



9 for the Road...

The road from Calgary, that is. Here's what's new at the big arc of resorts in Alberta and B.C.'s East Kootenays.

Photo: DAVE MOSSOP

It was the greatest run of a fabulous season. What appeared as a dusting of snow on the access road became eight cm in the parking lot and, as we rode Castle Mountain's two long, fixed-grip chairlifts, deepened to 25 cm. Not Castle's usual Rocky Mountains cold smoke, but Alaska-style stuff, humid and supportive, perfect for riding up over a refrozen base. The pro patrol had taken a few choice lines in the big Sheriff cirque, in Drifter and, we heard over the patrol radio, in the South Chutes. I knew the first run would be good, but I wasn't prepared for what came next.

We slid along the Skyline Traverse toward the stumpy rooted entrance of High Plains, an aptly named open slope that steepens into the tight gully of OK Corral. The patrol hadn't skied it yet, and for some undeserved reason I found myself first in the group, indeed, first of anyone. Careful turns gave way to more and more speed as the expected harsh base

was nowhere to be felt—just a perfect creamy blanket straight out of a ski flick. On it went, ever-steeper and faster, and after 20 turns I decided this was one run where I'd stop for nothing. This was the apotheosis of skiing, the Castle of distant memories and barroom fables—700 vertical metres of uninterrupted fall line. Better even than cat- or heli-skiing.

That magical mid-season run was emblematic of a phenomenal winter throughout the big arc of resorts in Alberta and B.C. that lie within comfortable weekend distance of Calgary. It was a season less to do with earth-shaking developments or huge terrain/lift openings, and much more focused on the core of the sport: going skiing. Skier-visits appeared robust to crazy nearly everywhere, owing to the combination of superb snow, moderate temps, a cold spring that delayed people's migration to the golf course, and the continued economic and population growth of southern Alberta, where BMW X5s, Porsche Cayennes and Cadillac SUVs have become a routine sight.

^ LAKE LOUISE

In last year's report I gibbered enthusiastically about the great season had at The Lake, and I could just about reprint that text—except last season was even better. I generally day-trip to this mountain, and last season there was great single-day skiing from November through late April. There was little of the normal agonizing lead-up, with terrain opening at the rate of one run per week. It was pretty much boom: game-on.

Early December found routine blown-in powder on Brownshirt Ridge, its rugged rock-lined gullies already lovely skiing. Ptarmigan Glades were at their best, soft and creamy and smoothly rolling, not yet degraded into spiky ridges and rooty troughs by snowboarders and incompetent skiers. Elevator Shaft, the burly big-mountain hiking zone above Larch Chair, was simply superb—and this was even before Christmas.

One fine mid-week day in March simply everything coalesced: a huge pounding of fresh

snow, dazzling weather, no people. I was sure I'd arrived too late to ski obvious untracked powder, but the rope was still strung across the Whitehorn 2 gate. I beetled over and arrived half a minute after opening. Another lift-serviced run that beat most heli-skiing days: 400 vertical metres of 40+-degree chute in 40 cm of blower. I stumbled upon a fellow ski writer from halfway around the globe and the day accelerated into one of relentlessly banging off one long steep run after another. By 4:30, \$1,000 couldn't have motivated me to make another turn.

This year isn't seeing dramatic capital additions. "We're making step-by-step improvements based on listening to our guests," says the aforementioned Mosteller. The base area's Kokanee Cabin was gutted and renovated over the summer to refocus on its traditional firepit-and-barbecue ambience. For the kids there are new, longer Magic Carpets creating slopes that make it worthwhile turning, plus coloured obstacles that encourage kids to learn to turn. And for once the government even helped: access and end-of-day escape has been eased by twinning about 10 km of the Trans-Canada Highway eastward from the Lake Louise turnoff (leaving a 15-km stretch of two-lane before the freeway's resumption at the Radium turnoff).

The assiduous on-mountain care seems not to have gone unnoticed. Alberta skiers, who'd been increasingly drawn farther afield by the many new offerings in B.C., seemed to rediscover the great terrain on their front porch. Most weekends last year The Lake was busy—really busy. In 40 years of skiing there I'd never witnessed chock-full parking lots in December. This was great to see. I'd long ranted about The Lake's service shortcomings even as I continued to adore its great terrain. According to its competitors, its skier-visits had sagged over several years. Last season, that trend appeared to reverse.

But just as Cato the Elder ended every speech to ancient Rome's Senate with the demand, "Carthage must be destroyed!" so must I conclude every reference to Lake Louise with the demand that the drafty, decrepit, comfortless travesty known as Temple Lodge must be burnt to the ground. Its staff needn't be sold into slavery and the ground needn't be salted—Temple should simply be rebuilt. Mosteller declines to promise the required act of arson, but says even Temple will become "a focus" of incremental improvements.

SUNSHINE VILLAGE

The perennially snow-safe Sunshine Village is one of the few resorts anywhere that can proudly snub snowmaking. Opening in November as usual, the mountain last season managed its earliest-ever openings of Goat's Eye, the Delirium Dive freeride zone and other challenging in-bounds terrain. Sunshine unveiled yet another zone of burly terrain, Silver City, which drops down a hidden cliff-face to skier's right of the Teepee Town chairlift. "Pretty much every route you can take includes mandatory air," commented Mike Moynihan, Sunshine's manager of sales and media. Like Delirium, access requires skiing with a partner, avalanche beacon and shovel.

Sunshine operated until its traditional Victoria Day weekend closure, closing amid copious snow. Skier-visits, says Moynihan, "were very good, helped along by the good local economy. People have extra money in their pockets, and we had one of our better years." Sunshine owner Ralph Scurfield used to boast gleefully about his mountain's number of visitors, particularly after surpassing Lake Louise a few years ago. But now there's fear the Parks Canada bureaucrautes will resent Sunshine's success, and so the resort no longer discloses skier-visit figures.

Nor was there any word on what, if anything,

FERNIE ALPINE RESORT

"We had great snow, incredible snowfall; Mother Nature was kind to us at all of our resorts," gushes Matt Mosteller, a vice-president and spokesperson for Resorts of the Canadian Rockies (RCR), which operates Fernie, Lake Louise, Kimberley and Nakiska. "Our guests had smiles on their faces." I was one of the many. Busy days at Fernie would see piranha-like swarms of 1,000 endorphin-engorged helmeted skiers descending on every postage-stamp-sized patch of powder the instant the patrol had it open—or before.

Luckily, in addition to its hugely popular Timber/White Pass area, Fernie has its old side. There the vagaries of geography and quirkiness of the Heiko Socher-era lift alignments hide the best terrain or demand a substantial traverse to access. My second-best run of the season was on Snake Main, a 35+-degree face lying a good 10 minutes' push/skate/trudge from the lifts. It opened well after 2:00 p.m. on a hugely busy day, but hardly anyone noticed. My buddy

is being done on Sunshine's long-hoped-for plan to expand its parking lot. It's created a lot of challenges, and last season was full of stories of hour-long waits to get shuttled from the access road to the gondola. Sunshine bought new passenger buses to accomplish the task, replacing its old tractors and open wagons. But Moynihan insists tales that Sunshine or Parks Canada were turning people away down at the highway on peak days are false rumours spun out of a temporary traffic jam.

The coming ski season is Sunshine's 80th anniversary. The resort began as a log cabin way station for people trekking to Mount Assiniboine, for the grand sum of \$300. Today Sunshine has a simply incredible lift system, including its eight-passenger access gondola, clearly the best in our lineup of resorts. Sunshine is currently focusing on base area upgrades. There's a new Grab and Go coffee and bagel shop in the gondola base, renovated retail space and complimentary ski valet service in the Sunshine Inn. The biggest news is the project to replace the Terrace wing of the Sunshine Inn. Thirty new units, 13 of them with lofts, will open in the 2008-09 season and, promises Moynihan, "will be comparable to the best accommodation available down in Banff. The transformation of the Sunshine Inn will be complete."

Scott Gerecke and I were among the first dozen or so to swoop down this willow-lined face in huge vertical-swallowing turns, every one a full body-immersing, face-drenching submergence. On our third lap at 4:00 there was still plenty of powder—and the Timber Bowl groupies still hadn't clued in.

Improvement- and service-wise, Mosteller says RCR is focused on the "key components": the snow surface, the food/daily amenities and the overall service experience. Grooming at Fernie and Lake Louise has improved massively in recent years, transforming the experience not only for intermediates but for experts seeking a respite from the double-diamond runs, or on days when the freeride terrain just isn't happening.

Over the summer, says Mosteller, staff were busy glading amid Fernie's ample forested slopes, summer-grooming rugged areas to enable snowcats to operate in winter and improving linkages between zones, such as the connection from Currie Bowl to the Bear Chair, which helps ►

avoid a trip to the base. Snowmaking, important around the base, was being augmented. At the top of the Timber Chair, the new Lost Boys Café was a huge hit, a great place to warm up quickly without losing one's skiing rhythm. This season the somewhat quirky menu of "elegant potatoes" is being broadened.

Fernie experienced a veritable explosion of real estate around the turn of the millennium.

PANORAMA RESORT

"It really was a neat season," enthuses Ken Wilder, Panorama Resort's head of business development. "There were a lot of great days in Taynton Bowl—just spectacular. More than just the amount was that the snowfalls came evenly, so we always seemed to be skiing on fresh stuff." Panorama was still benefiting from its major lift expansion of several years back, which takes skiers up its vast 1,000 metres of vertical in half the previous time.

This year is all about incremental improvements, including summer terrain grooming and glading in the Stumboch and Thousand Peaks zones, a northeasterly aspect that captures and preserves powder. The resort is systematically replacing its snowcat fleet to maintain grooming volume and quality. And it has widened and added snowmaking on Old Timer, one of Panorama's original trails, in preparation for the women's World Cup slalom and GS races in late November.

Panorama's biggest news events are off the mountain. Most visible is the \$2 million re-do of the Toby Creek access road, which includes upgrading the crucial 10 km through the canyon to the resort. This will benefit every visitor, year-round.

Destination travellers will welcome the expansion of Cranbrook airport, about two

This year there's one major new development, the 40+ unit Juniper Lodge, a higher-end condo-hotel. Down the road at Fernie's sister resort of Kimberley, there are 10 major real estate projects plus numerous little ones totalling some \$100 million underway or imminent. Upgrading of Cranbrook's airport (see Panorama Resort) should be a huge long-term plus for Fernie and Kimberley.

hours' drive from Panorama. Lengthening of the runway to 8,000 feet is complete, enabling the strip to handle non-stop flights from, say, Toronto with Boeing 737s or Airbus A-300s. The terminal expansion was due for completion this fall. Now the task is to generate actual flights, says Wilder: "It's not all going to happen at once, it's going to take some work and some patience, but we have the nuts and bolts in place."

Least tangibly but in some ways most intriguingly, Panorama is part of a new regional tourism strategy in which numerous regional resorts are marketing themselves as the "Powder Highway." These include more than 30 ski areas and backcountry operations lying within a huge geographical triangle defined by Fernie, Kicking Horse and Red Mountain. "The Powder Highway amounts to a huge total of lifts, runs and skiable mountains," says Wilder. "Obviously nobody would ever ski every stop on the Powder Highway in one trip. But it creates a unifying theme for destination travellers. You could keep coming back to the Powder Highway for 10 consecutive years and never do the same combination twice. There'd always be something new." How true. Even with my 50-day seasons, there are outfits on the Powder Highway I haven't visited.

and after 163 cm of snow that month, all of its rugged alpine terrain was skiable by early December, including Eagle East and the Knob Chair. Marmot's late-April closure came from diminishing skier traffic amid bounteous remaining snow. Skier-visits totalled 242,000, Marmot's second-highest ever.

In summer the resort focused on non-sexy building maintenance, summer slope grooming and the purchase of a new snowcat. Marmot periodically wins environmental awards for its careful, low-impact approach to development. This coming season the resort intends to make use of its special new environmentally designed snowmaking system, which services higher-

MOUNT NORQUAY

Last season this venerable ski hill just above Banff went through a change of ownership, after the previous family-owners concluded it was essentially unviable without a summer tourism component. Given that idea's icy reception from Parks Canada apparatchiks, it's at best a long-term vision. In the meantime, new corporate and financial blood stepped in, a group including former World Cup ace Ken Read, a couple of local developers plus Robert and Len Sudermann, veteran ski hill operators of Camp Fortune and Mont Ste-Marie near Ottawa.

From the skier's standpoint, nothing was really amiss as the new group simply took over. "It helped that Mother Nature kicked in and allowed it to be flawless," says André Quenneville, Norquay's new general manager. "November should be renamed Snowvember; we were skiing on natural snow in terrain that wouldn't normally open until after Christmas." Quenneville, most recently the general manager of Edelweiss ski area north of Ottawa, says the "awesome season" drove Norquay's skier-visits up over a comfortable 100,000. Usually an early-closer due to its sunny aspect and low elevation, Norquay operated until April 15, just two weeks shy of Lake Louise.

I was glad to see Norquay being kept alive. Its wonderful cruising, proximity, compact size and reasonable prices—including ski-by-the-hour ticketing that other resorts should emulate—make it ideal for certain skiing needs and create an irreplaceable role in southern Alberta skiing. For the coming season, the new owners are focusing on incremental improvements, including major repairs to a chairlift and smaller upgrades to the snowmaking, the goal being to offer consistently good skiing next season with the earliest possible opening. The summer tourism scheme remains at the proposal stage in the clutches of the federal bureaucracy.

traffic areas on the lower slopes, to ensure an early opening. That capability has revived interest from ski racing clubs to use Marmot for early-season race training.

Below the mountain, the heritage tourism town of Jasper is known as a much lower-key, laid-back alternative to raunchy and overbuilt Banff. After being ruled by federal bureaucratic fiat throughout its history, several years ago Jasper finally got its own municipal government. It immediately set about sprucing up the town's public areas, installing new brick-laid sidewalks and other streetworks, plus a new town trail that runs the length of town through the woods. A new Brew Pub kicks the après-ski action up a notch.

MARMOT BASIN

Having built a chairlift into major new terrain plus steadily opening gnarly freeride zones, this Jasper-area gem was less in need of capital improvements than an epic season based on one simple commodity: snow. That's what it got. "Our season was a record in every way," says Brian Rode, Marmot's vice-president of sales and marketing. "It wasn't rocket science. The word of mouth got the message out. We hardly even needed our new snowmaking system, which amounted to a \$2.2 million insurance policy."

Marmot opened its earliest ever, November 17, with 60 per cent of its terrain skiable,

KICKING HORSE MOUNTAIN RESORT

This phenomenal skier's mountain generated huge buzz almost the instant it was conceived as a rebuild of Golden's Whitetooth ski hill 10 years ago now. But for its first few seasons, Kicking Horse had more buzz than paying skiers. Its panoply of gnar-gnar—including square miles of "side country" with big-mountain lines just a few minutes' walk past the boundary—its enormous vertical, its limited base facilities and its congestion-prone gondola created a major barrier to mainstream skiers. That, and resort management's stubborn refusal to groom more than a zigzag road down Kicking Horse's mid-mountain. This is a burly zone that can be great skiing but that turns into SUV-sized bone-crunching bumps after a melt-freeze.

What a difference one year and a new general manager can make! Sure, Kicking Horse's bounteous snowfall of nearly 1,000 cm helped—even greater than many of our other resorts last year. But the greatest impact was the no-nonsense attitude of Steve Paccagnan, a veteran industry operator lately of Intrawest, who became Kicking Horse's president and general manager. Paccagnan ordered an immediate ramp-up of grooming. With that, Kicking Horse was transformed.

Skiers of all stripes loved it. Last year full-mountain laps became sheer pleasure. You'd skitter along the tricky traverse on CPR Ridge or above Feuz Bowl, hop-turn down a tight rock-lined gully, swoop out into the bowl, then exit on a newly groomed corridor spilling you onto the mid-mountain. There, you had your pick of four or five freshly groomed routes, stretching from the steep winched-slope under the gondola across to the old Pioneer Chair. Each offered a different incline to which you could match the day's snow conditions and your taste for speed. Bravo, Pac Man!

Not surprisingly, Kicking Horse's traffic was up sharply, to a record 140,000 skier-visits. "We're really focusing on our core product," says Paccagnan. "We've amply established ourselves as a big-mountain experience. Now we have to round things out. We're starting to emphasize the family market, family zones." After the snow melted, Paccagnan launched an aggressive

summer capital program, focusing on brush clearing and terrain grooming to make more of the mid-mountain runs comfortably groomable in winter. The resort purchased two new snowcats, one of them a winchcat.

At the base the resort added a family skating rink, a new tubing area near the beginner area, a new outdoor patio area, plus additional mountain biking trails and alpine hiking trails. Real estate development continues apace, the latest being the Aspens,

60 units of five-unit townhomes aimed at the middle market. Constructed over the summer, the Aspens raise the resort's bed base to about 1,200. Finally, the glacial improvements to the tortuous Kicking Horse Canyon section of the Trans-Canada Highway are starting to kick in, lifting a major psychological barrier to many drivers. "Stay tuned," promises Paccagnan. "We're excited about where we're going, and I think we're poised for some major growth." ▶

CASTLE MOUNTAIN AD



Photo: WES GARNEAU

^ CASTLE MOUNTAIN RESORT

Castle roared into the season with big early-season snow and, after nearly a decade's dogged effort, the intermediate slopes of the Mount Haig development at long last served by a newly installed fixed-grip triple chair. "The new mountain did exactly what we hoped," says Andrew Rusnyk, Castle's director of sales and marketing. "We knew it was the gentler terrain that we were missing and that people would enjoy it, but it went beyond that. We had locals rediscover skiing, people coming out with ancient equipment who hadn't skied in forever. People were beaming." I concur—Haig's trails offer superb fall-line cruising, with a nice variety from upper novice to solid intermediate.

Skier-visits initially shot up as families and mixed groups were lured to the heretofore freeriders-only mountain, and also due to the continued spillover of population and economic growth in Calgary. Sadly, March got very warm very suddenly in southern Alberta and, after two days of heavy valley-to-peak rainfall—the equivalent of probably 150 cm of snowfall—Castle closed on March 26, three weeks earlier than normal, having increased its seasonal traffic by 33 per cent to about 60,000 skier-visits.

Castle's other major problem was the insufficient and intermittent grooming. The operation was hit hard by Alberta's infamous labour shortage, and its "fleet" of three aging cats routinely went unserved. The main mountain, which has several superb—when groomed—high-angle cruising runs, was transformed into a virtually backcountry experience. This is great after a dump, but terrible after a melt-freeze. Even Haig's seven

runs weren't always groomed.

Rusnyk promises that mountain management, painfully aware that the resort needs to work hard to transform newcomers into repeat visitors, will pay particular attention to grooming this year. To that end, there's a new maintenance shop to replace the ugly ramshackle glorified lean-to that used to sit next to the parking lot—not exactly a glam upgrade, but important.

FORTRESS MOUNTAIN

Last year I wrote about this funky Kananaskis-area resort's attempted rebirth under Banff entrepreneur and skier Zrinko Amerl, ending with an optimistic air of much better things to come. Sadly, Amerl and Fortress had an even tougher time of it last year, continually thwarted by busybody bureaucrats concocting a succession of reasons to keep the mountain closed. If it wasn't toxic mould in the day lodge basement (and it never occurred to the government pencil-necks to, let's say, just keep the basement off-limits), then it was aging lifts or, finally, the access road's allegedly decrepit bridge over the Kananaskis River.

Those of a conspiratorial bent might conclude that certain powers just don't

want to see Fortress re-open. If true, it's unfortunate, because Fortress was precipitantly blessed to a similar degree as most other Western resorts last season. The in-bounds area's ridge-tops still sported over 200 cm of settled base in May. Sadly, few got to enjoy it. In the springtime Amerl issued a proposal call for a general contractor to renovate the lodge and facilities. Significantly, it emphasized knowledge of building codes and an ability to work with local government and parks administrators. Amerl was hoping to begin the work in June. So it seems Fortress is in the midst of a test of wills between Amerl and those who'd prefer that the remains of Fortress just rot until they disappear into the moss. ☹