

FEEL THE SCRATCH-CAT

BY LESLIE ANTHONY PHOTOS BY HENRY GEORGI

By the time we reached the snowcat on New Year's eve, buried high on a mountainside under six feet of prime Selkirk powder, we'd been in the lull for three days. Knocking in one touring track after another up various logging roads girding the mountain, we'd been trying in vain to rescue the stranded machine from the lofty perch it had occupied since just after Christmas.

Ostensibly we were here to help out friends who were getting their feet wet—and their wallets soaked—in a recently incorporated snowcat operation. But after three days of knee-deep trail breaking, it wasn't all benevolence and noblesse on our parts; we wanted the damn thing to take us skiing.

It was, in fact, a full month-and-a-half later, on a return visit, that we finally put P-tex to piste and skied the luxuriously treed, overhead-pow slopes of White Grizzly Adventures in Meadow Creek, British Columbia. By then the cat was running fine, the operation was booked with skiers complaining of "too many face-shots," Craig Kelly was there on an extended photo shoot, and there was no hint behind the smiles of customers and operators alike of the ardor required to kick-start the whole thing.

Indeed, when they'd incorporated their nascent snowcat business, it's unlikely that Brad and Carole Karafil could have imagined their opening days would be scuttled by a surfeit of snow, but that's what happened. The cat shut down and a hydraulic glitch wouldn't allow it to start again. Although it was snowing like hell, it should have been easy to drive a snowmobile with a tool kit up to the big machine and spark it back to life. But it didn't stop snowing for several days, and by then it was too deep and light for even the most powerful snowmobiles, which wallowed and turtled pathetically on the steep and deep trail. Fortunately, our group arrived with a quiver of climbing skins and abundant energy, and the snowmobiles were ultimately able to follow the trail we laboriously packed up to the cat.

Unfortunately, the cat problem wasn't solved by our breaking trail to it; snowmobiles could rally upward with parts, but the behemoth resisted all attempts to coax it to life. And though we had fun skinning around the Selkirks and eating Carole's five-star cooking for four days, eventually we had to move on.

Thankfully, and despite the dire potential of a cat-ski business without a cat, the problems eventually ended. White Grizzly was up and running by the third week of January. Snowfall continued to be remarkable, as well as remarkably stable. The cozy—now finished—lodge was going over well, and the gourmet fare was eliciting daily kudos. Customers were ecstatic and had already rebooked for the following winter. Brad believes cat skiing should really only cost around \$175 per day, but the unreliability of older cats (which is all most start-ups can afford), the constant servicing required, and high cost of replacement parts, drives the price up. For instance, aluminum paddles for the snowcat treads—the vertical



Eight lives left.

metal panels that actually dig into the snow—break at the rate of two or three a day, especially during crucial early season road building. As a result, they have to be stockpiled in great abundance; at least 50 to 60 at close to \$100 each. No small potatoes to add to your overhead.

And speaking of overhead, when we revisited in the second week of February, White Grizzly was humming in epic conditions. The slots forming the open glades of the upper mountain, framed by the needle-like spires of prime B.C. timber, were bordering on sick. Pillowdrops through the trees were much more than that, and even the cut-blocks offered silk-smooth riding that added up to about 16,000 feet per day. The same legs that had been worn by fruitless upward trail-breaking a month before now burned with the warmth of gravity's welcome bitch-slap.

When he wasn't driving his chugging machinery like a proud trucker with a rig full of tobacco, Brad was busy writing down daily totals from the overloaded storm-board of his mid-mountain weather station, and had almost put the struggles of the past month out of his mind. He was philosophical about the random, insolent nature of the mechanical felines in his newly chosen profession. "What can you do?" he shrugged one afternoon as I sat next to him in the cab while we rumbled up the mountain in the dim light of another deluge of flakes. "They're freakin' cats." ☘

White Grizzly Adventures, Meadow Creek, B.C.
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www.whitegrizzly.com or email snowcats@direct.ca

SEASON: mid-December to late March

\$285 US/day includes lodging, meals, and skiing for up to 12 people

CLOSEST AIRPORTS: Castlegar, B.C., and Spokane, WA

VERTICAL: 13,000-16,000 feet per day, snow conditions permitting

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