

Conquering big mountain skiing

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Laurie White (left) and Chase Wolfe head up The Ski Sisters, new at Sun Peaks Resort in Kamloops, B.C. (Courtesy Sun Peaks Resort)

There is an art to big mountain skiing. Tackling terrain at the high-alpine ski resorts of British Columbia, Alberta and beyond is not quite the same as skiing your local 200-metre hill. Out there, skiers encounter terrain with trees, steep chutes, moguls and cut-up powder. It can be daunting -- but it can also be a whole lot of fun.

There's a trend toward western ski areas offering big mountain ski clinics. Their goal is to give skiers tools to tackle runs that aren't groomed -- hills littered with trees, rocks and bumps, uneven snow conditions, gullies and steep pitches -- in other words, a lot of the good stuff in skiing.

"It's a different world up there," says Jordan Petrovics of Kicking Horse Mountain Resort, a B.C. ski area known for its rugged, expansive ski terrain. "It can be nerve-wracking standing at the top of a chute and not knowing how to ski it. And there's a safety aspect, too -- skiers need to know what they're getting into."

Near Golden, Kicking Horse (KickingHorseResort.com) has expanded its big mountain centre this season. Its new Red Bull BMC -- a yurt in the Kicking Horse village centre -- serves as a hub for big mountain education -- everything from introductory backcountry lessons to avalanche awareness training and powder ski rentals.

Guides are certified ski pros, so they are able to give students basic instruction on how to turn in the trees, edge on steep pitches, and navigate powder and bumps. But these pros are also trained in big mountain guiding and safety tactics. They teach avalanche awareness, including the use of avalanche transceiver equipment, plus terrain management skills and weather observation techniques. KH big mountain clinics run anywhere from two-hour avalanche transceiver lessons to five-day ski sessions, and are priced from \$29 to \$799 per person.

A similar centre is now a staple at B.C.'s Revelstoke Mountain Resort, which offers the highest lift-served vertical in North America (1,713) and acts as a hub for Cat- and heli-skiing. (For the uninitiated, heli-skiing involves using helicopters and ski guides to give skiers access to high-alpine, ungroomed terrain outside of ski area boundaries and not served by ski lifts. Cat-skiing is similar but skiers reach the high-alpine aboard Snowcats -- machines designed to crawl up steep hills and over snow.)

Last season Revelstoke (RevelstokeMountainResort.com) launched its Revelstoke Outdoors Centre to provide mountain education. Everything from backcountry touring and avalanche awareness courses run from the ROC.

Especially unique are the centre's courses on heli- and cat-skiing basics. Ski pros teach you essentials such as how to choose a good line (path) through trees, how to conserve energy while making turns in powder, and how to adapt your skiing to uneven terrain. These full-day clinics start at about \$90 per person.

The big mountain program concept is not a new one. Extremely Canadian Steep Clinics (ExtremelyCanadian.com) have been operating out of Whistler, B.C., for years. Their mission is to provide Whistler/Blackcomb visitors with insider knowledge -- where to ski off-piste at Whistler -- while mixing in ski instruction and steep skiing tactics.

Extremely Canadian's two-day clinics are ideal for skiers who want learn more about Whistler and Blackcomb's copious

big mountain terrain -- everything beyond their oft-crowded intermediate runs. Two-day clinics start at \$399 and include lift-line priority, video analysis, even apres-ski parties at Merlin's near Blackcomb.

Sun Peaks, near Kamloops, B.C., will focus on women with its big mountain clinics. New this season is The Ski Sisters program, where female ski pros -- longtime mountain guides Laurie White and Chase Wolfe -- will help build women's confidence on big mountain turf by improving skills and teaching straight-forward terrain approaches. Half-day sessions with The Ski Sisters start at \$75.

"The best will be when these women can go back to their husbands and their kids with a great ski story," White says.

"Like, 'Today we found some great glades' or 'Today I did my first black.'"

It's true, most of these western ski areas realize many skiers are frightened of big mountain terrain. There is no doubt chutes, bumps and glades are intimidating. But you don't want to miss out.

"It's so much fun to ski this stuff," says Jordan Petrovics at Kicking Horse. "Especially when it's with someone who can show you how."

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