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# Give It A Try

## BACKCOUNTRY SKI GUIDE **BRODIE ST. JULIAN** SHARES HIS ENTHUSIASM ABOUT CHATTER CREEK'S NEW SKI-TOURING PROGRAM.

**A**s a ski guide—and amateur psychologist/sociologist—I've encountered a lot of different types of skiers at Chatter Creek who are into or are curious about alpine touring, and I've come to realize that I like them all.

There's the veteran skier who's been doing this since I was in diapers. The overconfident and underskilled who spends too much time looking for lost gear but remains convinced it's the skis' fault. The skier who begins the trip nervous about her ability but by the end is right on my heels—with a big smile on her face. The strong, silent type who doesn't say much but nails his lines with style. Or the skier who pulls his brand-new skins out of the box, uncut, at the start of the first climb, and proceeds to put them on, sticky side out.

In the Groups Department, there are the husband-and-wife teams or father-and-son buddies who come to spend time together and bond doing something they love. And best friends who passive-aggressively try to outdo each other, while the overachieving business executive sometimes tries to bring the competitive rat race to the skin track.

Wherever you might fall on the spectrum, a guide will be there to offer tips and encouragement, pick up the pieces or cheer you on as you ski your dream line. Chatter Creek accommodates a wide range of skiing and experience levels, allowing new and returning guests to get the most out of their holiday—with the recent ad-

dition of a ski touring component already proving successful.

Chatter Creek Mountain Lodges created its hybrid ski touring program to keep up with the rising popularity of backcountry skiing. If you've been paying attention to the ski industry over the last decade, you know how much alpine touring has changed. No longer a fringe discipline, hoofin' it uphill has become mainstream in the ski world. A large part of this is due to the innovation in gear. Gone are the days when, cringing in pain, you slogged step after step in stiff and uncomfortable boots paired with a set of heavy skis. Some would joke about their death march more than a wonderful walk up into the alpine.

We live in a new world of light, comfortable gear that performs as well on the way up as it does on the way down, raising both the fun factor and increasing the reward beyond skiing virgin powder. Today, there are more options for touring gear than ski guides at a free lunch. The spectrum of skiers varies from the heavier slackcountry GoPro-your-radness and post-your-backcountry-adventure types, to the gram-counting, Spandex-clad and Strava-your-skin-times gearheads. Somewhere in the middle is a compromise between cool and speed that's just right for the average backcountry skier.

Add to the list all the new-and-improved safety gear like avalanche air bags, satellite communication and transceivers in reduced weights and prices with better overall intuitive use—

Photo: DAVE BEST







## YOUR CHOICE: TOURING OR CAT-SKIING?

So you want to go ski touring? Here are a few questions to ask yourself.

- Do I enjoy the challenge of pushing my limits?
- Can I comfortably walk with a heavy pack (10 kg) for a whole day?
- Would I enjoy squashed sandwiches and warm tea on an alpine peak?
- Can I carry my skis on my shoulder to push up to the peak to get the best line possible?
- Am I able to laugh at myself when I fall on my face attempting a kick-turn?

If you answered *yes* to most of these questions, then you're ready to test your mettle with a Chatter Creek Ski Touring adventure.

If your answers to the above questions were a hard *no*, you may be a great candidate for cat-skiing.

- Do I want to spend my ski holiday racking up the maximum amount of cat-skiing vertical possible?
- Do I enjoy the comfort of a cat to warm up and grab a snack or snooze between runs?
- Do I break out in a cold sweat just looking up at a peak and wondering how I would get myself to the top?
- Is the walk mechanism on the back of my ski boots only for walking to the bar?
- Do I feel that fighting gravity is just plain wrong?

If you said *yes* to most of these questions, then cat-skiing would be the perfect fit.

[chattercreek.ca](http://chattercreek.ca)



advancements in backcountry gear that have been remarkable. All of which is also useful in justifying to your mate or family why you need to spend some time at Chatter Creek.

Nestled in a wooded valley on the western front of the Rocky Mountains, Chatter's two massive log cabins are a 15-minute helicopter ride from its base in Donald, near Golden, B.C. Just out the door lies an epic combination of beautifully rugged terrain with a consistently deep snowpack: think Rogers Pass snowfalls but with striking Lake Louise scenery. What started as a six-guest cat-ski operation in the early 2000s, has grown to accommodate 36 cat-skiers—and now, six ski-touring guests.

Chatter's skiable terrain is a playground of great fall lines and a perfect mix of tree-skiing, open glades and steepes, which make for just the right amount of challenge to any level of fitness and

skiing ability. With 23,500 hectares of terrain (about the size of seven Whistler Blackcomb resorts) and more than 100 named runs, Chatter Creek is one of the biggest and most diverse cat-skiing operations in Canada.

A typical AT-day begins with a 30-minute cat ride from the lodge to the top of our first run. We start off in ski mode as our first uptrack is courtesy of the cat driver, the "assist" in cat-assisted ski touring. Once we drop into our line, however, we're all on our own for the day—and far beyond all other groups. Looking around we see Mother Nature in its full frontal glory. Some of the area's most prominent peaks loom over our tracks: Mt. Columbia, Mt. Sir Sandford, Mt. Clemenceau and many other majestic mountains named after old white guys, few of whom actually saw them.

And when we finish gawking at all the scenery

and put our snacks and water bottles back in our packs, it's up to us to climb to the top of our next run. Want to ski off the top of Vertigo peak? Looks good! Let's start breaking trail. How much and how far we ski simply depends on your fitness and desire. Whether you want to rack up the vert or enjoy a relaxed day walking through the mountains, we accommodate the group's wishes.

On average days we ski four runs and ascend roughly 1,000m of elevation—and we always get to ski more than we climb because the first run is "on the house." At the end of the day, the powder-satiated group is picked up in the cat to chat or snooze on the way back to the lodge for après snacks and share a story or two at the bar. Aside from stepping back to the wondrous world of ski touring, an obvious advantage of this program is to maximize the amount we can do in a day. Having that first





It's not a race, it's just one foot after another—and the guide always gets to break trail.

Photo: DAVE BEST



Photo: IAIN MACMILLAN

cat ride boost us right into the best terrain each morning means there's no time wasted walking up valleys just to get to the trailhead.

You may be asking yourself if you're ready for such an adventure, and the answer is "likely." Although not necessary, it can help to come with some backcountry experience as well as intermediate skiing ability, but I've learnt that a good attitude and stubbornness will go a long way—and help you get the most out of your experience. Tours range from two to four days, and you should be ready for seven to eight hours out in the field each day. If you have experienced mechanized skiing and want to try out ski touring, or if you have ski toured and want to spend less time walking and more time shredding, Chatter's hybrid program could be for you.

And here is where I come in. All of this happens with an ACMG-certified guide as well as a tail guide.

Not only do we lead guests safely through their ski adventure, we're responsible for a constant source of bad jokes and corny one-liners. Being a career skier, I have developed a bloodhound-like nose to sniff out the best lines with the best snow, many of which are accessible only on skins, making all the other skiers envious as they look over at our rad lines.

Although ski touring isn't for everyone, those who want a connection to the mountains will appreciate the work it takes to make it under your own power. The best things are never easy, right? After the snowcat drops us off in the morning, peace and silence is with us all day, no more engine noise and the smell of diesel. Dropping into Bowl-ing Alley below, the mental and physical challenges of getting yourself out can be as rewarding as the untouched powder you and half-a-dozen others just skied. It's not always easy; you'll sweat,

steam and push yourself to keep going. And you'll feel great about it.

After finishing a climb like Hazard County provides and reach the top of Smoking Herb, the rewards are bigger and the sense of accomplishment grander. We all work as a team to get the most out of our time together and as a result there's a deep connection that forms in the group. Looking around the dining room at night, you'll proudly realize you're eating at the "cool table." You really get to know a person when you have the day to chat on the uphill, and I know from experience that people noticeably open up in this environment—oversharing can be a real thing. So even if you start the trip with strangers, you'll leave as friends with a common experience and, who knows, maybe new ski partners for future trips. 🏔️