients worldwide and generating a combined C\$100 million (HK\$790 million) in gross revenue. Selkirk Wilderness' domain stretches over 25 sq km, so the operation can go three weeks without snow before guests have to take a run marred by a previous group's ski tracks.

But with an average annual snowfall of 400 inches (10m),

that's a powder pig's nightmare that's rarely going to happen. In the five days I skied there, it snowed nearly a metre. Another metre fell during the first few days after I left.

Drury describes it as "a place where time stands still," and it doesn't take long to see why. After a 7am wake-up call and a leisurely breakfast on our first morning, the cat drops us off for our initial run. Our group of 11 pilgrims is awed by a vista of snow that hangs like enormous sheets from towering rock faces and old growth fir trees that run in zipper-like patterns into and out of sea-deep bowls.

"It must be easy to get lost here," I say to Riley, our cat's red-headed driver. It's only his second day on the job, but he already seems to have mastered the maze of snowy access roads. "I'm lost right now," he responds dryly. I suspect he's joking until he radios lead guide Jason for confirmation. Riley quickly turns the machine around.

Our group consists of John, a journalism professor from Minnesota, and his daughter, Abbey; Jim, a retired

A guide leads the group of 11 powder hounds on a traverse towards virgin snowfields. Note the small avalanche area directly opposite them on the right side of the photo

surgeon from Oregon, and his wife, Mary; and the Pinder family, a foursome from Saskatchewan. And there's my group: a trio of Whistler Mountain regulars from Vancouver, an hour's flight away but at this moment the furthest thing from our minds.

Like another pricey white powder hailing from more southern climes, northern cat-skiing can be addictive. The Drurys' clientele seem to be hooked, almost all clients returning yearly for their week-long fix. Herb Pinder, who

chased by both beer and the occasional shot of hyperbole.

Had each day trumped the previous? Hard to believe, but after a fifth consecutive day of the best skiing of my life (26 years of which I've spent on skis on two continents) and my final requisite hot tub, I pull up a bar stool and ask another guide, Joe Schwarz (who in the off-season is a mountain biker who's been featured in seven films), how many days he gets to ski per year. He tells me 100 to 120. Work or no work, I reckon he must really love skiing.



Another perfect day for making fresh tracks in the deep powder bowls of the Selkirk Mountains

has come every one of the 33 years Selkirk Wilderness has been in business, tells me between heavy gasps (mine) for post-run oxygen that he keeps coming back for the “snow, food, people, fun and great terrain.”

In that terrain, incidentally, a tree's bark is its bite, so it pays to be vigilant. This revelation comes not via burning bush, bearded wise man or bumper sticker on a rusted-out Volkswagen van; it comes while I'm submerged in a deep tree well, skis flapping in the air like surrender flags and my head, thankfully protected by a new helmet, buried in the loose snow that has collapsed around me forming – in my mind, anyway – a snowy tomb.

Restored upright by Jeff, one of our superb guides, I rejoin the congregation and the banter and camaraderie of the cat, which, in addition to being a welcome if temporary respite for our thighs, arms and backs as it regains the altitude we have just dropped, becomes the debriefing room for all things skiing.

Here, we share shame, sham and glory. Runs are reviewed, stories take shape, legends are born. And, like the fish that got away, by the time we reach après-ski, tales of all heights are

“Guiding first, skiing second,” he says. Then he pauses, smiles and adds, “But it really helps when the skiing is good.”

Tree wells behind me, I wonder how it could possibly get better. ■

Selkirk Wilderness – call (1-250) 366 4424 or visit www.selkirkwilderness.com for information and reservations – is extremely popular; some spaces remain between March and closure in April. Six-day prices, all found apart from the bar bill, range from C\$3,190 to C\$4,140 (HK\$25,000 to HK\$32,700). First-time snowcat skiers and boarders should be reasonably fit and strong intermediates, able to ski and ride black diamond runs at major lift-serviced resorts.

Selkirk Wilderness Skiing (SWS) is in Meadow Creek, BC, just over two hours by road from Castlegar's small airport. Guests can fly Air Canada to Castlegar from either Vancouver or Calgary in just over an hour. From Castlegar it's a 30-minute limo or shuttle ride to the Hume Hotel in Nelson, an attractive mountain town where guests are picked up by a SWS staff member. It's another 90 minutes to the operation's base lodge, then a 15-minute snowcat ride up Meadow Mountain to the guesthouse.