

Big Cat diary

Can't bankroll a helicopter? Neither can **Kevin Wolff**. But when he stepped aboard a snowcat in a sleepy corner of British Columbia, he still got miles and miles of powder-caked isolation to himself – well, almost



Klaus likes to sing when he skis. Deep, booming, Bavarian folk tunes that resonate around the trees and barrel down the valley. He doesn't smile, choosing to express the joys of snowcat skiing musically. The deeper the powder, the louder he sings.

There's barely a soul to hear him. The nearest Starbucks is three hours away by car, and the nearest habitation, Rossland, is an hour distant in this remote corner of western Canada. International entry points Vancouver and Calgary are eight hours in either direction. So Klaus can hellow

to his heart's content – or at least until one of his fellow snowcat punters stabs him with a ski pole.

Driving into Rossland, home of Big Red Cat Skiing, is like arriving in the last town before the end of the world. It's a tiny outpost that survives on an industrial mix of mining and forestry operations, and glories in the status of alpine city because it's the feeder for the small but perfectly formed Red Mountain ski area. The reason it's of interest to skiers and boarders from further flung parts is that it sits on one of the points of British Columbia's coveted powder triangle, a colossal fluff magnet

whose other corners are Nelson and Fernie, and is blessed with up to 12m a year (6.7m on average) of the lightest, driest snow to be found on the planet.

Until recently, if you wanted to get closer to BC's finest domestic product than in the sanctioned ski zones, the only off-piste outfits which could help you out were the über-pricey heli-ski operations. Companies whose clientele are either untouchably wealthy or folk who just need it sooooo badly they've scrimped and saved all year to feed their habits.

For those who want to explore this playground there is now a wide choice of newly established backcountry operations which use snowcats (pimped-out piste bashers which seat up to eight passengers, and a guide) to make a sampling of what the locals are fond of calling "Super Natural Snow" a much more affordable prospect. One of these new startups is Big Red Cats, operating out of Rossland, and today starring Klaus.

True, snowcast skiing is not quite as exciting as heli-skiing. The runs are shorter and Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries' doesn't send the same tingle up your spine as it does in a chopper. On the plus side, you don't have to sell a kidney to do it, these mean machines operate in all weather conditions, you get in just as much vertical skiing, and if the transport breaks down there's no need to assume the brace position, (aka kiss your arse goodbye).

When Klaus finally stops singing the silence is deafening. There are no planes overhead, no faint whirr from a distant chairlift. Even the wind maintains a respectful hush. Snow ghosts – trees shrouded entirely in snow, then sculpted by the wind into tortured shapes – line the top third of the peaks. The views are of three elements exclusively – trees, mountains and snow, like man never existed.

The terrain is just as delicious. Skiing is below the timberline, and comes in a number of guises – old-growth forest where trees are widely spaced with plenty of bail-out options, cut blocks where you can make fast turns between the Christmas trees, and the true

expert favourite, natural glades – tight and steep and demanding perfect technique.

Fat freeride skis are the order of the day, as is a flexible strategy. Skiing in the forest isn't about perfect, dainty wiggles. Trees have a habit of spoiling that approach. Instead be prepared to twist, duck and surf your way around the landscape – it brings a whole new dimension to skiing. Feeling macho? Turn the speed up a few notches and see if your reflexes can keep pace.

The light is fading fast and the Kootenay Sea – a local name for the ocean of cloud that regularly blankets the area – has rolled in. Under the sea it's probably already snowing, above it the shadows have grown long when Big Red's Kieren signals the final run of the day – 'Keep close together in the fading light.' 'What happens if we get split up?' someone asks.

Just follow the singing and hope Klaus knows where he's going.

Kevin Wolff travelled to Vancouver with British Airways, and hired a car through Hertz before a very long drive to Rossland. Accommodation was provided by Red Mountain Village www.redmountainvillage.com. Big Red Cat Skiing offers single and multi-day trips from £125 per day www.bigredcatskiing.com. They can also arrange lodging and lift packages.



RED MOUNTAIN, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

www.redresort.com

Getting there: Zoom (www.flyzoom.com) flies Gatwick to Calgary from £199 one way, incl taxes. Air Canada (www.aircanada.co.uk) from £495. British Airways (www.ba.com) flies Heathrow to Vancouver from £510.

Mid-range: Ski Independence (www.ski-independence.com), Frontier Travel (www.frontier-travel.co.uk). Lodgings at (www.redmountainvillage.com)

Season dates: early Dec-end Apr
Vertical drop: 1,165-2,177m
Terrain: 4,200 acres
Pistes:

20% 56% 24%

Annual snowfall: 7.6m
Mountain munchies: pack a lunch!
Guiding: free guides will show you the mountain from base

