



Mustang Powder keeps them returning with family atmosphere

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I had the best two days of my life so far a couple weeks ago at Mustang Powder Cat Skiing – just a half hour from Revelstoke. Be forewarned, however: if you go, you will likely go back every year for the rest of your skiing or snowboarding life. With the most snow of any cat or heli-ski operation in B.C. this season, and a simple mission statement, “to ski lots,” this isn’t the kind of place you go to only once. Every guest there during my visit was certain they would return, and more than half had been before – some for five years, and some have been visiting owners Nick and Ali Holmes-Smith for all ten years they’ve been in the cat skiing business.



Skiers load into one of Mustang Powder's Pisten Bully cats at dawn.
Katie Findlay/Times Review

From the meeting place – the Skyline Truck Stop 30 minutes west of Revelstoke – guests travel by yellow school bus about 20 minutes along a logging road, then a little over an hour in a snow cat to the beautiful timber frame Mustang Lodge. At 5,700 feet, the lodge was surrounded by over three metres (about ten feet) of snow when I arrived, thanks to its favourable snow location on the west side of the Monashee mountain range.

The Holmes-Smiths decided on the name “Mustang” for their love of horses. Nick went to two Olympic games for the equestrian three-day event: Seoul in 1988 and Barcelona in 1992. Currently the family uses their farm in Chase to run some cross-country riding camps in the summer.

My private room was snug but comfortable, and equipped with two volumes of Ski Canada magazine, earplugs and a cozy bed. Clearly the main purpose of the bedrooms was to get a good sleep before another epic day of powder skiing.

Once upstairs in the high-ceilinged dining room, we were treated to a gourmet four-course dinner, the climax of which was white salmon from the Queen Charlottes. Nick joined the other new guests and myself for the meal and served us some B.C. Merlot. I could only take it as some kind of good omen

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when "This Must be the Place" by the Talking Heads was one of the first songs playing in the living room during my stay – indeed, it already felt like home.

Chef Rick Schneider has been working for Nick and Ali for ten years – first at Monashee Powder then moving with them to Mustang. Living in Nelson when he's not at the lodge, Rick prides himself on making everything from scratch and using local and mostly organic ingredients. Food is brought up to the lodge every two weeks, and as much as possible comes from the local farmer in Chase. Morning coffee served in bed, delicious and hearty hot breakfasts, lunch spreads to pack for the cat including delectable baked treats, and exquisite après-ski appetizers are all part of the culinary package at Mustang.

After safety training on our first morning, we loaded up the cat and were quickly on our way to some legendary powder skiing! There are lots of little steps we were instructed to take throughout the day to get as much skiing in as possible: be quick getting out of the cat, last person out closes the door and raises the ladder. We don't stop for lunch but rather eat it on the ride up in the cat, which, as Nick notes is only sensible.

And of course, the best part of all is the snow – light, fluffy and deep, this is the kind of powder all skiers and snowboarders dream of. There are face shots galore, and dropping cliffs is a piece of cake since you always land in soft snow. There is some incredible steep and varied terrain, including lots of alpine and great trees, and because there's so much of it – over 30,000 acres – guests are encouraged to have fresh tracks every turn. "We don't farm the snow," Nick said. "A lot of cat operations really conserve their terrain because they don't have that much. But we ski it much like a heli-ski company would ski theirs, where everybody spreads out and we're not bullying people to stay tight." After pretty much every run I heard someone say, "That was the best run of my life."

There is plenty of competition within the cat and heli-skiing business in B.C. – so what is it about Mustang Powder, that keeps guests coming back every year? Approximately two thirds of their annual clientele is returning.

If anyone should know it's Revelstokian Scott Davis, IFMGA/ACMG Mountain Guide, past president of the ACMG (Association of Canadian Mountain Guides) and a professional member of the Canadian Avalanche Association. Scott guides for Mustang for a few weeks every year. "It's probably one of the best cat ski operations in Canada, and that's not to toot their horn, it really is. It's got amazing ski terrain, it's a great lodge, and the food's over the top," he said. "I can't think of a reason not to come here, actually," Davis mused over an après-ski beer, "I just have to control myself so I don't work too much. You couldn't get me to work here if it wasn't good skiing, it's as simple as that."

The camaraderie that develops during a cat skiing trip also seems to be a big draw. "One of the parts [our guests] like so much is sitting in the back of the cat, chatting and socializing between the runs," Nick noted. "The social part of it is certainly a factor for a lot of people."

"Everybody socializes here," Australian Anthony Gollan said, "There's a family having dinner over there, and over here we're giving Steve a hard time for a ten-point crash. At heli-skiing you don't see that as much." Anthony's son Fred piped in, adding, "at heli skiing you don't get a break 'cause you're up to the top so quickly."

At Mustang Powder guests typically ski 17,000 to 22,000 vertical feet per day. "These Pisten Bully 300s are very fast," Nick noted, adding that they are also the most fuel-efficient cats available. "We try to give people as much skiing as possible," the owner said, and by using little efficiencies like unloading smoothly and starting early, (they operate on Mountain, not Pacific time to maximize daylight hours) guests definitely get a lot of skiing. "We certainly don't want the day to be rushed, but on the other hand if it's efficient you get more skiing in." "In heli you can get more vertical," Nick added, "but it's a little more 'feast or famine' – for example, for the last three or four days they would have struggled to go skiing, because of foggy weather," in which the helicopters may not have been able to fly.

Many of the staff seem to be able to do every job at the lodge: driving cats, doing dishes, skiing, serving dinner and shovelling snow, for example. There is definitely a team atmosphere where everyone pitches in to ensure everything runs seamlessly. "It feels like family here," said Sandra Treat from Salmon Arm, teacher and nanny for Nick and Ali's three daughters.

Many of the staff have been there for several years, and they usually only have about a 15% turnover in staff each year. Rich, one of the tail guides, has been working for Nick and Ali for ten years, and now his son Dustin has joined him at the lodge as the bartender. "This is like going to somebody's house," Anthony Gollan said, "Nick and Ali understand that we're on holiday; they really look after you."

On the business side of things, "It's a very competitive industry," Scott Davis explained, "and the economy has hit a lot of operations, but I think the cream rises to the top. An operation like Nick's will always be at the top and will always draw people. Other ones might struggle and maybe move by the wayside – I think a sort of survival of the fittest will play out through these next four or five years."

By the sounds of it Mustang Powder won't be struggling for guests in the near future. "Every bad day I have at work in construction during the summer I think about this place, and that's the honest-to-god truth," said Steve Lannan from Waterville, New Hampshire, now in his tenth year skiing with the

Holmes-Smiths.

The cost may be prohibitive for some, and as Mark Berkman from San Francisco put it, "It's not just \$4,000 for this week, it's \$4,000 once a year for the rest of your life," himself already addicted after one visit. But as he pointed out, "every dollar is worth it."

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