

travel

with Stephen McCarty



The great ungrooved

Sick of pussyfooting around the intermediate slopes? Hitch a ride on a snowcat to reach the kind of terrain heli-skiers dream about, but at a fraction of the price. Powder hound Rachael Oakes-Ash makes fresh tracks in Canada.

There comes a time in every snow-sport-lover's life when they have to step off the trail. They've conquered the snow plough and parallel turn with ease and carved up the groomed runs across the resorts. They may even have tackled ungrooved snow on dedicated black-run terrain and the steeps and tree runs of the infamous double black diamond offerings in North America. But still it's not enough.

The next obvious step on the way to the skier's dream, untouched powder, is to hit the "back country": unpatrolled terrain, with which come avalanche warnings and safety guides. But how do you reach this nirvana? Sure, you can trek out there with skis or snowboard over your shoulder but peak fitness is required and a 45-minute hike uphill produces only a two-minute trip back down.

You could heli-ski but it's expensive. Helicopter fuel is costly and guests tend to pay per run rather than for time taken. That's all fine and dandy if you're Barry Billionaire and can hire a helicopter for you and your mates; less so if you're on a budget. So thank the snow lords for snowcat-skiing, which has all the fun of heli-skiing at half the price and with double the number of runs.

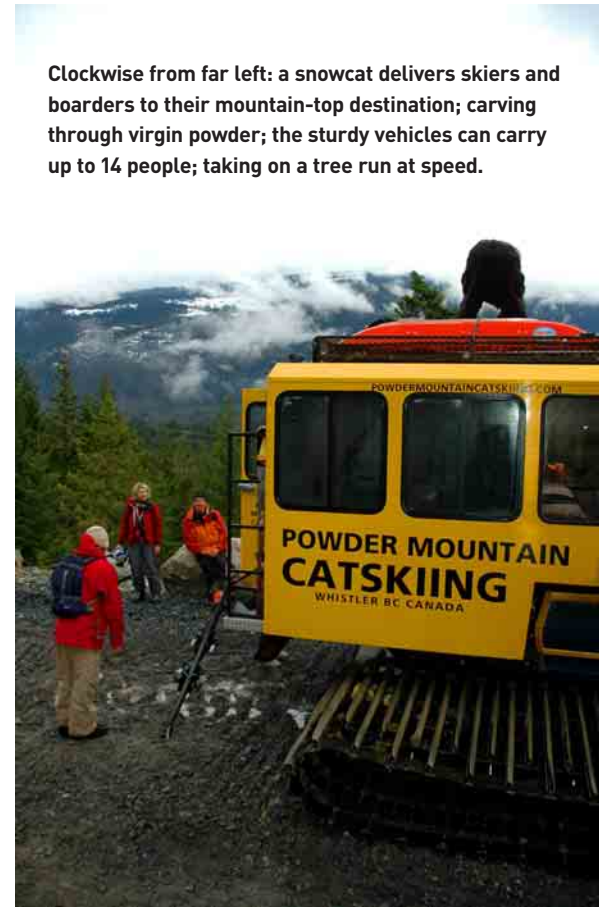
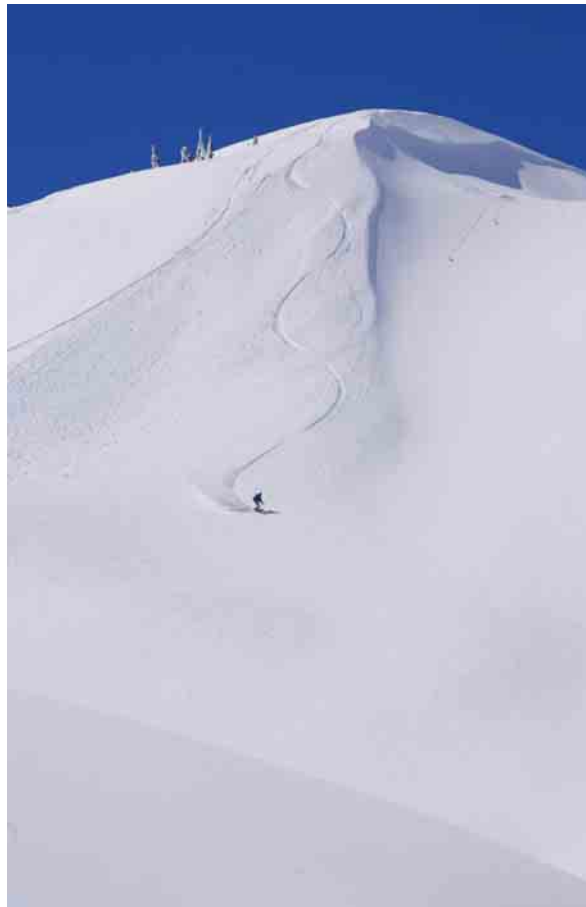
Snowcats are traditionally used to groom ski trails and are designed with tank-style caterpillar tracks to traverse snow. Up to 12 skiers can fit into a cat that can reach terrain even helicopters sometimes can't: when the weather prevents helicopters taking off and heli-skiing is cancelled, the cats are still running.

Developed in the 1960s, cat-ski operations now run throughout the world, although the best are found in

Canada. Powder Mountain Cat Skiing is the name given to an area close to Whistler Blackcomb resort in British Columbia that covers 1,740 hectares of deep virgin snow across five peaks.

Not only is the snow virgin; I am too. It's my first time in a cat and my first true back country experience, in which lift queues, tracked-out runs and man-made snow are non-existent. I am nervous, scared the others in the group will be extreme masters worthy of a Warren Miller ski film and I'll hold them up.

There are 14 of us, including a lead guide and a tail guide. We make small talk as the cat moves from the mountain day lodge to our home for the day, the great, remote outdoors filled with trees, gullies, open bowls, chutes and lips. The cat is more tractor than Testarossa



Clockwise from far left: a snowcat delivers skiers and boarders to their mountain-top destination; carving through virgin powder; the sturdy vehicles can carry up to 14 people; taking on a tree run at speed.



and we're seated high above the snow in a metal cabin with nothing more than a bar and each other to cling to as we brave the 40-degree incline. Almost an hour later we've made it to the top of our first run. We step out of the cat and straight into thigh-deep powder; this is going to be good.

Avalanche gear is distributed, checked, double checked and tested as we run through a drill. The lead guide goes first and once we've wrestled with our fat powder skis and clipped ourselves in, we're off. There is a skill to skiing powder, but thankfully I don't fall and I soon get the hang of riding the snow with rhythm. I remember my instructor's advice to ski like a dolphin and I wonder what a dolphin would be doing so far from the sea.

Each run takes about 15 minutes and the cat waits for us at the bottom of the slope. When the weather is clear we're encouraged to make our own tracks but not to ski below the guide. I stick with the tail guide at the back, trusting him to help me should I come unstuck. He offers me powder-skiing tips: pick up speed, skis together to create a platform, don't stop, just flow and spread the weight evenly on both feet.

When the weather closes in you're playing search for the person in front of you in the white-out: ski on their tail

and listen for the lead guide shouting, "Coo-ee!" below. It's like skiing blind. At one point I fall backwards and the tail guide starts laughing. I'm not hurt but he knows I've been caught out trying to ski the sky. It's impossible to tell the difference between the snow and the air and vertigo has made me lose my balance.

It doesn't last long then the cat takes us to tree runs, where the contrast of the trunks provides visual definition and allows us to revel in the powder. We're a mixed bag of skiing and snowboarding exponents, from intermediates to extreme skiers whose legs are held together by metal pins, but the terrain suits us all and we give each other "high fives" like we've known each other since birth.

We tackle more than 10 runs, each different. I lose count as we beg the cat driver to take us up just once more. If someone needs to sit out a run they rest in the cabin with the cat driver and take the alternative mode of transport downhill. You can't do that in a helicopter, where every flight must be fuel efficient.

The day finishes at a pub in Whistler, where we watch a slide show of our exertions and exchange e-mail addresses, promising to write but knowing half of us never will. When I return to the village I am told the helicopters didn't go out today and those skiers who had booked are on the waiting list for tomorrow. I say nothing; my mother always told me it's rude to gloat.

Getting there: Air Canada (www.aircanada.com) flies from Hong Kong to Vancouver, from where Whistler is a two-hour drive. See www.powdermountaincatskiing.com for more information about the area. A day's cat skiing, transfers, guides, safety equipment, lunch and snacks, plus a guaranteed minimum total daily descent of more than 2,000 metres, costs CA\$479 (HK\$3,160) per person. The season runs until the end of April. Spend the money you would have forked out on a heli-ski day on a ritzy room at the Four Seasons Whistler, which costs from CA\$345 a night. See www.fourseasons.com/whistler.