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AUTUMN 2022
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Full Nelson

Finding white gold in British Columbia Interior's mining country

WORDS MATT CABRE

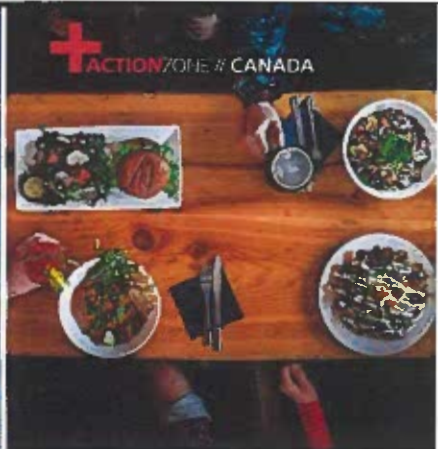
First impressions count for a lot, and it's fair to say mine – of Whitewater Ski Resort – was one I won't forget. Every car in the parking lot at the base was a pickup of Monster Truck proportions, almost every man sported a wholesome beard, and everyone seemed to know each other, as enthusiastic greetings echoed between the enormous vehicles.

Those 4x4s were no show ponies either. Whitewater gets hammered by over 40 feet of snow annually, and we'd have certainly struggled to make the 25-minute drive up from Nelson, the former silver mining town on the shores of Kootenay Lake, had we not hired the same. Whitewater has the feel of Nelson's unofficial church, to which its residents loyally make their pilgrimage every weekend. When I made it into the ramshackle lift pass office, the first thing that caught my eye was a notice warning against disturbing wolverine habitats. Huh. "Should be fun up there today?" I asked the lady behind the counter, hopefully. "Oh you betcha!" she replied with a chuckle. "First time here? You're in for a treat."

A CULINARY HEAVYWEIGHT

Nelson, and her 11,000 inhabitants (almost half of which own a season pass at Whitewater) are situated a long way from any major population centres, even by British Columbian standards, where 'the next town' can be several hours' rugged drive. Some 270km to the south over the border is Spokane, Washington, while – in February – a drive from either Vancouver or Calgary might take over 10 hours.





PHOTOS TOM WILSON, ALPHEITRED MOUNTAIN RESORT



* Obscene amounts of snow, friendly locals, world class eateries and the odd wolverine to side-step... BC has it all

42 skiclub.co.uk

With no shortage of bigger-name ski resorts on their doorstep, relatively few are likely to put in the extra hard yards to Nelson. I was in no doubt that Nelson's residents are in no rush to change this state of affairs.

In spite of its seclusion, the town has undergone something of a hippie and foodie revolution. With over 80 restaurants occupying many of its restored heritage buildings, Nelson claims more restaurants per capita than New York City, and we certainly found a winning variety of cuisines I wasn't used to sampling on a ski trip. Understated veggie-heavy South Indian Tamil Kitchen, refined Italian Marzano, cosy Japanese joint Red Light Ramen, and healthy breakfast café The Yellow Deli (co-owned and run by a community that produced much of its ingredients on its local farm), were all winners.

Our favourite was Cantina de Centro, a lively Mexican bar-restaurant, whose Mescal-powered cocktails and medley of quesadillas, tostadas and tacos were several cuts above the sloppy fare one normally encounters in ski town 'Mexicans'. Likewise, the culinary offerings on the hill were head and shoulders above what I've found at most North American mountain restaurants. Whitewater even has its own cookery book!

Around town, I was struck by the openness of Nelson's people. Despite Canada still very much feeling the effects of Covid, and us being very obviously not-from-round: here the car hire logo in foot-high lettering down the side of our rented pickup trucks were the giveaway (if nothing else), we were met with enthusiasm. It was all "How was it up there today boys?" and something bordering on amusement that we'd bothered to come all this way on learning of our provenance.

SO, HOW WAS IT UP THERE?

It may be small. Its three rickety lifts servicing just over 600m of vertical, but we found it plenty mighty. This is a technical mountain with oodles of highly complex terrain jam-packed in there, offering a challenge quite unlike anything us Brits would encounter closer to home in the Alps, and all caked in obscene amounts of snow. The trees resembled snow-ghosts, so heavily were their limbs laden with white goods.

Kerr McEwan, a Scottish transplant and ripping now-local freeskiier - whose parents had swapped Glasgow for Nelson (no-brainer!) a decade prior - would show us the terrain and how to ski it. Light-of-foot and fast-of-pivot seemed to be the key for Kerr: fitting as he did from one marshmallow to the next in the pillowy playgrounds off Trash traverse.

Easier said than done when you're carrying several kilograms of lockdown timber, are still digesting an additional bellyful of Nelson's aforementioned fine fare, and haven't skied for two tortuous years to boot. The thighs got a severe going over and the temperature rose several degrees under the collar during a first run spent blundering gracelessly down the powdery pinball machine, desperately trying to keep up. Not content with standard-issue humiliation, Kerr then began toftily tossing 360s and backflips off everything in sight.

By the second lap, in some unfathomably steep and tight trees in the double black zones to skier's right of Glory Ridge Chair, the mojo began to slowly return.

The following day we picked our way up onto Blasters Ridge, by way of a 20-minute bootpack above the ski area boundary. Here we found a cornucopia of short, sharp, cornice-lined chutes (corniceopia?), ranging from the relatively straightforward to the downright shudder

inducing. It was here that we made lap after lap until our legs ran out of juice. We felt you could easily spend a whole week, if not a whole season, exploring this ridge alone and not make the same descent twice, so rich and varied was its bounty.

As we slurped down a few gallons of Nelson Brewing Company's Faceplant Winter Ale and Hooglan Pale Ale that evening, we wondered aloud - farcically - if we'd be as good as Kerr if we're to do exactly that. We recovered dignity in time to reflect that of course we would not, but it'd sure be fun to give it a go.

\$10 CATSKIING, ANYONE?

For a (slightly) different vibe, we made the one-hour drive to RED Mountain Resort, another highly rated but similarly low-key mountain. It too presents a stiff challenge, with plenty of steep but markedly more open terrain and it too bangs the anti-corporation drum, having raised around \$1 million in a 2016 crowdfunding campaign titled 'Fight The Man. Own The Mountain'. To keep the resort independent and out of the hands of the US conglomerates.

With less snowfall, more sunshine, more lifts, more runs - plenty of which are blue and green - and a recently opened and lovely (albeit slightly incongruous) Josie Hotel, RED's appeal seemed rather broader than Whitewater. With its proximity to Castlegar - the tiny local airport accessible from Vancouver or Calgary - this felt like a great place to start a Nelson trip and get some miles in the legs before going deeper into the Kootenays.

Not that the friendly vibe and steep terrain wasn't very much in evidence here too. The resort runs a free ski guide programme, staffed by volunteers eager to share their love for and knowledge of RED's three mountains. Ours (a jovial double-act of Greg and Jon, both local doctors) were a hoot, eager to compare notes on the ski experience across the Atlantic.

RED also runs resort-based cat skiing (shuttered during our visit in February 2022 due to Covid), where - for just \$10 a go - those eager to get their first taste of cat skiing are whisked up to Mount Kirkup and left to have at it: unquestionably the cheapest cat skiing available on the planet!

Judging by the standard of skiing (ferocious, despite bony conditions) from locals both male and female - some as young as eight - competing in one of RED's many freeskii contests beneath our skis as we went up Motherlode Chair, the soul of skiing is very much alive and well in this corner of the Canadian Rockies.

Factfile

From the UK fly to Castlegar - via Vancouver - with Air Canada (various routes, you may need to overnigh in Vancouver on the way out only). Whitewater and RED are located 40 and 50 minutes' drive from Castlegar, for car hire in Castlegar, Matt used Practical (practical.ca), whose owner - charmingly - met them at the airport to hand over their trucks.

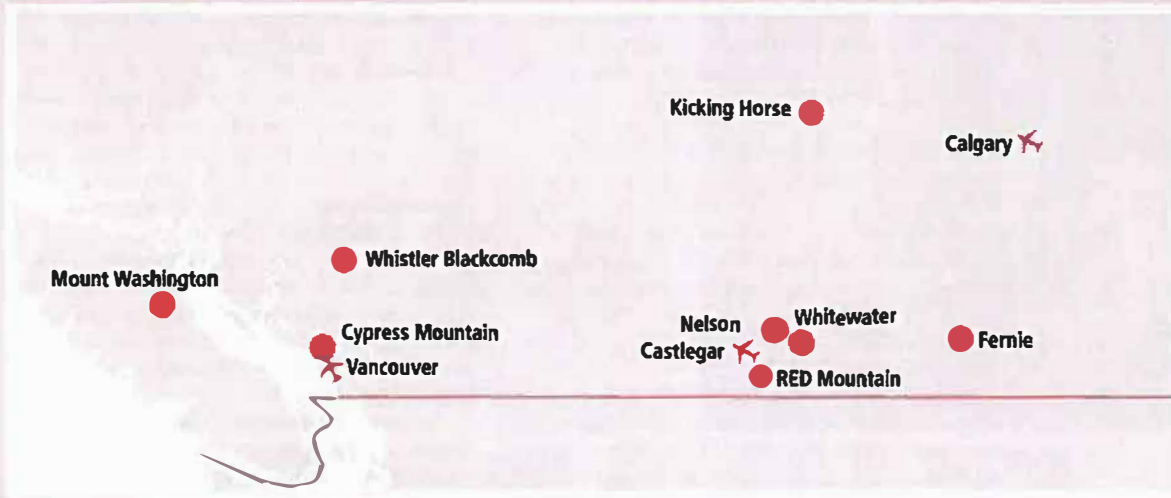
SKI & STAY

For information on Whitewater and RED Mountain, and/or accommodation and ski pass options, visit skiwatwater.com and [hellorbc.com](http://redmountain.com. For more info on skiing in British Columbia visit <a href=). Check out Malby Ski (malbyski.com), the BC specialists, for tailor-made trips (and read all about its founder, Nickie Malby, back on page 20).



▲ Whistler Blackcomb has 8,000 acres of prime mountain terrain

FIVE MORE EASY-ACCESS BRITISH COLUMBIA RESORTS



WHISTLER BLACKCOMB

The classic. Located 75 miles north of Vancouver, two mountains, Whistler and Blackcomb (pictured), rise up out of the valley with 8,000 acres of prime mountain terrain, including 16 alpine bowls, more than 200 marked runs and three glaciers; it has the most above-the-tree line skiing in North America.

whistlerblackcomb.com

CYPRESS MOUNTAIN

Not to be confused with Cypress Hill, a '90s American hip hop group, this ski resort is located just 30 minutes from downtown Vancouver. It's local and small, but on a good-snow day there are some fun runs to be had – just make sure you head there mid-week, because at weekends it can get busy.

cypressmountain.com

MOUNT WASHINGTON

Located on the eastern edge of Vancouver Island, its seaside location, along with some classic orographic precipitation, delivers the resort's epic annual snowfall: it averages 11.5 metres

of snow a season. It's the tree skiing that defines this place – check out the Gold Rush Glades, with its 100 acres of perfectly spaced trees.

mountwashington.ca

FERNIE

Okay, the transfer from Calgary airport is a wee longer than the ones we've mentioned above (around three hours), but that's still not far in North American road-trip terms. Located in the Lizard Range of the Canadian Rockies, Fernie is known for its steep, gladed, ungroomed slopes. Fun.

skifernie.com

KICKING HORSE

It's around the same distance from Calgary as Fernie, and a few miles up the hill from the blue-collar town of Golden. Don't be fooled by the seemingly limited options shown on the piste map – this is a must-do for any skilled skier. It has 85 chutes alone and almost the entire area of the upper bowls is freeride terrain.

kickinghorseresort.com