



A return visit to this Okanagan gem proves that absence really does make the heart grow fonder. **BY GEORGE KOCH**

Skiers are prone to some bone-headed habits, their decades spent in pursuit of great turns making the lapses only the less excusable. One is chasing rather than anticipating storms, only to arrive the day that epic storm turns to rain. Another is using a 10-hour drive and 2:00 a.m. arrival as motive to miss the trip's best morning of powder. Sitting out a ski day for any reason is a third. Perhaps worst of all, letting years and years slip by between visits to mountains you love. While I've worked hard to purge the first three, the last

one, sadly, only increases as I get to know more and more ski areas.

So it was that my wife, Laurie, and I found ourselves pulling into the dark but still-familiar village of Apex Mountain Resort one evening just before last New Year's. It was our first visit in six years. We used to be diehard Apexers, visiting this southern Okanagan mountain west of Penticton nearly every winter in the '90s. I adored Apex for its burly terrain, its innumerable steep lines largely hidden in the wooded folds of this convex mountain, its great easy-

access backcountry touring, its phenomenal grooming—and its unique culture created by Apex's phenomenally hard-skiing and even harder-partying locals. We fell out of the routine, probably for the same stupid non-reasons as too many others: on paper Apex seems improbably small to capture and hold one's interest. It has just one main chairlift, 600 vertical metres and one mountain.

Apex packs more variety and challenge into its 700 resort-area hectares than many of its far bigger rivals. A chock-full Apex day is barely



APEX FACTS & STATS

LOCATION: 45 minutes' drive along paved roads west of Penticton, B.C.; nearest major airport is at Kelowna, about a 90-minute drive north of Penticton.

THE VILLAGE: approximately 1,600 resort beds, including the 90-room Apex Mountain Inn slopeside hotel, the Saddleback Lodge close to the slopes, plus several B&Bs among the resort's private cabins, like the Apex Whitetail Chalet (www.apexwhitetailchalet.com).

ON-MOUNTAIN DINING AND ENTERTAINMENT: the legendary Gunbarrel is the top restaurant and also the resort's main nightspot, and the new Salty's restaurant opens in the hotel this season.

MORE INFO: 877/777-2739; www.apexresort.com

2,000 skiers (in contrast to 14,000 at some other regional resorts) with barely 130,000 skier-visits in a season. During our four-day visit, the biggest crowd was about 1,500 skiers. We never waited more than three to five minutes to get on the detachable quad—which provides access to the entire mountain—and regularly skied right onto the lift. Up on the mountain, this always means plenty of elbow room, whether on groomers or the steeps. “Those coming for vacations, people from outside the Okanagan Valley, are almost treated to a private ski

holiday,” mused James Shalman, Apex’s general manager, during a few enjoyable laps together off the quad.

Most mornings Laurie and I stopped in at the Fresh Tracks Café for coffee and breakfast. Run by a burly hunting outfitter, its Hog’s Heaven bagel loaded up with egg, ham, salsa, etc. got the day going right. We found Apex’s cruising runs groomed to literal perfection. Double-railing at some crazed velocity down Okanagan and using up half this broad run’s width, I had to recall our first visit 16 years earlier. We were enjoying a sumptuous dinner in the old Gunbarrel Saloon on the mountain’s backside, watching one of Apex’s snowcats essentially surfing down the 30+-degree slope of Chute run on a huge wave of snow lit up by the snowcat’s headlights. The mountain couldn’t afford a winch cat, so this is how they got the job done: grind up the Grandfather beginner trail, then surf down Chute. Repeat until complete. Last year, pretty much the same approach was being taken, and we enjoyed four days of cruising on runs that were nearly as smooth and fun to carve at 3:30 as they were at 9:00. This labour of love is performed by the father and son team of Pat and Neil, a pair of area farmers who’ve been grooming at Apex for 25 and 17 years, respectively.

Laurie and I stayed at the Apex Whitetail Chalet. Owned by locals Warren and Jeannine Cressman, it’s a pleasant wooden lodge on a small road just outside the main village, containing the Cressman’s home and three huge suites. Access-wise, the Whitetail is best described as almost ski-in/ski-out. Getting to the lifts meant an easy 200-metre stroll along Whitetail Road, then into our bindings and an easy coast down a groomed trail that debouched at the main hotel. Getting back you needed to find a small groomed path coming off the Grandfather’s Trail near the old parking lot, bear left, then eventually walk back those same 200 metres. It was certainly no biggie for the seclusion, quietness and luxury of the accommodation.

There was, alas, a key element missing from the skiing. A bizarre rain event in early December of last season had laid down a horrific ice layer throughout southern B.C. The hazard drove heli- and snowcat-skiing operators frantic and accounted for at least one in-bounds fatality when a huge avalanche ripped out at Big White’s Cliff Area. Virtually all of Apex’s steep slopes slid down to the ice layer—thankfully while they were closed—but the mountain entered

its crucial Christmas season with barely 30 cm of snow on its signature steep slopes. They all looked great—unbroken fields of powder, but little more than a dusting over dirt and rock. All but a few bumped-up lines remained closed.

On this trip, then, there was no hop-carving on the arrestingly steep gullies of the Gunbarrel zone, no exhilarating swoops in waves of powder down the open bowls of Hank’s and the Pit, no rock-lined chutes at Essendale and Sweet Sue, and no touring out into the couloirs and the vast fire-cleared bowl between Apex Secondary and Apex Peak. I say none of this in spite—snow conditions are beyond human control.

Strolling into the infamous Gunbarrel Saloon one afternoon after skiing, we ran into a sea of familiar faces: wild Wendell Clarke, a former freestyler who always sports a trademark one-piece North Face suit; inveterate backcountry telemark powderhound Neil Currie; and Steve Portman, former head of Apex’s pro patrol and now a senior avalanche forecaster for B.C. Highways. The talk naturally turned to the thin snowpack, which in turn triggered a round of backcountry storytelling. Here then are a few lines describing one such outing in a previous *Ski Canada* article on Apex:

For me, no Apex visit is complete without touring out into the vast bowl lying beneath Apex Mountain, what the locals call Apex Proper (the lift-serviced “Apex” lies on Mount Beaconsfield). I headed out with Neil Currie, a fanatical powder-hunting telemarker and longtime Apexite; Neil’s buddy Andy; Sue, a longtime local volly patroller and friend from several years back; and Charles Wood, a mountain guide with TLH Heli-Skiing. The day brought three fine runs down the so-called Mineshaft Line, a broad gully-shoulder combo that ends, indeed, in a tailings pile that would make some jibbers a mondo kicker.

On the way back we beetled purposefully to the great north-facing gullies spilling off Apex Secondary. If this were Fernie or Whistler, I remarked to Neil at the top, the terrain would be crawling with powderfreaks. Instead we were haggling good-naturedly over which of six couloirs filled with untouched, foot-deep pow would provide the optimum fun quotient. Neil grinned and replied, “Now you know why I live here.” In the end, we found one wide enough for us all, with a pitch of that certain gradient where you sink down into the turn and your skis do the work carving meaty, deeply satisfying turns. The line eventually narrowed and cliffed out, a small bit of billy-goating depositing us in glades that

APEX OVER:

gave more sweet turns down to the new Wild Side collector trail.

Soon after Laurie and I departed, Apex began receiving the snow it needed, and people were back to skiing those legendary steepes. “The season was absolutely fantastic after Christmas,” reported Shalman in a recent phone conversation. “March was just the pinnacle—it seemed to snow every day and we were knee-to hip-deep in powder for days and days.” Shalman’s right: Apex is a hidden gem. I promise it won’t be eight years until our next visit. ❄️