



ROAD TRIPPING BC'S

POWDER HIGHWAY

WORDS BY REGGAE ELLISS

The interior BC location of the Powder Highway resorts means cold temps and dry snow during a storm, leading to some incredible powder days. Carter McMillan on one of those magic days in Fernie earlier this winter. **Photo:** Steve Reed
Courtesy of Fernie Alpine Resort



A road trip along BC's Powder Highway has been on my bucket list for a long time, a route in the Kootenay Rockies that takes in some of the best resorts, cat ski and heli ski operations in British Columbia. Located in southeast BC, this is home to Kicking Horse, Fernie Whitewater, Revelstoke, and Red Mountain five of the best resorts in North America for terrain and quality snow.

The interior location of these resorts mean they receive quality snow and usually a lot of it and it's all about the terrain and, when it's on, the powder. The beauty of a Powder Highway adventure is that your itinerary can include all resorts or just a few. On this trip my wife Amanda and I were heading to Kicking Horse, Revelstoke and Fernie.

While the Powder Highway is all about skiing, the drive takes you through some of the most spectacular mountain scenery in the world, something that became obvious as we left the flatlands outside Calgary and headed into the mountains and the Banff National Park.

KICKING HORSE

Our first destination was Kicking Horse, just outside the small town of Golden, an easy 2.5-hour drive from Calgary airport. Our daughter Arkie has spent the past three winters there and raves about the mountain, so we thought we'd visit her and see for ourselves. It was also a good opportunity to do a short family road trip to include two of the other jewels in the Powder Highway crown.

Kicking Horse has well-deserved reputation for its advanced and expert terrain with open bowls, steep tree



The terrain in Kicking Horse is next level and so are the spectacular views. **Photo:** Maur Mere Media. **Below:** Local skier Odin Sinclair, ripping the freshies on day two of our visit to Kicking Horse. **Photos:** @goldenboyski. **Top Left:** Road Trippin' **Photo:** Laura Szanto

skiing and technical chutes spread across the mountain. It's also the only North American location on the Freeride World Tour.

The resort is 2.5hrs (270kms) west of Calgary and 14km from Golden. There are plenty of accommodation options in Golden and a regular shuttle services the mountain all day. There is also a good range of accommodation on the mountain with condos, luxury homes apartments and B&Bs. Our B&B, the Copperhorse Lodge, was a convenient five-minute walk to the gondola.

We arrived in late February, a week or so after a storm. It has been an inconsistent winter in Kicking Horse and it was looking low tide on the

lower mountain. "It's a different story up the top," Arkie said as we got on the gondola. "There's plenty of snow up there."

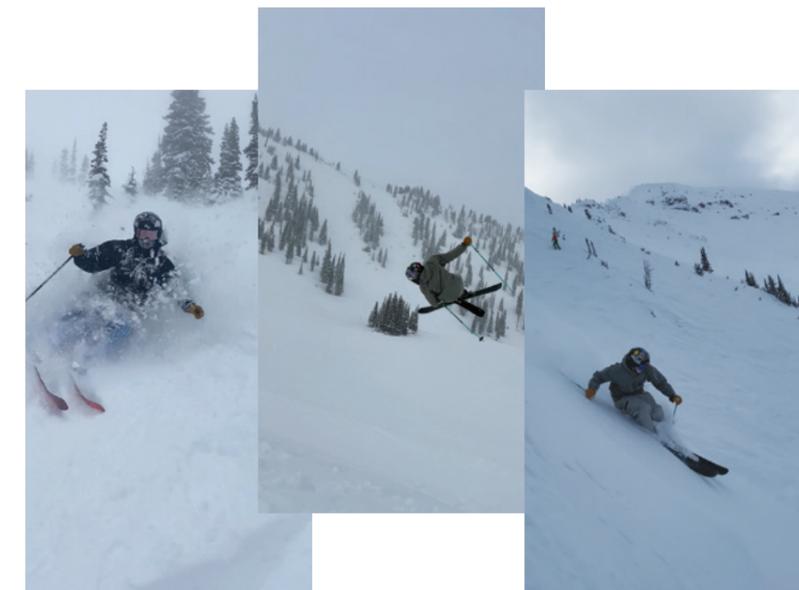
That wasn't surprising as the top elevation is 2500metres and Kicking Horse's Golden Express Gondola is one of the highest and longest in North America. Kicking Horse is located in the middle of the Selkirk and Purcell ranges and the views when you disembark the gondola are amazing, dramatic mountain peaks in each direction.

The inbounds terrain is spectacular, and Arkie was about to give us a tour of her favourites. She has a penchant for steeps, but I've asked her to go easy on us. Amanda hasn't skied since last

August and I was fresh off the plane from Japan having skied a heap of soft snow in mellow Japan terrain.

"Don't worry dad, you'll be right," she said with a laugh.

She did take it easy on our first run, dropping into the milder terrain on Crystal Bowl, the snow was cold and dry with a bit of wind-blown on top. That led to a groomed cat track called "It's a 10" that winds through the middle of the mountain with steep glades and chutes off the side before we hit a choice of groomers on the lower mountain. These were pretty mellow and well groomed, perfect to get the legs dialed in before venturing into more adventurous terrain.





Next lap Arkie lead us across CPR ridge which runs underneath the upper gondola. The south side has some great tree skiing while CPR north has chutes, open faces and more technical lines. The trees on the southside are fun, steep and open with a heap of different lines that drop off the ridge.

The first day gave us a real idea of what Kicking Horse is about, the four upper bowls and the ridgelines under the gondola and Stairway to Heaven chair accessing huge variety of terrain.

We received some snow on the first night we were there, a 10cm freshening up and that was followed by another 25-30cms the next night. It was still snowing lightly but was wet, borderline rain, as we walked to the gondola that morning.

However, it was a different world on the upper mountain, cold with a light wind, a few snow flurries and the snow underfoot was awesome. It was one of those special mornings. I'd just spent five weeks in Japan and skied more powder than I have in years but dropping into 30cm of fresh snow on steep terrain is next level.

As we wait in the lift line after skiing another 1300m of vertical it's obvious Kicking Horse is a core mountain and it attracts core skiers and snowboarders. Every skier has wide, freeride skis and are wearing technical outerwear. It's all shells, Arc'teryx, Burton AK and the North Face, not a Moncler logo or a white jacket and belt with black fur in sight. Refreshing to be in a line free of pretentious fashion 'flakes' and 'yo bro, did you see my run' type machismo – just chill people who love to ski, and can.

Golden is a classic small mountain town, its history tied to the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR – hence the name of the ski runs, not referring to keeping someone's heart going, although the runs do that too!) and the logging industry which still has a significant role in the towns' economy. Tourism is also growing, and summers can be busy, the mountains and the town's proximity to six national parks attracting a lot of people.

The community is made up of multi-generational families and relative newcomers lured by the mountains and the outdoors. 20-year-old Odin Sinclair

was born and raised in Golden, his mother a teacher at Golden school and his dad is a manager at the timber mill. Odin said he was fortunate to grow up in Golden: "It has that small-town vibe and it was special growing up here," Odin said. "You know everyone you went to school with and chances are your friends with most of them."

Odin, like most of his friends, started skiing when he was three years-old, and they all rip, as you'd expect from born and bred locals on a mountain like Kicking Horse. They ski together a lot and call themselves Golden Boys Ski, the classic local rat-pack.

"I always ski with the same people and as the years go on that group has been getting bigger and bigger," Odin said. "The terrain at Kicking Horse has really influenced our skiing. It's about freeride. I don't know many tricks but where I do better is the freeride aspect – powder, steep lines and cliff drops."

"The best thing about Golden and Kicking Horse is definitely the powder and views. It never gets old."

REVELSTOKE

Revelstoke is an easy 2.5-hour drive from Golden, through the spectacular Rogers Pass. In some sections of the drive the mountains on either side of the highway are near-vertical and after a snowfall the road is often closed for avalanche control. While it was snowing off and on during our trip it the rental AWD with snow tyres made for a cruisy run with ample opportunity to take in the view.

Revelstoke Mountain resort opened in 2007 and is one of the newest resorts in Canada. It is a short 5-minute drive from the town of Revelstoke, which has a variety of accommodation and regular shuttles to the mountain. We stayed on-mountain at Sutton Place Hotel, just steps from the gondola with a few food outlets nearby although it was an easy drive to town to explore other dinner options.

Revelstoke has a reputation for big mountain terrain, with high open alpine bowls, gladed tree-skiing, long cruisy



groomers and the longest vertical in North America at 1713m. And it is big with over 3000 acres of skiable terrain – most of which is off piste.

We arrived a couple of days after a good 30cms snowfall and by all reports the snow in the upper bowls was in great shape. Revelstoke is a mountain that takes a while to find your bearings and work out where to go and where to find the best snow. Fortunately, we had the perfect guide in Aussie pro skier Nat Segal, who has been living in Revelstoke since 2018 after spending the 10 years

prior to that travelling to compete in freeride events and film.

I hadn't seen Nat for a few years and was great to catch up and she was keen to show us around – she said it was a good excuse to ski in resort after spending a lot of time in the backcountry this season.

"You guys up for a short hike into the bowls," Nat asked as we headed up the gondola. "We can head over to Stoke Chair hike up Lemming Line into the north bowl, there'll be some good snow in there." Ok, sounds good.



Opposite: Arkie Elliss, fresh lines in Kicking Horse after 25cms fell on our second night in town. **Photo:** Daniel Soto. **This page:** Nat Segal, above, slicing an open face in the upper bowls at Revelstoke. **Below:** Nat dropping into one of Revvy's many chutes. **Photos:** Laura Szanto



Now, I'm not one for long boot-packs, but Lemming Line is an easy hike, the name obvious when you see the number of people doing it. After traversing around the ridge there are plenty options, the north-facing aspect of the bowl ensuring good snow quality.

We dropped into Powder Assault Bowl and the snow was surprisingly light and fluffy as it hadn't snowed for three days. "How good was that," I said to Nat.

"Yeah, it is north facing, and the SW winds often blow snow into the bowl and keep it fresh, for days after storms," she answered. "It also keeps the snow cold and soft during warm periods."

On the next lap Nat suggested we traverse further across the top of the bowl and drop into a steeper face further along. "Arkie and I can hit Cinco Chute which is pretty steep, bit of a Revy classic. If you guys don't want to do that, you can drop in earlier."

Amanda and I dropped in earlier and it was perfect, soft snow and not many tracks dropping into the trees. We stopped at the bottom and watched Arkie and Nat ski the chute, a steep line that opens up towards the bottom and onto the bowl.

Nat suggested we head to The Outpost for one of the best on-mountain burgers you'll ever eat which is no exaggeration. Nat has seen a lot of the world and skied a lot of places, so what is it about Revelstoke and the surrounding mountains she likes? "I love how close the resort is to town, it's 10 minutes from my house to the base of the gondola. Revelstoke is nestled between the Monashee and Selkirk mountains that have an amazing variety of skiing – that was the final sell for me. I love alpine skiing, but Revelstoke also has some of the best tree skiing and powder snow in the world. I feel like I am going to spend the rest of my life exploring these mountains."

After just a few days in Revelstoke I could see the attraction. The mountain has so much to offer while the town has a cool mountain vibe, it's relatively small with a population of around 9000, but has a lot going on with some great restaurants and bars and variety of retail.

There is a hub of creative people in town with a vibrant arts and music scene. "I stayed here because Revelstoke offers the perfect mix of resort and backcountry skiing and community I had been wanting," Nat said. "There's the mix of people working in resource industries (forestry and mining), on the railway, in tourism and my favourite part – and a lot of entrepreneurs. Some people are into mountain sports and other people live in the area to be close to nature. There is a really special community that takes some time to sink into.

Every year there are lots of fresh faces coming to work for the winter or summer and there is always a percentage of people who get hooked and stay."

FERNIE

The drive to Fernie required back tracking via Golden, but it was another awesome drive, although through different type of country, the road winding by cattle ranches and lakes, always with the mountains in the distance.

Fernie is located on the Elk River, the town and resort surrounded by the spectacular Lizard Range which tower above the resort and town. I hadn't been to Fernie for 25 years and had forgotten how good a mountain it is. It's more of an all-rounder than Kicking Horse and Revelstoke and the lower mountain caters well for beginners and intermediates.

However, there is no shortage of advance and expert terrain with five open bowls, plenty of tree skiing and long groomers. The peaks above the resort

loom large from the top of the higher chairlifts, constantly drawing your gaze. Fernie's upper bowls – Timber, Siberia, Currie, Lizard and Cedar – offer an excellent mix of on and off-piste terrain, Timber and Currie Bowls offering steeper lines while the popular Lizard Bowl is mostly intermediate.

We were staying on mountain at the ski-in ski-out Lizard Creek Lodge, with easy access for first lifts. We had fine weather for the first three days, spring-like with mild temps and a melt-freeze cycle on the lower mountain, so we stayed up high each morning, using the Timber Bowl Express quad chair to access the higher terrain.

On our first morning we thought it'd be firm off piste, so we headed over to Siberia bowl and skied Falling Star, a super long groomer with beautiful dry corduroy on the top half, turning hard-packed at lower elevations. It was the

perfect warm up, the bottom winding through the trees before taking us back to the base of the Timberbowl Chair and that became our opening run each day to fire up our legs.

Timber Bowl is accessed from the same chair but faces a little north and was in shadow, holding some fun dry chalky snow in the trees. Despite the mild daytime temps, the snow was pretty dry up high, with White Pass quad chair taking us to the best snow on the mountain in the north-facing Currie Bowl. It was our go-to off piste spot, the elevation and northerly direction holding cold winter quality snow with a soft layer of wind-blown on top. It has a great pitch with a variety of lines including some nice trees towards the bottom.

There's a lot of variety across Fernie's 2500 skiable acres and a number of linking cat tracks make it easy to get around. Mid-morning we'd head to the



Carter McMillan, cold smoke Fernie powder, earlier this winter. We missed out on snow like this, a cold storm arriving two days after we left, but Fernie's terrain guarantees quality skiing. **Photo:** Steve Reed/Courtesy of Fernie Alpine Resort. **Left:** While we arrived in Revelstoke a few days after the last snowfall, there were still plenty of pow turns off piste. Arkie Ellis, getting her fill. **Photo:** Laura Szanto.

Spectacular views from the top of Fernie's Polar Peak chair.
Photo: Reggae Ellis



other side of the resort towards Currie Bowl where there is plenty of off piste lines and some steep tree skiing. There is a good mix of fun on piste runs, including Linda's Run, a black run that has a perfect steep pitch on the upper half.

In many ways Fernie has an old school vibe, including a day lodge where you have the option of buying food or bringing your own lunch, which many local families do. Then there is the Griz Bar at the base of the mountain, which bills itself as Canada's number one après bar. This an old a school pub venue with live music and no minors from 3pm, cold beers, pub food, people dancing in ski boots and having fun. Every ski resort needs a bar like this!

The town of Fernie has to be one of the coolest towns in BC, with plenty of galleries, an array of retail shops, bars and restaurants. Fernie has maintained its heritage architecture and you have a real sense of the town's history as you stroll the streets.

There is close small-town community and we got a feel for that as our visit coincided with "Griz Days" a three-day festival that "honours the community's connection to the legendary Griz, the mythical creature said to bring snow and winter fun to the region."

It's a celebration of Fernie and the community and one of the biggest events on the calendar. The community was out in force across the weekend, the street parade, the "extreme Griz" competition, live music, and fireworks all attracting big crowds out to have a good time.

Skiing around the mountain all I could think was I want to be here on a powder day - it'd be awesome. We had a teasing taste on our final morning, a cold change dropping 5-10cm of light snow. We did our usual morning lap, a warm up on Falling Star - which I reckon that morning was as good as a groomer can get - before squeezing three laps in on Currie Bowl that served up untracked freshies and soft underneath.

"Imagine if we had another 10-20 on top of this," I said to Arkie. "I did when I was here in December," she replied. "It was awesome. You need to come back". I'm sure I will.

Our BC roadie was a quick two-week trip, four days in each resort which was just enough but left us wanting more. I'd love to make time to do the full Powder Highway circuit or at least hit Red Mountain and Whitewater as well... Next time.

Having the right vehicle is important for a winter trip like this and we rented a mid-sized SUV with all-wheel-drive with winter tyres from Budget, the car rental area at Calgary Airport conveniently located across the road from arrivals. Winter tyres or chains are mandatory for most routes in British Columbia from October 1st to April 30
