

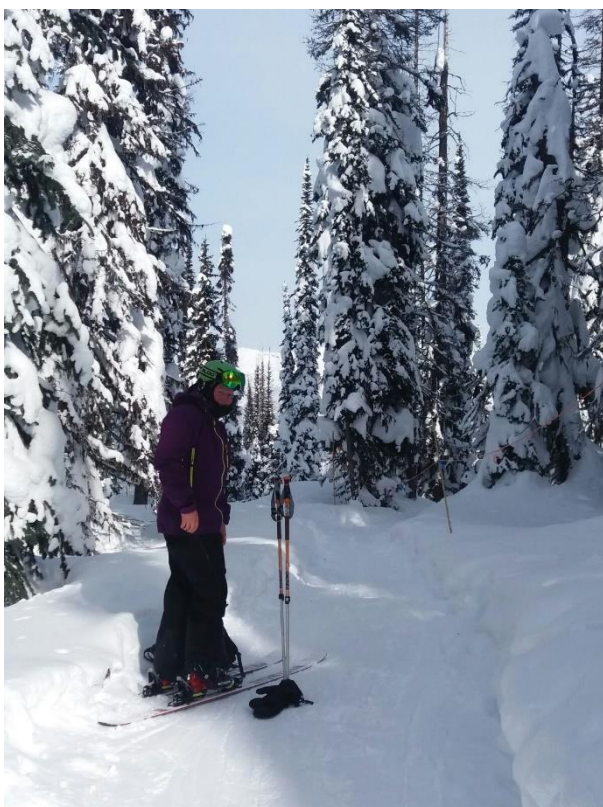
OLD BOYS' SKI POWDER IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

John Langridge

It all started after a conversation with a friend on a chair lift. Being of pensionable age and therefore slightly older than the average skier, the chat was about places to ski before your knees start to limit your choices. I had heard so much about 'The Powder Highway' in the Canadian Rockies. So I began to think of the best, and least expensive, way to get to these incredible ski areas in deepest British Columbia. There are many packages offered by various tour operators but I soon realised that, for me, the only way to see and ski what I wanted, would be to plan my own road trip.

I worked out that in a fortnight I could ski the three BC resorts which had captured my imagination the most - Fernie, Revelstoke, Kicking Horse - with a couple of days in and around Banff at the end of it all. Finding return London to Calgary direct flights under £500 on the web is not difficult. An overnight stop in Calgary Airport seemed the sensible choice after nine hours on the plane before setting off on the road. All I needed now was to persuade someone to come with me. My friend John Meaden and I quickly established that February was best for us both and, when we realised that since there is no 'half term madness' in Canada, the green light was on for the last fortnight in February.

The flight out was easy, the hotel stop at Calgary Airport was comfortable, cheap and even included free beer and food that night. You would think that finding an SUV with winter tyres in Calgary Airport would be a piece of cake: not so. It was very difficult to get past the car rental response of 'you'll be ok with all season tyres': definitely not correct. There would be many times in the trip when we were so grateful that we had persisted and insisted on winter tyres. If you are reading this and intending to pick up a car in Alberta to drive into BC in winter, do not, I repeat do not, accept any other tyres. God bless Alamo Car Rental in Calgary Downtown.



A long way from the piste in Fernie - John Langridge

The drive from Calgary to Fernie Alpine Resort was due south and parallel to the incredible Rockies. Nothing but huge blue skies across the Prairies to the east and fascinating tiny towns next to the freeway. It took three hours and was - 25°C all the way. The last hour was over Crow's Nest Pass which dropped into the heavenly spot that is Fernie, once a mining town but now a main street of turn of the century architecture with its charming buildings carefully preserved, with a big hill sitting behind.

We had chosen a catered chalet (almost non-existent in North America) run by Canadian Powder Tours (we liked the sound of the name as well). The chalet is run by the amazing Susan Mould who could not have been a better host, cook, organiser and incredible skier who offered free (yes - free) ski guiding all over the deceptively huge ski area that make up Fernie's wonderfully varied piste and off piste. Susan has over twenty years knowledge of every trail and she somehow manages to push your skiing that bit

further by taking you to places that you would never find on your own and would probably never contemplate either. Some of the guests in the chalet had been skiing with Susan for two weeks and she was still taking them to new routes. Fernie was very, very friendly: by the time we had pulled the bar down on every single chair ride the strangers next to us were already asking about us and introducing themselves. After three days of skiing dry, light powder in Fernie's glades and its five vast powder bowls in - 23°C, added to three evenings of great food and drink with all sorts of unusual chalet guests, John and I were grateful for a day off to make the five hour drive north to Revelstoke.

The drive weaved between the Purcells and the Kootenays. The final part from Golden to Revelstoke took us through the awe inspiring 50 miles of Rogers Pass in the midst of the Glacier National Park. A two lane road dotted with avalanche sheds through a narrow valley beneath massive mountains, chutes and dense forests with an average annual snowfall of ten metres. It is one of those places and one of those journeys that words cannot describe. Still reeling from the experience we dropped into the Canadian Pacific railway town of Revelstoke. Immediately you felt you had taken a significant step further into interior BC.



The never ending Critical Path to The Ripper Chair, Revelstoke - John Langridge



Snorkel Glades Revelstoke - the trail lived up to its name. - John Langridge

By mid-February this winter the town had already registered over 55 feet of snow (1971/72 season saw over 80 feet) which coupled with the longest vertical drop (1700m) in North America meant that we were quite looking forward to the next day's skiing. We had no fresh powder while we were in Revelstoke but we had three unforgettable and wonderful ski days there. Still only ten years old, it is the only resort in the world where you can take a lift, a cat or a heli from the same place. The opportunities were there but, to be honest, the gondola and two chairs gave us three days of non-stop exhilaration on and off piste through never ending steep runs of beautiful dry snow which kept perfectly from top to

bottom all day long through bowls, glades and pistes of whatever steepness. Such was the thrill factor that we hardly noticed that it was -28°C. The whole place was like nothing else we had ever skied.

Below this incredible ski hill lies the town of Revelstoke. It is far removed from the typical European ski resort and has a real 'frontier' feel to it: great bars, original eateries, quirky shops and full of incredibly friendly and welcoming folk such as the 'slednecks', crazy snowmobile riders who, deep in the forests, fire their machines uphill at speed. At night the town is full of huge parked up trucks and pick-ups each carrying a couple of snowmobiles. We loved it all!

After three days skiing the paradise of Revelstoke we left the next morning for the two hour drive back across the jaw dropping Rogers Pass to the town of Golden which lies below the steep ski dream that is Kicking Horse Mountain Resort. Golden itself was forged by the railway and the logging industry and still carries that characteristic today. There is accommodation in the resort itself but there is more choice and less expense in and around Golden. John and I stayed ten minutes out of town up a quiet snow bound track which led to Home Lodge, a B&B run by Lynn: 'stunning, plush and ridiculously good value' just about sums it up. Kicking Horse has become world famous and with good reason. There is a lot of scary skiing here. Again the snow was cold and beautifully dry from top to bottom.



The famous Stairway to Heaven or more accurately the Stairway to Whitewall, Kicking Horse - John Langrisge

The two North Ridges are cluttered with opportunities to seriously test anyone's off piste credentials. On the other side of the ski area lies the Stairway to Heaven chair for limitless opportunities of ungroomed trails or you can boot up for ten minutes to the top of the seemingly vertical WhiteWall. After a very steep start, the drop opens into the glorious Feuz Bowl with a long, long ski down mixing fast groomers and off piste all the way to the bottom of the gondola. With a couple of blue exceptions, pretty much the top half of Kicking Horse skiing is dominated by steep trails on and off piste. It has the fourth highest vertical drop in North America and all the skiing funnels back to the Golden Eagle Express gondola which takes you back to the really interesting stuff in under ten minutes. Such is the steepness and length of the trails here that even with breaks it is very easy to clock up over ten thousand metres of descent in a day.

Suddenly the time came for us to leave beautiful British Columbia and head across the provincial border into Alberta, with two days skiing around Banff and then down to Calgary and home. Our

fortnight cost us £2600 each and that included everything - flights, car hire and fuel, all hotels, chalets and B&Bs, 11 days of lift passes, food and drink. Cheap at the price!