

The powder and the passion

SUZANNE MORPHET

hits the heights in the epic Rocky Mountains of British Columbia

It's no secret that ski resorts in British Columbia have been struggling this winter. With wildly fluctuating temperatures and lack of precipitation, many resorts still have "early season" conditions, even though winter is more than half over.

With that in mind, it made sense for our annual BC ski trip to go where mountains are some of the highest and snowpacks typically the deepest. And that meant BC's Powder Highway.

The Powder Highway isn't a single road but a circular route through the Kootenay Rockies region of eastern BC.

It winds through four mountain ranges, connecting scenic towns that have oodles of history and eight alpine ski resorts offering some of the biggest and best terrain in North America.

My husband and I visited three resorts over six days, not nearly long enough given the scope of these mountains but it was a welcome first taste of the region.

"Remember to always put your weight on that outside ski," says Julia, a young Austrian ski instructor on staff at Panorama Resort, our first stop along the Powder Highway. One of the interesting things about all ski resorts in BC is the number of international staff — especially Aussies — who come here to work, so in their free time they can ski or board (we even meet a girl from Fremantle working at Lizard Creek Lodge in Fernie).

After our two-hour lesson with Julia, we feel a lot more confident about tackling some of the almost 12ha of Panorama's terrain. Shaped like a cone, we find this mountain easy to navigate, starting from our ski-in/ski-out condo at its base right up to the summit at 2365m with views on a clear day of peaks in all directions.

Given this season's weird weather, we're surprised to find great conditions. The secret is Panorama's enormous snow-making capability. With more than 300 snow guns, many portable, this resort doesn't depend on Mother Nature. "Instead of having to strategically plan your runs based on what's



A ski guide at Fernie points to the spectacular Headwall that rises above the resort. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

open," says Lauren Gale, Panorama's destination sales manager, "literally everything is open . . . from the get-go."

Half the runs on the mountain

are suitable for beginners to intermediate skiers, with wide, groomed corduroy. Those wanting a bigger challenge can find it in the Taynton Bowl, formerly a heli-skiing area, but now within bounds. Two comfy snow "cats" named Jekyll and Hyde shuttle a dozen expert skiers at a time to the rim of the bowl, where nine double-black diamond runs await, along with endless glades.

We opt for the much easier "Get Me Down" run after enjoying coffee and homemade cookies on the patio of the Summit Hut. Meals on the mountain are a fun part of this place. For lunch, we stop at Elkhorn Cabin where we melt Swiss-style raclette cheese, along with potatoes and pickles on a tabletop grill.

Across the valley from Panorama we find Toby Creek Adventures, where we've signed up for a four-hour guided snowmobile adventure. It's not the noisy, macho experience I feared it might be. The sleek machines run quiet and clean, and as many women as men are on the tour. We follow a winding trail to the site of a historic mining town named Paradise where we relax on the

sunny deck and enjoy a barbecue, after which we zip around on our machines in a snowy alpine bowl.

Ditching the Ski-Doo's, we're back in our car for the 90-minute drive south to Kimberley, where we check into The Larix, a chic hotel in a heritage building. For decades, Kimberley was home to one of the largest lead-zinc mines in the world. It was so prosperous the company built a ski area for its employees and their families. Today, Kimberley Alpine Resort is owned by Resorts of the Canadian Rockies and enjoyed by locals and visitors alike.

While it's part of the Powder Highway, you need to take a detour off Highway 93 to get here. It means Kimberley is a bit off the beaten track and largely overlooked. "I call it the sleeper of BC," says our guide, Rob Duncan, as the North Star Express — a



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The view from Elkhorn Cabin at Panorama Mountain Resort, where skiers stop for Swiss raclette. Panorama is in the Purcell Mountain range with views towards the Rockies.



Skiers at Fernie Alpine Resort enjoyed 15cm of fresh powder recently.

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high-speed quad — whisks us up the mountain. “You’ll go down a run midweek on a powder day and you’ll be the only person on the run.”

We visit on a Saturday and the mountain is lively but not busy and we wait less than a minute to board any lift. We don’t find any of the “champagne powder” the Purcell mountains are famous for, but the snow is nicely groomed, there’s plenty of space and community spirit is evident everywhere from the Kimberley Conference and Athlete Training Centre — built to prepare athletes for the 2010 Paralympic Games in Vancouver — to the people we see walking up the side of a run on touring skis.

“People will come here at 7.30 in the morning, walk up the mountain on the up-track, ski down, then go to work,” says Rob matter-of-factly.

We’re not surprised when he tells us this one-stoplight town of 8000 residents charms people.

“That’s the comment I get from a lot of visitors. They stopped in here because ‘oh, while we’re in the area we’ll come by,’ and then they get here and go, ‘wow.’”

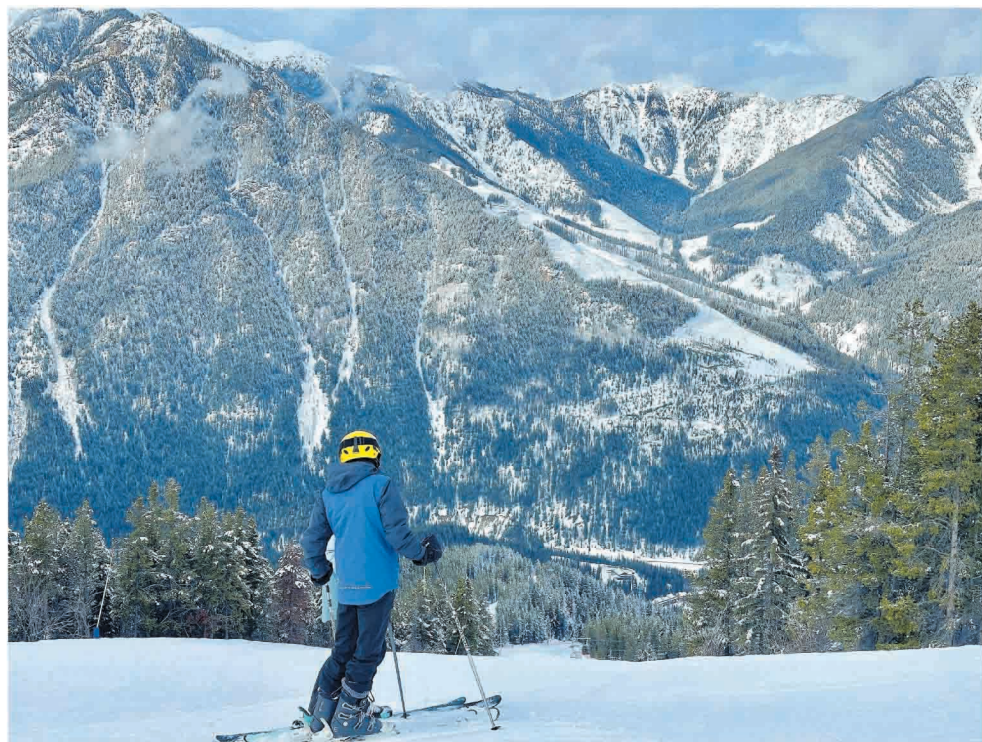
Leaving Kimberley, we drive across the Rocky Mountain Trench, a broad valley separating the Purcell Mountains from the Rockies and head east to the town of Fernie. Unlike Kimberley, Fernie has been “discovered” by outsiders, who come from far and wide for its epic powder snow, about 9m in an average year, but up to 11m some years — enough to bury a three-storey building,

Locals call it the Fernie Factor. That’s when two weather systems collide over Fernie, as they frequently do, and dump a lot of white stuff. “They might be calling for 2-4cm of snow and we’ll actually end up with 24cm,” chuckles Christine Grimble from the town’s tourism office.

But even with its reputation for reliable powder, “we’re not a glitz and glamour resort,” says ski instructor Shawn Clarke. “We might see five to six thousand people on our busiest days. Compare that to Whistler. I think they’re in around the 30,000 range.”

On our last morning, the Fernie Factor has kicked in and we awaken to 15cm of fresh powder. At breakfast we can hear guns or dynamite dislodging snow that accumulated overnight on the Headwall, the spectacular wall of rock that rises above the resort’s five enormous alpine bowls. The weather here means avalanche control is carried out regularly.

As we weave our way down Falling Star, the longest run in the resort at 5km, my legs burn from the effort and I think of Linda Socher, known as the matriarch of the mountain. Linda started the resort’s first ski school in 1967 and along with her husband Heiko, was instrumental in developing the resort. Now 86, she’s still skiing. “I see her up here almost every day,” Shawn tells me. “She rips around with a group of ladies.”



Above, Suzanne Morphet assesses a blue run at Panorama Mountain Resort. Right, ready to ride a sleek, new Ski-Doo with Toby Creek Adventures.

Before leaving Fernie we admire the town’s beautiful brick buildings, an anomaly in BC, but mandated after two fires levelled the town in the early 20th century.

This trip may be over but we know we’ll be back on the Powder Highway. These three resorts have been so varied and interesting that now we’re curious to experience the remaining five.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Kootenay Rockies Tourism and Destination BC, which has not influenced or approved this story.



Snowmobiling high up in an alpine bowl with Toby Creek Adventures. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

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what you need to know

- The closest international airport to the Powder Highway is Canadian Rockies International Airport in Cranbrook, but there are more connections if you fly to Calgary. From there, it’s about a 3½-hour drive to either Panorama Resort or Fernie. powderhighway.com.