

Revelstoke now holds the bragging rights to the longest lift-serviced vertical on the continent—and so much more.

BY IAN MERRINGER // PHOTOS BY HENRY GEORGI

RECORD

REVELSTOKE FACTS & STATS

THE NUMBERS

Vertical: 1,713 metres
Named runs: 40
Lifts: 4 (1 gondola, 2 high-speed quads, 1 Magic Carpet)
Terrain: 10% beginner, 43% intermediate, 27% advanced, 20% expert
Powder: Plenty (12-18 metres/season) plus hike-to, cat- and heli-skiing on site

BEDS

In addition to the Hillcrest Hotel (www.hillcresthotel.com) and the new Nelsen Lodge, Revelstoke is home to many affordable lodging options, listed at www.revelstokemountainresort.com.

GETTING THERE

- » WestJet (www.westjet.com) has daily non-stop service from Toronto to Kelowna with connecting service from points across Canada. Kelowna to Revelstoke is an easy two-hour drive.
- » Hawkair (www.hawkair.ca) has non-stop flights from Calgary right into Revelstoke four days a week.
- » The spectacular five-hour drive from Calgary passes Banff, Lake Louise, Golden and Rogers Pass.

More info: B.C. Tourism, www.hellobc.com

Skiin' Ian (in photo): Merringer

HOLDER

I was annoying even myself. We were driving through the Okanagan Valley and radio stations were coming in and out of reception with every new peak we passed, making it impossible to listen to any of the formulaic jingles from start to finish.

My finger was hurting from hitting the Seek button—more evidence that I was suffering from late-onset attention deficit disorder. But worse, I was surely driving the guy beside me mad. The problem was, he was technically my boss, this magazine's esteemed editor-in-chief, the man who would eventually be hacking at this story with his red pen. Now, at 135 pounds

Iain is not your typically intimidating guy, but isn't it those initially non-threatening ones you have to watch out for? I turned the radio off and drummed the steering wheel.

Our indefatigable editorial team was heading to check out the biggest news in North American skiing last winter: Revelstoke Mountain Resort. The forecast suggested the reporting would be in-depth, but Iain and I had never tripped together and I wanted to make sure I impressed the man who was ever-capable of making a fool out of me with a few strokes of his pen, or worse, assigning me to the Ontario beat.

Iain eventually fell asleep (so much for indefatigable) and I kept a watch ahead, expecting Mount Mackenzie to appear extending skyward. Revelstoke Mountain Resort had recently seized on this formerly underachieving local ski hill and redefined it with the two words that are coming to define skiing in the 21st century: massive investment.

With the swift addition of a gondola and high-speed quad, Revelstoke announced its presence on the scene for 2007-08 with inaugural season stats of a 1,443-metre vertical drop, 607 hectares of mainly strong intermediate and expert terrain, and four



The cushiest cat in Canada.



alpine bowls glazed with an average annual snowfall of 12 to 18 metres. (That's metres, not feet.) Impressive numbers, even before last summer's (downward) extension of the gondola, which gave Revelstoke the highest vertical drop on the continent at 1,713 metres. The addition of The Ripper high-speed quad doubled Revelstoke's area by opening up a huge swath of the north flank to mostly medium-pitch tree-skiing.

All of which meant I would need a good night's sleep in the Sandman Hotel at the edge of town. Word is, on a moonlit night you can look south from town and see Mount Mackenzie (doomed to soon become known as Revelstoke Mountain no doubt). But travelling with the boss as I was, he got the room with a view (the parking lot) and I got the room with a window opening onto the indoor pool courtyard and the Sandman's own Denny's restaurant full of sledheads.

★★★★★

Sports psychologists have a name for the mental state you descend—or more properly ascend—into when your attention is wholly

focused on a compelling task, such as carving up a fresh alpine bowl or negotiating through a stand of altitude-stunted fir trees nearly buried by fresh snow. They call this the state of flow. There are a lot of markers of this mental state, but a common sign that you have entered it is that you will find yourself repeating some song lyric or phrase over and over again in your head, as though your brain had found something simple to keep itself out of the way while your body went on athletic autopilot.

Too often the phrase bouncing around in my head is some advertising ditty, proving marketers are diabolically good at what they do, but at Revelstoke I was lucky. Pushing off into the North Bowl, the opening strains of "Big Boss Man" filled my head. It's a song that's been covered by everyone from Elvis to Conway Twitty to the Grateful Dead, but it belongs to Jimmy Reed, the pioneering force of the electric blues who popularized it in 1960.

The shuffling groove is hypnotic, perfect for a background sidetrack for a day of hopping from side to side—but the lyrics are just as good, mostly because there are only a few of

them: "Big Boss Man, Don't you hear me when I call? You ain't so bad, You just tall that's just about all."

It's a good song, which might be why I settled on it. But maybe my subconscious was trying to help me sort things out. Who was this threateningly tall but ultimately phony boss man? Iain, the little scrapper who seems like he'd be happier climbing trees looking for honey than sitting in front of the *Ski Canada* computer? Not likely. How about Revelstoke itself? Much has been made about its quick ascent to the top of the vertical-rise rankings. But did it have what it takes to stand its ground in the competitive B.C. market?

Another boss man with some opinions on just that joined us midway through the morning. Paul Skelton talks as hard as he skis. As the former mountain operations manager at Whistler, Skelton knows how to handle large numbers of skiers, and he's the man investors (himself included) have put on the hill as president of RMR to make sure prospective buyers of base-area real estate want to come back for more.



As I watched Skelton power over a set of traverse tracks less adventurous skiers had carved into the bottom of North Bowl on their way back to the piste, I thought back to the huge photo of Skelton I had seen on an early 2008 cover of *The Globe and Mail's* Report on Business. In that photo he had been holding tele skis, but now his heels were locked, much like his determination that people will buy property to finance the insta-resort that has taken shape on Mount Mackenzie.

His sales pitch? Revelstoke offers one-stop shopping for a hitherto ignored breed of skier, the kind who wakes up in the morning and wants a truly deep and delicious choice: ski the lifts, jump on a cat or board a helicopter.

Revelstoke Mountain Resort isn't just four lifts, it's also three adjacent bowls worth of cat-skiing and 200,000 hectares (roughly equal to a mountain range) of heli-skiing. The Revelstoke revelation was that there were enough skiers out there with sufficiently advanced skills and finances to make a business model based on the synergy of lift, heli- and cat-skiing being easily available to the visiting skier. Runs

tracked out? Take a heli. Heli grounded by weather? Prowl for powder in a cat.

It's an exciting idea, and by buying Selkirk Tangiers Helicopter Skiing, Revelstoke acquired for itself one of the most established names in heli-skiing. Skiers going out for the day with Revelstoke Cat Skiing gain alpine elevation thanks to the resort's lifts, which highlights the idea that the owners are after a synergy of the three types of skiing feeding off each other. The recently announced Guides Bureau at the new base aims to make it easy for curious skiers to pick up a day of cat- or heli-skiing as a walk-on bonus to their holiday.

But what about that new base? Skelton excused himself at the summit by explaining that he was nearly late for a meeting with the city council about the planned development of the base area. We followed him, at an increasing distance, down to the base lodge which last winter was still above the site of last summer's major real-estate efforts—including the building of the resort's new flagship hotel, Nelsen Lodge.

After more than a vertical kilometre of

the steepest sustained cruising runs I've ever skidded my way down in tele-gear, we arrived at the bottom in time to see Skelton already on his way back out the door, cell phone to his ear and marketing assistant at least three steps behind him.

I remember thinking at the time that he would likely be getting exactly what he wanted from city council, but an autumn of economic turmoil makes me as uncertain as an economist about the bigger picture at Revelstoke. Last year *The Globe* reported that the plan for Revelstoke was to invest \$1-billion over 15 years. But \$1-billion was infinitely easier to come by back when the plans were still leaving blue smudges on the busy fingers of architects.

In the days of family-owned ski hills and diversified real-estate interests, you didn't have to worry quite so much about how the collapse of banks and mortgage loans in the U.S. or Europe might affect your choice of ski hill for the spring.

But even in this season of headline hysteria, mountains must be considered durable things. Only a third of the planned lifts are built thus far however they are firmly rooted in concrete. And if the real-estate prospects should slow while the weekly stock-market graphs continue to look like altimeter readings after a day on Revelation gondola, what has begun at Revelstoke will not go away.

Revelstoke's investors might need a few days in Selkirk's coveted A-star four-person helicopters to cheer them up, but then again the helicopters might all be full because advanced skiers have a new home in North America, one that seems intent on giving them just what they want. Whether that means a lifetime's worth of heli-terrain, a cat operator at the base lodge, or a mountain of alpine bowls, deep trees and steep cruisers.

Jimmy Reed served me well at Revelstoke. His driving beat kept a good rhythm for the quick turns on the steep terrain, but I see now that the lyrics weren't actually suggestive of anything.

Despite making me drive both ways and taking the good room, my boss doesn't compare to the type of bosses suffered by Reed, who worked in a foundry, a meat-packing plant and for a record company whose owner would sometimes jet off to Vegas with the payroll money.

And as for Revelstoke, unlike Reed's boss, it's a whole lot more than just tall. ❄️