

Go for peak performance

experience: Mt. Baker is perfect for ski and snowboard enthusiasts

BY SUZANNE MORPHET, SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE FEBRUARY 13, 2012



Mt. Baker is not your typical ski resort, as it boils down the experience to skiing and snowboarding with no extra frills. — submitted Photos

From my home near Victoria, Mt. Baker looms large on the horizon, like a white knight in icy armour, guarding Washington State. Despite its formidable grandeur, it beckons to outdoor enthusiasts summer and winter.

A few weekends ago we heeded the mountain's call, loaded up the car and headed south for some cross-border skiing.

Good thing we weren't looking for a smaller version of Whistler or even Mt. Washington because Mt. Baker is not your typical ski resort. Just the opposite in fact.

It's in the Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest and is operated by a private company for the benefit of the local community, according to Gwyn Howat, operations manager.

There's no accommodation on the mountain, there's no après ski scene, no night skiing and no

corporate advertising. Anywhere. “We even make the Pepsi guys take their logos off the Pepsi machines,” Howat confides.

There’s also no television in any of the three day lodges, no video games and no hard liquor.

“It’s all about skiing and snowboarding,” she adds unapologetically. “When people come here we don’t want them to feel like they’re just in another city in the mountains, but that they’re truly in a mountain environment.”

With two teenagers in tow, we’ve no quibbles with any of that, but I am a little worried about one thing: tree wells.

Mt. Baker gets more snow than any other ski operation in North America — an average of almost 18 metres a year.

It even holds the world record for snowfall — in the winter of 1998-99 it got dumped on by 28.9 metres! (by comparison, Whistler and Mt Washington get between 10 and 11 metres each per year.)

The more snow, the deeper the well that forms around trees. Fall head first into a tree well and you can easily suffocate.

I wouldn’t normally worry about the risks of skiing — I don’t go out of bounds — but Mt. Baker’s trail map is pretty blunt.

‘THINK’ it says, ‘Because as a visitor here, you will encounter an ever-changing and at times severe mountain environment. Your safety is NOT guaranteed.’ (Their emphasis, not mine.) There’s even a little diagram of what a tree well looks like and a website you can go to for more information.

Any fear I have quickly dissipates when we arrive in bright sunshine and springlike temperatures. Still, my husband and daughter kindly point out trees that look like potential deathtraps as we pass over them from various chair lifts. What’s not amusing is the lifts themselves – none of the eight quads have safety bars, which seems a little odd given the culture of safety here. (I learn later they’re not required in the U.S.) We lean back and avoid looking down.

The scenery offers plenty of distraction. Mountains rise up in every direction, most with jagged peaks, but there’s one rounded mountain with gentle contours covered in squiggly lines left behind by out-of-bounds boarders.

Where we ski is not on Mt. Baker itself, but on a serrated ridge that connects Mt. Baker with Mt. Shuksan. Strangely enough, it’s impossible to see Mt. Baker from much of the ski area. The top of Chair 1 has the best views of this active volcano (on cold, clear days you can see steam plumes) but it actually looks more impressive from Vancouver or Victoria than up close.

What is impressive is the variety of runs. “People come from all over the world for the terrain,” says Howat. “It’s small but condensed.” The groomed runs are short compared to Whistler and even smaller B.C. resorts such as Sun Peaks and Big White. The vertical drop here is just 455 metres. But the way

the runs follow the lay of the land makes them interesting and unpredictable.

Take The Canyon. It starts as a bowl in the upper reaches before funnelling into a true canyon, mountains closing in dramatically on both sides as you careen down the narrowing passage. A couple from Abbotsford mentioned it as we rode the chairlift up with them. “It’s the signature run at Mt. Baker”, he said. “Be sure you do it before you leave.”

Other welcome advice comes from locals — not about the skiing, rather where to eat at the end of the day. While the day lodges on the mountain offer tasty lunch fare (bread bowls of soup, savoury ‘man’ pies, pulled pork sandwiches and a variety of micro-brews) they’re not open past 5 p.m.

“Milano’s”, insists a local man sharing my lift. “Order the daily special. Whatever it is, order the special.” Milano’s is on the main street in the teeny tiny town of Glacier, 33 km down the Mt Baker Highway. We had noticed it on the way up the mountain the first day.

Glacier is where most overnight visitors stay and it’s a welcome counterpoint to the phoney European-style villages that many ski resorts try to emulate. Glacier is for real, even its name. Glacier Creek, which flows through the town, is melt water from the glacier atop Mt. Baker.

Besides Milano’s there’s Wake ‘n Bakery for fair trade coffee and cookies, Graham’s — both a restaurant and grocery store, and closer to the mountain, Chair 9, home of your first or last — depending which way you’re driving — cocktail.

Chair 9 is where we’re enjoying pizza our second night when we learn there are plenty of other Canadians around. “Half the people who own second homes around here are from Canada,” says co-owner Peter Cook, before hurrying off. “I’ve got a group of 22 women from Vancouver arriving any minute to celebrate a 30th birthday.”

After pizza, we head back to the delightful cabin in the woods that we’ve rented at Glacier Springs, just a five-minute drive away.

By the time our weekend is over we’ve skied The Canyon, indulged at Milano’s (one of the specials was roasted breast of duck in an orange liquor reduction) and, best of all, I’ve avoided falling into any tree wells.



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