

The powder highway : freeriding in Canada

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THE POWDER HIGHWAY - FREERIDING IN CANADA

The Powder Highway in Canada is a circuit of multiple ski resorts in British Columbia (BC)'s Kootney Rockies, known for its deep powder and chilled ski towns. My wife Anna and I visited the Powder Highway in February 2018, together with Jean-Marc, a Swiss-Canadian couple, and our guide Mike. The month of February seemed to be a good time before the busier holiday season in March, thanks to colder temperatures that preserve the snow quality and a well-built base in snowpack.

“Skins? Wait a second... Are we gonna hike?!” asked a worried voice with an unmistakable French accent. Jean-Marc prefers charging his Rossignols straight downhill to any form of hiking. However, even Jean-Marc had to admit that opening a fresh couloir was worth the short hike. The couloir was not a bad start, but the transport there was quite a different story. In short, our flight got cancelled due to a snow storm. A proper one. So proper, that Mike wasn't able to make the two-hour drive to Calgary airport. He only picked us up the day after. “Are you Anna and Jakub?” “Yes, how did you know?” “I asked all couples with skis passing by”, said Mike, smiling and without forgetting to mention that our rental van was on summer tyres. “Canadian laws”, he explained. Never mind. We skipped the rest of the day and still managed all of our four planned stops on the Powder Highway: Kicking Horse, Revelstoke, Whittewater, and Red Mountain.

Repeating “Pow, pow, pow, pow...”, Jean-Marc skipped lunch on our first day in

Kicking Horse, despite “Poutine” – a local dish consisting of French fries with cheese soaked in gravy. Jean-Marc is a truly dedicated skier. The only skier I know who made headlines in The Guardian and South China Morning Post. He had skied Stairs of Sacré-Cœur opposite of the Eiffel Tower when snow had covered Northern France. A typical run in Kicking Horse looks like this: You take the central gondola up to the very top, traverse a “who-waxed-bootpacks-less”-ridge, and drop into one of the many couloirs. Obligatory moguls further down on the mountain test your legs. One of those mogul runs bears its name «Terminator» for a reason.

Another storm was challenging our not-mountain-compliant van on a drive to Revelstoke, BC, the only place we visited in Canada with cable cars up to Austrian standards. (Slow chairlifts without a foot rest are common.) And a place with continuous 2km vertical drops. You ski forever and still have three quarters to go. Freeride options in Revelstoke are endless and fun, even days after the last snowfall - no need for heli-skiing here. We left Revelstoke in another snow storm for the town Nelson and the nearby resort Whittewater. Two sunny days and fresh snow made up for less vertical slopes compared to Revelstoke.

Our last stop in Rossland and the Red Mountain resort turned out to be truly special. The Red Mountain consists of three old chairlifts (one of them red, but all without foot rests) up to three different



Charging through the trees (photo courtesy of Jean-Marc Paillous)

mountains which you can ski all around. Our local friends knew the best hidden stashes! Steep trees, steep trees, a little opening, and steep trees again. Anthony, one of the locals and owner of a great barn accommodation in Rosslund, went through the trees on his European-sized skis (i.e. short and narrow) like a ghost. The only chance to keep up with him was to follow the sound of the bell attached to his pole. The golden rule of tree skiing is to look in-between the trees unless you want to hug one. The golden rule of après-ski is to hit the best bar according to the Ski Canada Magazine, which happened to be in the Red Mountain. We followed both rules and

the latter was a great finish to our eight skiing days in a row, four places visited and two thousand kilometers in our van.

Skiing in Canada differs in many aspects to what we are used to in Europe. First of all, it's often about steep tree-skiing. Trees are great and fun, and there are no longer bad weather days. Secondly, all large freeride areas around ski resorts are avalanche controlled, i.e. no avalanche gear is needed. And finally, small kids drop cliffs and rip down moguls as if they were a piece of cake!

Jakub Chleboun

NEW MIXED CLIMBS IN ALASKA'S REVELATION MOUNTAINS

Ever since Clint Helander's feature article in the American Alpine Journal in 2013, we kept reading about the wild mountains, fickle weather, and good climbing in Alaska's Revelation Mountains. But as the years went by, many of the objectives identified by Clint were being ticked off. One valley, however, seemed to have been spared the attention. After looking at the maps and Google Earth, Frieder Wittmann and I decided to explore the south fork of the Fish Glacier. Having checked the landing feasibility with Talkeetna Air Taxi, we were soon loading their plane with food and fuel for three weeks.

Flying over the Alaska range in a small plane was spectacular. Landing roller-coaster style in the soft snow on a beautiful

glacier was even better. Seeing a bunch of unclimbed walls and peaks around got us dizzy. I was already content with the trip and it was just the beginning. After landing on the Fish glacier on 28 March 2017, we spent a few hours digging trenches for our gear. As the afternoon came, I was getting tired and was about to go to bed early. Frieder, however, was keen to try to climb something immediately. I agreed to follow him and belay where needed. We chose a peak next to our landing spot. We skinned up to a col, and a pleasant ridge with a few rocky steps got us to the top. The mountain had two obvious high points, and because we couldn't be certain which was higher, we tagged them both. We named the route "It's A Girl!" (PD, easy snow and rock). It was midnight by the time we were