

One for the chattering class

British Columbia's best-kept secret offers vast, pristine slopes and legendary last-night parties, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.

LEONARDO DiCAPRIO and I have shared a seat in a snowcat. Sadly, just not at the same time. Leo and his Hollywood crew discovered Canada's Chatter Creek Cat Skiing lodge before and the results are immortalised on the silver screen in the high-speed snow chase in the film *Inception*.

Chatter Creek was the best-kept secret in interior British Columbia, until now.

I heard about it through a mate who worked at the nearby Kicking Horse resort, who spoke of big-mountain skiing in land accessed only by helicopter.

"There's a wooden lodge miles from anywhere run by lumberjacks," he told me. "Scream out there and no one hears you. Trust me, you'll be screaming."

He was right. I did scream – with delight. Chatter Creek Cat Skiing was founded by Dale McKnight, who started his working life as a logger and was a ski guide on the side. His passion for skiing led him to do more guiding and less logging. The only problem was he couldn't see a future for himself in either. So he lobbied the Canadian government with an idea to utilise a large amount of land for cat skiing.

He was eventually granted a 25-year tenure on 238 square kilometres of prime skiing terrain. They started building the first lodge



in 1999 out of logs that were ferried up remote logging roads. In 2000, they opened for business and guests survived a three-hour skidoo ride to their accommodation.

By 2002, word was out, thanks to a glowing report from skier's bible *Powder Magazine* that some of the best skiing terrain was available at Chatter. Demand outweighed the facilities so two more lodges were built in the next two years and the skidoo was traded in for a chopper.

Ten years on, a mere 36 skiers and boarders of varying levels, from advanced intermediate to expert, and their guides share this vast terrain of open bowls, tree runs, ridge lines and chutes each week.



You'll be skiing with the same crew every day, so be polite.

Put simply, this is powder paradise, with fresh lines to be had every run among truly breathtaking scenery. The snow-covered rock formations that thrust skyward inspired DiCaprio's location scouts to set up the cameras.

Chatter Creek is often referred to as "Cheater Creek", or so I heard from locals the week before when



I told them where I was heading. Pile 36 guests and an equal number of staff into a wilderness lodge for four to seven days at a time, then throw them down some of the best snow they have had the pleasure of skiing upon, add some hearty breakfasts and gourmet dinners, then pour alcohol down eager throats and some folk may begin to think themselves immortal.

The last-night parties here are legendary but from where I was standing, it was all above board. I can't speak for what happens under tables. Perhaps they are referring to the lodging set up.

All rooms are shared rooms here with two double beds, so if you're travelling alone don't be surprised

to find someone else's suitcase on the bed opposite. You can, of course, request a same-sex lodger or, better still, go with a friend.

Be warned, though: Chatter Creek is hard to get into. Most folk immediately book for the same dates the following year upon departure and since the lodge has been open for 10 years that's a lot of return guests. There are occasional gaps and there is also a standby list.

Life at Chatter Creek is simple. Rise in the morning for pancakes and maple syrup, creamy porridge and bacon and eggs. Grab fresh baked brownies, golden syrup cookies, club sandwiches, chicken wraps and fresh juices for your lunch and climb into the snowcat



Top-notch ... (from far left) Chatter Creek's main lodge; peerless powder skiing; mountain views and the snowcat.

Trip notes

Getting there

- ▶ V Australia flies six days a week from Sydney to Los Angeles with economy, premium economy and business class options including a full flat bed in business. vastralia.com.au or 13 82 87.
- ▶ Online booking agency Zuji has connecting flights from Los Angeles to Calgary with no booking fees, zuji.com.au.
- ▶ Chatter Creek is a three-hour drive from Calgary. Transfers can be arranged through Chatter Creek.

Skiing there

- ▶ Chatter Creek Cat Skiing lodge, Golden, British Columbia, Canada, from \$C1515 for three nights including all meals, lodging and guided cat skiing. chattercreek.ca.

that is home for three, four or seven days, depending on your package.

Say hi to your fellow skiers and boarders; you'll be skiing with the same crew in the same snowcat every day, so be polite. This will last an hour before banter begins and life-long friendships are made.

Then ski or snowboard fresh powder, following your guide back

down to the snowcat waiting to take you to the next secret stash to do it all over again. There's no need to stop for lunch as there's plenty of time between runs to recover and rehydrate on the way back up.

Finish the day with a cleansing ale back at the lodge bar, soak in a hot tub, shower, change and sit down for a three-course dinner. Follow up

with some post-dinner drinks, maybe a game of pool, go to bed and repeat the next day.

The beauty of cat ski lodges is you get a heli ski experience at half the price and the snowcat goes out every day while a helicopter may still be waiting for the clouds to clear. I had often heard of cat skiing as a poor man's heli ski experience

but the terrain I skied during my week was some of the best I have had the fortune to turn upon.

Besides, what poor person can afford the \$C500 (\$507) to \$C800 a day price tag for heli-skiing, depending on the time of year?

The writer was a guest of Chatter Creek and V Australia.

