

On a real powder trip in Colorado

LORI KNOWLES

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If you've always wanted to try cat skiing but have hesitated due to cost, accessibility or do-ability then Colorado may have a program that will finally get you into that snowcat.

Keystone Resort in Colorado's Summit County has a approachable cat experience called Keystone Adventure Tours (KAT). For a fraction of the cost of heli-skiing or even regular cat skiing, skiers spend a day riding up to 400 hectares of powder-filled backcountry with the help of a guide, their own private snowcat, and a group of like-minded skiers and snowboarders -- all starting just steps from the ski area's main gondola.

Here's how it works:

Adventurers check-in early at the base of Keystone, get buckled into their ski boots, then catch one of the morning's first gondolas to the Keystone summit. A short walk to KAT's mountain top headquarters -- a round yurt, their outdoorsy base of operations -- and you're welcomed into a cozy room with your own locker, a bottle of water and individual avalanche transceiver equipment.

Gear experts fit you into a set of Salomon's latest powder-friendly, extra-wide skis, teach you how to use avalanche beacons (transceivers), then load you into a bright yellow 12-person snowcat. For those unfamiliar with snowcats, these are the same vehicles groomers use nightly to smooth out the ski runs. The only difference: These snowcats -- many made by Canada's Bombardier -- have giant cabins attached to the back with windows and seating for 12 passengers.

Keystone's cats then transport you into the local backcountry -- five bowls beyond the ski area's main terrain. All five bowls are within Keystone's resort boundary but do not have lift access.

The snowcats spend the day climbing to the ridges of these trackless bowls, about 3,600 metres above sea level. Skiers are dropped off at the top with the guide and a ski patrol acts as a tail gunner. Then, one by one, each member of the group drops into the bowl.

Every run taken is in fresh powder. Some runs are wide open and expansive, others are dotted with easy-to-navigate trees. With names like Patriot, Revolution, Liberty and Midnight Ride, it's a twist on the all-American experience.

Lunch is well-earned and served hot inside yet another backcountry yurt -- belly-warming bean soup, cold cuts, fresh bread and cheesecake. Most skiers cozy up to the yurt's woodstove to compare experiences while shovelling in the hearty grub.

KAT offers the tour daily during winter for \$230 US per day, per person. A minimum of six passengers must sign up for the trip to run.

If you can, it's best to fill the snowcat with your family or friends -- that way you're guaranteed to be skiing with like-minded riders. Skiers must be strong intermediates or better. Expect to get about seven runs per day -- a pace guaranteed to leave you sated and exhausted.

Keystone is located within Colorado's famed Summit County, about 56 km southeast of Vail. It is one of several ski areas in the region, close to Breckenridge, Vail, Beaver Creek and Copper Mountain.

For more information, visit keystoneresort.com.

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