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Eastern B.C.'s 'Powder Highway' a blast



RK Heliskiers and boarders break for lunch in the Purcell Mountains of British Columbia

Photo by MARK LORENZEN / For the Union-Tribune

You've probably been reading and hearing a bunch about Whistler/Blackcomb in recent months. Which is understandable, what with a huge new tram and the Winter Olympics set for this impressive resort next season.

But there is a lot more to schussing in British Columbia than Whistler. A whole lot more. Hop over to the southeastern corner of the province and you'll find eight ski and snowboard areas along the aptly named Powder Highway.

And that's just the start of things.

Dubbed the Kootenay Rockies, this area has more than half-a-dozen heli-ski-and-snowboard operators, at least nine cat outfitters and a batch of backcountry lodges ideally suited for touring, snowshoeing and ski mountaineering. There are also a number of funky and friendly little towns along the way, too.

I've been up to this region -- situated to the north of eastern Washington, Idaho and western Montana -- twice in the past three years. And I'm certain I'll be returning. I'd love to spend a whole season up here, exploring its myriad skiing and riding opportunities.

Europeans have known about the Powder Highway for some time, and when I was at the Kicking Horse Resort, I heard about as much Swedish as I did English. But that may be changing as more Yanks head north to find the kind of snow that disappears in puffs when you lift some in your hand and blow on it.

As things stand, I've only tasted a bit, skiing at the Big Red, Panorama and Kicking Horse resorts and flying with RK Heliski and Canadian Mountain Holidays. And while the peaks in the U.S. are impressive, these mountains - including the Purcell, Bugaboo, Selkirk, Columbia and Rocky Mountain ranges - took my breath away when I visited.

Here's a sampling of what's available in this neck of the Canadian woods, starting in the north:

Revelstoke covers 3,031 acres and has an amazing vertical descent of 5,620 feet, the greatest in North America, lots of challenging terrain and some long, long runs. It has four lifts, 40 designated trails and up to 60 feet of snow a year. See www.revelstokemountainresort.com.

Kicking Horse (I just had to ski at a resort with a name this cool) has a vertical drop of 4,133 feet, only 6 feet less than Jackson Hole. Like its Wyoming cousin, it has more chutes and gnarly terrain than you can shake a stick at. It also has a grizzly bear preserve inside the resort's boundaries. (It's fenced.) See www.kickinghorseresort.com.

The resort took its name from nearby Kicking Horse Canyon and Kicking Horse Pass. It is just a few miles from **Golden**, which has more than its share of skiing, snowmobile, climbing, rafting and kayaking guides. One of these days, I plan to come back here to kayak the Class IV (really hard) Kicking Horse River.

Golden is also home to the **Kicking Horse River Lodge**, dubbed one of the top eco lodges in the world by National Geographic. See www.kickinghorsriverlodge.com. I stayed there on my visit and found the place cozy and friendly. And the breakfast was tops, too.

One evening, photographer Mark Lorenzen and our host, Miro Micovsky - who moved to Golden from his native Slovakia for the mountains - and I walked from the Kicking Horse River Lodge on the outskirts of town, over a stunning **pedestrian bridge** made of huge beams and ended up at Konan Mar's "**Eleven-22**" restaurant on 10th Avenue.

It was a great Rocky Mountain find and I savored my seafood plate heaped with scallops, prawns and mussels. See www.eleven22.ca. For more information on Golden and its myriad offerings, see www.tourismgolden.com.

Continuing south along the Powder Highway (Highway 95A), Lorenzen and I rolled into the town of Invermere after our day at Kicking Horse. Before we headed up to Panorama Mountain Village, we stopped at Strand's Old House Restaurant, which is run by an ex-patriot Kiwi - Tony Woods - who came to this area to ski more than 25 years ago and never left. By the by, the food was great. For reservations, call (250) 342-6344.

Panorama Mountain Resort boasts a vertical drop of 4,000 feet (another Powder Highway behemoth) and is spread over 2,847 acres. See www.panoramaresort.com. Though I'd have loved to make some turns at Panorama, we came to Panorama to fly with RK Heliski. We ended up having a hoot with guide Jeremy MacKenzie and chopper pilot Duncan McNabb, who dropped us

off high in the Purcells.

We skied and boarded with the Allan family from Edmonton, a German on holiday and French émigré who was working at a lodge in Banff. Though the conditions were variable, Jeremy was still able to find us powder stashes here and there. I had an especially good time on Rosie's Run. It wasn't that steep, but it was gladed and the boot-top powder was fun.

Jeremy also found us some slopes that had pitches as steep as 40 degrees - yikes - and some challenging tree skiing. McNabb chauffeured us high up in the mountains four times into what MacKenzie called the Jumbo Creek Drainage for descents on three other runs dubbed Millennium, Christie's and Finale - one more than a regular day. The cost, in Canadian dollars, was \$690.

I'd go back in a minute to get a chance to ski in deep powder and go higher up on the glaciers. See www.rkheliski.com.

Some 20 miles south of Invermere is Fairmont Hot Springs. This resort is primarily for novices and intermediates, which makes it good for families with young skiers - and seniors, too. And when you're done skiing, you can soak in the onsite mineral pools. See www.fairmonthotsprings.com.

The next stop south is the Kimberly Alpine Resort, which is only a few miles from the city of Cranbrook and the Canadian Rockies International Airport. Delta Airlines has been flying in to Cranbrook from Salt Lake City for a couple of months now and offering some great deals from U.S. cities. Roundtrip from San Diego, for example, is only around \$320.

The Kimberly ski and snowboard area covers 1,800 acres, has 80 runs, five lifts and a respectable vertical drop of 2,465 feet. See www.skikimberley.com.

Another alpine resort not too far from Cranbrook (headed east) is Fernie, which has 10 lifts servicing 112 different trails with a vertical drop of 2,811 feet and 2,504 acres of skiable terrain. The average annual snowfall is a whopping 29 feet. See www.skiferne.com.

About 120 miles to the west of Cranbrook is Red Mountain Resort near Rossland. This is one of the oldest ski hills in North America, dating back more than 100 years to the creation of the Red Mountain Ski Club. It is owned by Howard Katkov of Del Mar.

Red Mountain is in the Monashees, not far from the US border. It has a vertical of 2,909 feet and five lifts spread out over 1,585 acres. It has two main peaks, Granite Mountain and Red Mountain. See www.redresort.com.

In the same area as Red Mountain is Whitewater Winter Resort. This is a relatively small area with three chair lifts and a vertical drop of 1,300 feet. But it gets up to 45 feet of snow a year. It is about three hours west of Cranbrook. See www.skiwhitewater.com.

Inland British Columbia is filled with heli-ski operators who had lodges spread around these stunning mountains. But other than RK, the only one I've skied with is Canadian Mountain Holidays out of Nakusp.

It's been a couple of years, but I remember knee-top snow and steep pitches through groves of big trees and lots of "yahoos" from my fellow skiers. I also remember deep tree wells that we all did our best to avoid. And then there was the Nakusp Hot Springs, where we soaked after hard days of skiing. See www.cmhski.com.

I haven't even touched the cat-skiing and snowboarding operators here - or the backcountry

lodges - in this region. To find out more about them, go to www.kootenayrockies.com and to get details on ticket deals from Delta, see www.kootenayrockies.com/deltadeals.

Posted by **Brian Clark** at February 16, 2009 10:34 AM

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