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## Higher Learning

Everything you ever needed to know about life, you can learn snowcat skiing at Mustang Powder Lodge. Self-enlightenment should always be so much fun.

By Chris Solomon

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**Sometimes the Big Lessons come at us in surprising places.** Like in the back of a snowcat. Skiing hard with a small group in the wilds of British Columbia can shine a surprising amount of light on life, which isn't at all what I expected to take away from carving up powder for a week in the Monashees with a bunch of sweaty strangers.

### LIFE LESSON No. 1: Don't Trust First Impressions

The directions to Mustang Powder Lodge say to meet at the Skyline Esso Truck Stop on the TransCanada Highway, 20 minutes east of something called Sicamous. Meet at a gas station. What is this, you think, a college road trip? But you show up anyway, because you're hungry for British Columbia powder. You park beside the gigantic snowbanks, where somebody tosses your skis into the belly of an old Blue Bird school bus. For the second time, you're concerned about the quality of your upcoming ski vacation. Then the Italians show up—six rowdy guys piling out of a rental car in matching fur toques like something Jack London wore while mushing huskies in the Yukon. They're laughing too loud and yelling, "Macaroni! Pavarotti!" These men, you realize, will be among your shoulder-to-shoulder companions on a snowcat for the next five days.

The old bus, with you aboard, barrels up a snowy road until its end, where you toss your luggage into snowcats for a 90-minute ride up into darkness. Awkward conversation with seatmates fogs the windows. Your unsure feeling lingers. Either that or you're a little carsick.

Finally the cat stops at 5,750 feet, at the door of a welcoming timber-frame lodge softly glowing in the wilderness. And you think, Oh. And your seatmates—now that they've finally arrived from Vermont and Colorado and Seattle, and each now with a Mt. Begbie Ale in hand—well, you can practically see their armor of formality and self-importance peeling away. The tables in the dining room are set with organic rack of lamb; jazz softly falls from the big timber rafters.

The next morning, you look out the windows and see that the Esso truck stop—or for that matter any other sign of man—is nowhere in sight. Instead there is only the startling Monashee range dressed in the blue morning light. The snowcat is already outside clearing its throat, ready to take you still higher, just a few feet from the steaming hot tub that's ready to embrace you upon your return. And you think, Ah. Yes. OK. Maybe I have been a little judgmental. Maybe this place will do just fine.

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Henry Georgi

## LIFE LESSON No. 2: Life is Full of Sacrifices

Poor man's heliskiing. That's always been the easy shorthand for snowcat skiing. After all, heliskiing is so sexy, fueled by the adrenaline surge of getting whisked to a mountaintop as blades Cuisinart the air. The thousands of feet of powder turns every day. The tablecloth lunches on sunny glaciers. Pity the snowcat skier, whose ride is like a pig is to a bird of paradise. But these are frugal times! We must cut back! Settle for less!

I don't understand just how deep the privations will be until we return from our first day of skiing: All the spaces on the massage list are taken. I guess I'll endure the alternative—an après-ski tasting of British Columbia wines accompanied by knowledgeable commentary by Mustang's bartender, Dom, while outside, alpenglow daubs the peaks an indiscreet rouge. But such are the unexpected sacrifices of the poor man's heliskiing.

The privations hit early at Mustang Powder. In fact, the first one drops at dinner on arrival night. Co-owner Nick Holmes-Smith, who is God up here and who even controls time, announces that everyone should switch their watches to Mountain Time even though Revelstoke, just to the east, is in the Pacific Time Zone. The reason: Nick wants us to ski as much as possible. Sleep, he's not so concerned about. And so the next day we're up early, groping for coffee and the gourmet breakfast spread. That evening the cat won't growl back to the lodge until after 5 p.m.—a full hour later than at other snowcat outfits I've visited. "Where most operators ski six, six-and-a-half hours, we ski eight or nine," he says. Thighs quiver as if made of aspic.

And me without my massage.

The list of indignities will pile up like snowflakes: skiing up to 20,000 vertical feet daily (a very healthy day) in the crumpled and folded Monashees while looking across at...about four other heliski outfits where clients are paying nearly twice as much to ski similar—or less interesting—terrain. Exploring one of the largest permit areas in the business—about 30,000 acres. Waking every day in the shadow of the peak that holds Canada's snowfall record—963 inches in the 1971–72 winter. "If there's something that makes this place distinctive, it's snow," says Nick, a former Olympic equestrian, who owns five-year-old Mustang with his wife, Ali. "When things are marginal, we'll get snow when others don't."

And then there's snowcat skiing's predictable relentlessness. Chuck Delamater lives part-time in Vail, Colo., and has skied from all types of machines, large and small, propelled by everything from crunching tracks to whirling blades. In a snowcat, "I know I'm going to ski every day; you don't get weathered in, as sometimes happens with heliskiing," he says. He leans in and confides that "in the chopper it's hard to talk, it's loud. Here it's like going into the lodge between every run. You socialize in the cat. You eat in the cat. And you still get 12 to 15 runs."

And soon, one thing becomes apparent: Snowcat skiers are gluttons for punishment. Nearly everybody is a repeat customer—two years, three years, four years running. Dow Powell, a custom homebuilder from Whitefish, Mont., says he's brought 98 people here over the five years Mustang has been in operation.

But in life, as in war, it's always the ones left behind who suffer. Outside, the sun is sparkling, the snow is sparkling, the air is sparkling. The whole scene is like the fairy-dusted opening of a Disney special. At the cat doorway, as new ski pals climb in, there's talk of furious girlfriends and wives eight months pregnant. "What can I say?" Andy Troszok asks, dusting the evidence of the last run off his jacket. "She lost the coin toss."

But then, life is full of sacrifices.



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Henry Georgi

### LIFE LESSON No. 3: You Can't Choose Your Friends

There's an alchemy that happens in the back of a snowcat. There you are, tossed into a metal box that's pungent with sweat and meltwater, packed shoulder to shoulder with knots of strangers. Now shake it well for eight hours a day. Why? Because in snowcat skiing, you spend more of your time churning up rutted-out trails and logging backroads than making turns. And sooner or later something extraordinary happens.

For us, extraordinary happens four runs into Day Two, just after we glide to a stop below a run that lead guide Mat Valade calls Mumbo Jumbo. It's an apt name: From the ridge, we slip into a tilted forest of spruce and balsam festooned with moss, where the open spaces are ribboned with small ego cliffs, and quilt-topped boulders have pillow-padded landings—a mash-up of the Monashees' greatest hits. We charge downhill like a pack of starving coyotes, feeling the goodness of warmed-up legs, a warming day and untracked snow—and feeling good about each other for the first time.

At the bottom we pile back into the snowcat, smiling and chattering and ready for more. But something has palpably changed: We have marinated in the cat together long enough that we're no longer just fellow clients sharing the common experience of the Monashees' famed treeskiing and deep snow. These are friends, now. Our atoms have merged into something bigger.

One of my seatmates tells me that the uphill trips—not the powder skiing—is what he remembers most fondly after he's returned home. I know what he means. The cab of a snowcat is a moveable barstool. On the 20-minute rides between runs stories are swapped, along with a lot of bad jokes. With every crash dissected and digital picture shared, small mythologies are born.

By the third day, people who didn't know each other at the Esso station are planning next year's trip together. The wet, humid, seasicky cab of a snowcat is a friend-making machine. And what's the best part about skiing but being with friends in the mountains—even new ones? "It's more fun when your group mingles," Dow says one day as we trundle higher. "My friends—we all know our own stories." Meeting strangers, he says, "adds to the experience. Makes it a richer trip."

Across the cat, the Italians are teaching that *polvere* means powder. They're teaching that another word means, well, something that can't be printed in a family magazine. They're singing a folk song. They've dubbed Dow "Franco," and they're belly-laughing with him, though Dow speaks no Italian. They're playing "It's Raining Men" on one of their cell phones. And you know what? They long ago stopped being loud and rather obnoxious foreigners. They're Dow's new best friends.



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## LIFE LESSON No. 4: Sometimes People You Barely Know Are Looking Out For Your Best

### Interests

All morning a charge runs through the group—rumor that conditions are perfect to attempt a nearly 6,000-foot run that no group has done yet. (Normally, snowcat runs at Mustang, and at most outfits, are 1,500 to 2,000 vertical feet.) Now, after lunch, we pick up two employees, including Dom the bartender—whose presence in the cab signals to us that we’re headed for something special. “Two-minute warning!” the tail-gunner guide hollers as the snowcat lurches higher. We scramble with gear like men preparing for battle.

The rumbling stops at 8,050 feet, and we emerge, squinting in the sunshine. Across the Perry River Valley, the Monashees thrust a jawbone of rough peaks. There’s a snagged fang. Beside it, a crooked incisor. Over there, a cracked and canted molar. Just below the gumline, the landscape either mellows into glaciers or pinches into drinking-straw avalanche gullies. This is a range in need of some serious orthodontics.

Guide Mat gathers us around. We’re headed into the maw. “This is the Fifth Dimension,” he says. “For those of you who are wondering what the fifth dimension is, it’s”—he pulls out a Post-it Note and reads—“the unexplored and unknown aspect of the universe and oneself.”

“I’ve been looking at this for years,” Dow says. Sweet Lord, is Dow drooling? One at a time for safety, the skiers glide to the edge of the pitch and vanish into perhaps the most memorable run of our season. The first 1,000-foot section grazes 40 degrees—steep enough to drag a hand through powder like a surfer leaning into the curl.

Mat doesn’t like the avalanche potential on the next section, where side gullies pour in from the canyon walls on either side, so we again take it one at a time, and in a single gulp—2,000 feet of nonstop S’s.

Turnturnturnturnturn. Halfway down, it’s a draw between what aches more: our thighs or our facial muscles from laughing. And we’re only at the run’s midpoint. Next up is a garden of massive bumps that we launch off like springboards. Then, a stand of old-growth cedars where the sun slants through as if from cathedral windows.

At the bottom, the guides shake their heads in disbelief. Maybe two or three other runs in North America, they claim—heliski runs included—can match that run in vertical drop. And now Dom the bartender takes over for Dom the stud skier: As each of us skis up to the snowcat, he hands out beers for the long ride back to the lodge. One of the Italians pulls up, trades hugs with Dom, then turns to Mat. “Thank you,” he says. His English is thick with accent, thick with exhaustion, thick with gratitude. “I dream of British Columbia.”



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Henry Georgi

## LIFE LESSON No. 5: Life is a Series of Repetitive Tasks

On a ski-resort vacation you expect variety. You ski different areas of the mountain each day, maybe even different resorts during your trip. You seek out new trails. New conditions. New terrain. You try different restaurants every night.

On a snowcat trip, each day is nearly a Xerox of the last. At Mustang Powder, each begins in the dark with a little knock at the door from a small girl—Nick and Ali’s youngest—politely asking, “Would you like some coffee, sir?” You rise. Eat. Ski. Eat. Sleep. Eat. Ski. Eat. Sleep. One day blurs pleasantly into the next.

Out here among wild mountains, sitting in the back of a snowcat without a trail map to guide you or a village at your feet, you always feel always a little disoriented. But soon you relinquish the usual sense of resort-skiing control. You let the repetition of the days anchor you. And what you find is that you can now focus on what really matters: the curve of the slope just beyond your tips. The silence, once the cat rumbles away, that’s so loud it makes your ears ring. The pleasant bite of that Okanagan merlot at dinner.

There are destinations where you can immerse yourself in more luxury. But ask yourself, what are you really looking for? “We were at the Little Nell in Aspen,” Charlie Brush tells me one night. “It was awesome. But who needs to spend \$800 a night? Here, we skied powder with the owners’ daughter today. It doesn’t get any better than that. It feels kind of European here, where it’s family owned.”

“Less is more,” he adds.

A simpler luxury, then. And repeat until you’re grinning dazedly: Eat. Ski. Eat. Sleep. Eat. Ski. Eat. Sleep. And each morning, the little knock in the dark. “Would you like some coffee, sir?”



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## **LIFE LESSON No. 6: The Moments You Remember Forever Come to You When You Least Expect Them**

]The last morning arrives clothed in pink: It will be sunny, again. For much of the month high pressure has hovered over our corner of British Columbia, but we head out and again manage to find plenty of untapped powder off the eight-mile ridgeline of the permit area, thanks to its nearly 200 miles of snow roads.

That afternoon, the cat driver cuts the engine on a mountain shoulder. “OK, so now we’re going for a hike,” Mat says, taking off his skis and heading up among the krummholz. I know enough Italian words to recognize complaining behind me. Twenty-five minutes later we top out at 7,300 feet. A few clouds have moved in, their hems snagging on peaks and settling in side valleys—just enough to give the scene an extra poignancy. The complaints are long gone. A quiet settles in. It’s a quiet that says, after five days, we can go home now and feel pretty good—but also that going home is going to hurt.

“We’re going to ski Medusa,” Mat says.

Like so many other things this week, Medusa is a blur. I remember pushing off onto a steep face. I remember the hiss of deep powder. I remember canyon walls rising to either side, and an apron between them like one of those rolling European glaciers that go on forever. I remember Mat opening the throttle and becoming smaller and smaller as he cruises down the valley. I remember chasing him with loopy GS turns, faster and faster through where the scraggly trees begin to appear, and then seeing the cat below.

What I remember most, though—the thing I may always remember—is what I hear behind me when I finally stop. From up in the blue canyon comes the sound of the Italians, though I can’t see them. They are picking their way down through the willows, and they are singing.



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## **SIGNPOST: Mustang Powder**

**Mustang Powder sits on the west side of the Monashee Mountains, the heart of British Columbia's interior snow belt, about 30 miles west of Revelstoke. All that adds up to near-certain snow: The record for Canada's most snowfall was notched on a peak next to the lodge. The operation's permit area is one of the largest in the business, with about 30,000 acres crisscrossed by nearly 200 miles of snowcat roads.**

**THE LODGE** The 25-room, timber frame lodge, at 5,750 feet, has an outdoor hot tub, a game area, bar, night and morning massage, fat-ski rentals (massage and rentals extra) and excellent dining. There's free wifi in the lodge.

**PRICES** The season runs from early December until early April. Mostly three-, four- and five-day trips are available (a few two-day trips are held in December). Costs, including guiding, lodging and meals upon arrival (except alcohol), are approximately \$500 to \$750 per day, depending on the time period and booking size.

**GETTING THERE** Most skiers flying from the States fly into Kelowna, B.C., a two-hour drive south. From there, rent a car. Or arrange a shuttle with Winds & Rivers Escapes from the Kelowna Airport . You won't need a rental car again unless you plan to ski at the new Revelstoke Mountain Resort (revelstokemountainresort.com). It's worth the side visit.

**YOU SHOULD KNOW** Early winter is statistically the snowiest time of year; the trade-off is shorter, colder days. March has longer days and more chance of sun.

**INFO** [mustangpowder.com](http://mustangpowder.com)



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