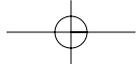
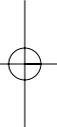
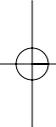


FORTRESS MOUNTAIN

1967-2004

R.I.P.



By George Koch

THE STORY OF SKI RESORTS WITHIN

WEEKENDING or day-tripping distance of Calgary has been one of a decade of growth. In late April, skiers learned there's one unfortunate exception: Fortress Mountain. Resorts of the Canadian Rockies (RCR), the Calgary-based company that also owns much larger mountains such as Lake Louise and Fernie Alpine Resort, announced this small ski hill in the mountains of Kananaskis Country, about an hour's drive southwest of Calgary, was "not economically viable" and would close.

RCR's move erases the home mountain for a cult following of snowboarders, freestylers, backcountry travellers and families. But in the big scheme of resort operations, Fortress's passing will be hardly a blip on the radar since it amounted to at best two per cent of the wider region's skier-visits. There are simply too many greener pastures, with new or greatly expanded offerings at Kicking Horse and Fernie, upgrades at Panorama and Kimberley, far better lifts at Sunshine Village, Lake Louise and Marmot, and alternative cult stashes such as Castle Mountain. In its announcement, RCR said it envisions converting Fortress into some sort of environmental education centre. Whatever this nebulous notion turns out to be, moving ski lifts will probably not be a part.

Twenty-five years ago I came to know Fortress as a funky place to get some uncrowded early-season turns, with the chance for some estimably deep powder that came in sudden storms—though at the risk of -35 degrees and frostbite. Founded in 1967 as Snowridge, it was later renamed Fortress Mountain after the singular, monumental ramparts towering over the lift-serviced ridges. Though its vertical was modest at 335 metres, you could ski on three faces pitched at a more interesting angle than the slopes of Marmot or Sunshine. With just 133 hectares on-piste, Fortress always seemed small, but not that small, probably because all other resorts back then were far more limited. In the intervening years, skiing changed dramatically, but despite a succession of owners Fortress didn't really change alongside its competitors.

Fortress had a rebirth in the late '90s. Freestyle Alberta called the mountain home, and word spread to snowboarders, jibbers, freeriders and sundry other yout's about a mountain with some of the coolest terrain for building secluded kickers beside natural halfpipes, with steep powder shots lurking just a few minutes' walk from the lifts—all at a low price. "You could traverse out-of-bounds off the Back Side chair out into the big open bowl underneath the Fortress," says Jonas Delogne, an international freerider who skied Fortress until a few years ago. "The Far Side had those gullies that are like little halfpipes. Every once in a while there'd be one of those upslope storms that put down, like, a metre of snow overnight." Then it was time to skip school.

"There are a lot of people sad about the closure," agrees Kevin Hjertaas, a well-known Canmore-area freerider and ski video model. "There's a great zone, the Far Far Side, where you hike off to the left to a zone of chutes and stuff. And right off the front you can traverse out to the South Chutes, which are some

In the mid-'80s, Aspen Skiing Corp. owned both Fortress and Blackcomb Mountain at Whistler, with Blackcomb nearing bankruptcy.



Skier: Rob Bickor; Photos: HENRY GEORGI, Fortress Ski Resort, Alberta

serious avalanche terrain, and ski right down to the access road. When I first moved to the Calgary-Canmore area five years ago, I went there a lot. It was such a quiet spot, and you could get powder days after it snowed. I guess they just didn't have the numbers—it was never busy there."



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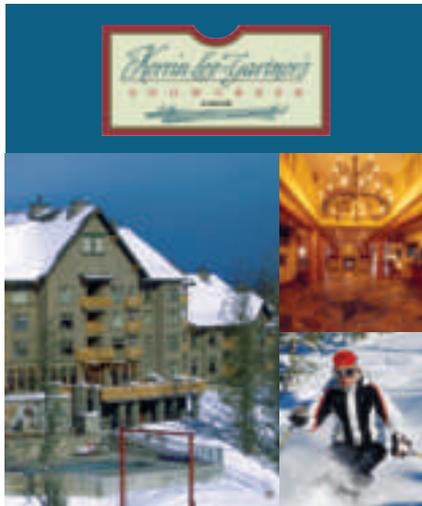
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There had been renewed hope when RCR purchased Fortress in the '90s. RCR's chief, former mountain guide and Calgary-area rancher/oilman Charlie Locke, modelled his company on Intrawest, owner of Blackcomb Mountain and numerous other resorts. Might RCR now commit some serious capital to rejuvenate Fortress? It was not to be. The mega-successful Intrawest formula depends on real estate development to furnish both the bulk of profits and masses of overnight skiers to fill the lifts—and large population centres nearby. Real estate was verboten at Fortress and nearby Nakiska—and Calgary doesn't have the population of Vancouver or Montreal.

Which brings in the Alberta government and its perennially schizophrenic attitude towards tourism. On the one hand, the province claims tourism is a pillar of its long-term economic development strategy. On the other, it seems to do everything in its power to make mountain tourism as inconvenient, small-scale and retrograde as possible. The history of the Alberta government's involvement in Kananaskis is one of political manipulation, bone-headed decisions that defy snowfall and weather and identity-group demagoguery. K-Country was originally created as a recreation-oriented natural area, but is now under a lock-down more stringent than the national park rules that govern the three Banff-area ski hills.

Fortress was one victim. The province foisted on cash-strapped Fortress the year-round maintenance bill for the twisty, steep access road, even though it's a provincial road on Crown land. It repeatedly vetoed Locke's plans for a modest town-house development that would have boosted skier-visits and furnished capital for a new lift, which Fortress's meagre cash flow could never support. Fortress's other cool plans—new backcountry terrain with possible cat-skiing—also never quite came to fruition, hounded by a handful of opponents and government bureaucracy.

The brutally dry winter of 2002-03, coming on the heels of a season-ending avalanche that killed two of eight young snowboarders swept away by a massive slide down the South Chutes just outside the boundary, nearly did the mountain in. Able to open only for portions of February and March, Fortress lost \$250,000. That summer RCR shut Wintergreen at nearby Bragg Creek and toyed with doing the same to Fortress. Instead the company decided to give the mountain one more chance, opening Wednesdays through Sundays and bringing some cool hike-accessed terrain, the Bandit Chutes and Sherwood Forest, in-bounds. No new lifts, however.

The move evidently didn't work, for the closure was announced just after season's end. Neil Jackson, Fortress's general manager, cited ruinous property taxes well above Fortress's market value, skyrocketing insurance premiums, high energy costs and the provincial government's "limitations precluding on-hill accommodations" as combining to leave Fortress "unable to generate positive cash flow to make the necessary improvements it needs to continue operations." Skier-visits were way down (competitors estimated it as low as 40,000), lifts were nearing their end-state and, RCR disclosed, Fortress had lost more than \$1 million over two seasons.

RCR says it will spend the next year "exploring options to create a sustainable Fortress operation, with a focus on an environmentally sensitive solution to long-term viability." A mass of buzzwords—but almost no meaning. We'll just have to see what happens. The announcement hinted that RCR would be willing to operate Fortress in some form, if the provincial government sweetened the terms.

IN ITS OWN BIZARRE WAY, Fortress leaves a monumental legacy. In the mid-'80s, Aspen Skiing Corporation owned both Fortress and Blackcomb Mountain at Whistler, with Blackcomb nearing bankruptcy. Hugh Smythe, Blackcomb's young manager who had also worked at Fortress, conceived a wild scheme to rescue Blackcomb. He dismantled one of Fortress's T-bars during the summer, trucked it up onto Blackcomb Mountain by cover of night, and that season made Blackcomb's phenomenal alpine terrain accessible to the public for the first time. One of the highly impressed skiers was a Vancouver shopping mall magnate named Joe Houssian. Houssian liked it so much he bought the mountain, re-oriented his company to ski resort development and the rest is history. So every time you're scaring yourself silly on Spanky's Ladder or swooping down the Blackcomb Glacier, think of Fortress Mountain. ❄️