

Mistaya Mountain Hop

Contributed by Adam Howard Photos by Chuck Waskuch

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text by Adam Howard

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We boot over a small scree field to gain the saddle on the shoulder of 10,407' Mt. Baker. Standing on the Continents Divide, the Wapta rises up to meet us from the southeast. Behind us, and three miles below, is our home for the week-

Mistaya Lodge.

Named after nearby 10,100' Mistaya Mountain, the lodge is barely distinguishable in the surrounding spruce forest from this vantage point. We can see nearly all of the upper Wildcat Basin that is nestled between Banff and Yoho National Parks. The basin is a full day's ski from Bow Lake, over the Wapta, and completely untouchable via snowmobile. But for the guests at Mistaya, it's a mere 20-minute helicopter flight from Golden, British Columbia. The lodge sits at the toe of seven glaciers. Perched above a large cliff that drops into the Wildcat Creek valley below, it accesses 38 square kilometers of couloirs, glaciers, snowfields and glades.

My toes are feeling better, which must mean they're frozen. And even though it's at least 20 degrees Fahrenheit the little piggies need to get moving. It's our first day of touring and there's six inches of dry new snow over a creamy wetter layer. We decide that dropping 2600' vertical and doing a second lap on the wind-protected Wildcat Glacier would quench both the touring and turning soul. It will also give us the chance to catch up with the other group that is still ascending below us.

The upper Wildcat basin above Mistaya is renowned for its varied terrain. It can easily accommodate both those looking to pound vertical, maximizing turns, and those looking to tour more moderate terrain. The aspirations of our group of six are somewhere between the two classifications—we're all fit and experienced but not pushing any type of agenda. The second group is more diverse and includes both beginners and novices.

As we yank skins from skis for the descent, our guide for today, Lily Lambert instructs everyone to pay close attention to the terrain. She'll lay a course and ask that we ski to the right or left of her tracks as she weaves through the glacier's hazards. No one in our group has ever skied with a guide and at first it seems strange not to be making our own calls. Still, there are no questions for Lily.

Over the last month and a half there have been two horrific avalanches that most notably have resulted in 13 deaths in B.C. It turns out that Lily, along with several other guides with Canadian Mountain Holidays (Lily also guides for CMH, Canada's largest helicopter skiing outfit), responded to the avalanche on Roger's Pass that killed seven high school students only three weeks before we arrived. By the time they touched down at the accident site it was for body recovery.

"It was really tough you know, eh," she says, shaking her head. There was a silent pause. "Well, let's ski."

"Ski to the left of my tracks and stop where I stop, eh?" Her thick French Canadian accent brings a smile to everyone in the group and snaps me back from visions of the Roger's Pass accident. She points down the fall line with her pole and it's clear that every hidden crevasse on this 25-degree slope is etched in her mind. With Lily on the clock it's easy for our group to concentrate largely on our turns.

Matt, from Anchorage, drops deep into each turn, his upper body perfectly squared to the fall line. Mari, his fiancée, goes even deeper and it seems impossible that she doesn't bounce her kneecap off the top-sheets of each ski. Katie, from Bozeman, springs from turn to turn with the alacrity of a tango dancer linking tight arcs. She makes twice the turns of

everyone else in the group. Until now we've only been able to check out each other's gear and gauge the fitness of our new friends on the skin up. Now we revel in the talent of everyone in the group-even the randonneé skiers Mike and Chuck who take up the rear.

On our second lap we run into Ron Blaue at the junction of Wildcat and Ophidian glaciers. One of the owners of Mistaya he's out checking the snowpack. During the week he and the two guides take turns cycling between the two groups of skiers. Though each guide will assess the snow conditions moment to moment, another is assigned snow safety duty. Today Ron's on snow safety duty. Each day he, Lily and Mike Lodge will dig pits and check snow depth on the glaciers for the following day's tour. Ron and Lily discuss the Ophidian Glacier approach-tomorrow's tour-as we catch our breath before the final pitch. He flashes a smile and a few words of encouragement to the group before quickly moving on to finish his work so he can hurry back to the Lodge and help prepare dinner.

Mistaya is surrounded by a 400-vertical-foot amphitheater sparsely treed with spruce. We put the skins on one last time and ascend what Ron calls the Red Cliff area, where the trees tend to hold more new snow than the open glaciers. Quickly carving the gladed powder, we drop down onto the unnamed lake where the cold snow provides enough grip against p-Tex for us to kick and glide a few hundred meters to the lodge. There is just enough time to hit the wood fired steam room to wash up and thaw toes before dinner.

It's the second night at the lodge and already we've settled into the routine - eat, sleep ski. Ron started the Lodge with Jane Girvan in 1988. Over 15 years, they've refined the day's skiing experience and the evening's relaxation at the lodge into a science. Partners in both life and business, one will stay at the lodge with the group and guides, while the other is at home near Golden running the business, facilitating arrivals and departures from the helicopter hanger.

Every detail is accounted for, right down to where each of several hundred novels, guidebooks, histories and other books sit on the shelf. At dinner Mike, who guides here in both the winter and summer, shares a joke about moving a book in the case just to see if Ron would notice. He did. But the precision of the operation is why Mike says he chooses to guide here eight months a year.

As we sit in the afterglow of a four-course meal, the warmth of the wood fire has each guest in a nearly catatonic state. Jazz plays on the stereo, powered by the micro-hydro at the outlet of the lake, making the lodge as modern as any home, minus flush toilets. Two days of successful tours douse the early jitters shared by a few. And even though there are two distinct touring groups by day, based on speed and experience, everyone congregates at the boardroom-style dinner table to share the conversation about the day's adventure.

Liz and Bernard Swan sit across the table and have just the energy to tell tales of adventures telemark skiing in Scotland, where their journey to Mistaya began. They spin stories about a traditional Scottish dance and supper they attend each year after the Braemare Telemark Festival at Ski Glenshee.

"Telemark skiing has really become part of the ski culture there," Bernie says after a sip of fine Scotch he's brought along from home. And though we're not dancing tonight, as I look around the room at new friends, I realize that in spite of our skiing experience ours is a shared ski culture. We've traveled from Alaska, Montana, Colorado, Scotland, Vermont and New Hampshire and though only the skiing styles are more diverse than the personalities, the common denominator is skiing.

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