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COLD BRITISH COLUMBIA FUN RES

It's known for its great skiing, but Golden holds treasures of all kinds for snow enthusiasts visiting British Columbia

**BY SABRINA DOYLE
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAIRE DIBBLE**



I HEAR MY NECK CRACK beneath the snow, and immediately, I fear the worst. Even if I'm not paralyzed, surely the hands-free cartwheel I just spectacularly — albeit accidentally — performed will have consequences. I lie motionless for a moment before cautiously sitting up, and give my head a subtle wobble. Amazingly, everything seems to be in order. I push myself to my feet and glide down the mountain to join the others, thankful the promise I made to my mother is still intact.

Flash back to three months prior, when a guide for this heliskiing trip in British Columbia inquired about my snowboarding ability. I was honest: intermediate runs at my local ski hills were a piece of cake, and I could handle a few of the black diamonds too. Perfect, he'd replied. And just like that, any qualms I'd had were laid to rest on a pillow of fluffy snowflakes, the likes of which I imagined myself soon racing through à la Mark McMorris. "Of course I'll be fine," I later assured my mom. It turns out that Ontario and British Columbia have very different interpretations of black diamond.

The Purcell Mountains are one of four ranges in southeastern British Columbia that make up the Columbia Mountains. Formed 10 million to 20 million years before their Rocky Mountain neighbours, the Purcells are shorter, but make up for it with more vertical distance between peak and base, which lies closer to sea level. I'm exploring the range's northern end, in the town of Golden. Fewer than 4,000 people live in this patch of Rocky Mountain Trench, with the Rockies rising on one side and the Purcells on the other. It also marks the confluence of

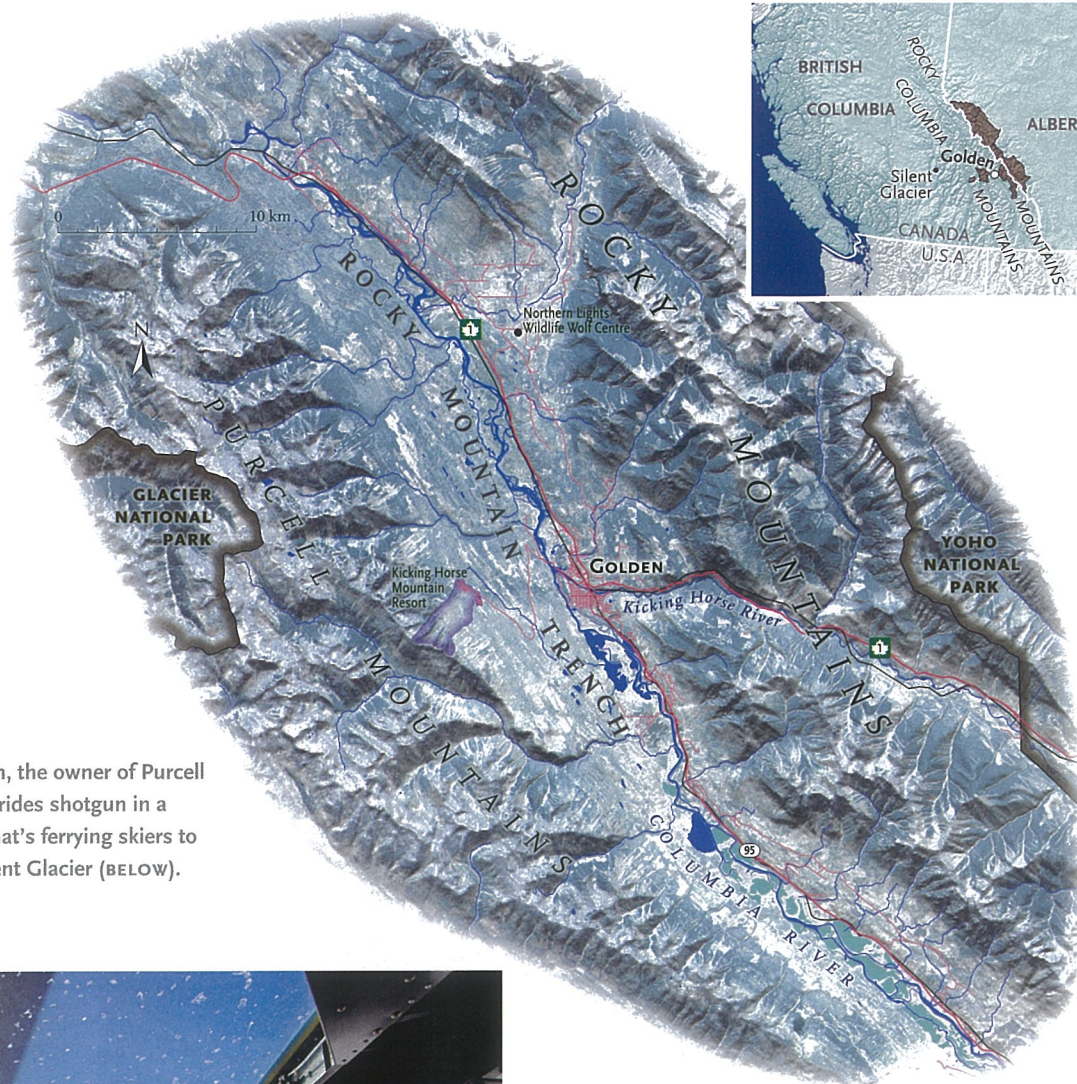


Skiers duck as a helicopter lifts off from a snowy peak in the Purcell Mountains, the start of a run known as **The Hump** (TOP). A guide directs skiers about to tackle an untouched line on the **T+A** run (ABOVE).

two rivers — the Kicking Horse and the Columbia — and it's close to no less than six national parks, all of which make it an ideal base for adventure.

I pull into town after a three-hour drive from the Calgary airport, and gape at the seemingly perpendicular ski slopes towering over nearby Kicking Horse Mountain Resort. Boasting an

GOLDEN



Rudi Gertsch, the owner of Purcell Heli-Skiing, rides shotgun in a helicopter that's ferrying skiers to a run on Silent Glacier (BELOW).



ever-expanding collection of in-bound chutes (current total: 87) and North America's fourth-highest vertical drop, the resort has left many an expert feeling "kicked by the horse." It makes me wonder: Is this town only for diehard powder hounds?

Instead, over the next five days, I find a wintry playground catering to both pros and rookies. Sure, 60 per cent of the resort's runs come with black diamonds, but there's also a luxurious

10-kilometre beginner trail that switchbacks from the Golden Eagle Express gondola all the way to the bottom, with sweeping lookouts sprinkled throughout. Upon leaving the gondola, altitude addicts have the option of satisfying their inner foodie at Eagle's Eye, the resort's highly acclaimed mountaintop restaurant. If the mountain panorama doesn't interest you, the wild boar poutine might.

Beyond skiing, Golden offers more mellow pursuits too — an art gallery featuring local artists, riverside pathways and the chance to grab a Canadiana road trip snapshot with the world's largest paddle. (The lumber town is a haven for paddling in the summer.) The wolves, however, fall somewhere in the middle of the adrenaline spectrum.

The morning after exploring Kicking Horse, I find myself strolling through snowy woods with two wolves rescued as orphans. Casey and Shelley Black run the Northern Lights Wildlife Wolf Centre, located about 15 minutes outside Golden, and offer the experience of walking with wolves. Our partners are Maya, a reticent 30-kilogram grey wolf who, while long in the tooth at 15 years, is lithe and enchanting, and two-year-old Scrapy Dave, whom Shelley describes as "the quickest mitten grabber in the West."



As predicted, Scrapy Dave is bursting with puppy exuberance. I'm startled when all 34 kilograms of him leaps up to lick my face; there's zero aggression behind the move, but it's a manners issue that the Blacks are still working on. (It might be less cute when he reaches 45 kilograms.) Maya is slower to trust. She wanders away from us and gazes at the hills rising in the distance.

It was the Canadian Pacific Railway that first saw money hidden beneath the sparkling slopes that would eventually become known as the Powder Highway, a 1,000-kilometre loop through British Columbia's interior mountains. Billed as the "Canadian Alps," the CPR began luring mountaineers from Switzerland to guide tourists through these fresh, uncharted peaks. Eventually CPR built a cluster of Swiss-style houses near Golden for the guides' families; alas, the architect had not undertaken a serious examination of Swiss houses, and the resulting designs did little to ease homesickness. Visitors can still walk through the remains of "Edelweiss," which serves as a lasting reminder of the guides' popularization of Canadian mountaineering.

At the moment, I've got my own Swiss guide to worry about. After finding my neck unbroken and powder up to my knees, I consider the man I'm fumbling after. Rudi Gertsch, local legend and owner of Purcell Heli-Skiing, was born beneath the Bernese Alps and started skiing as soon as he could walk. In 1966, a then 21-year-old Gertsch transplanted to the Canadian Rockies and has been guiding in Canada ever since. Shortly before his arrival, commercial heli-skiing was born in the Bugaboo Mountains, just south of Golden. Today the Powder Highway has one of the highest densities of ski operations — including resorts, heli-ski, cat-ski and backcountry — in the world. Now 69, Gertsch still skies 80 days a year, with no plans of stopping any time soon. "As long as you can push me out of the helicopter and fasten skis to my feet, I'll be skiing," he chuckles.

Gertsch is clearly made for the mountains, but his grey hair helps dispel the misconception that heli-skiing is just for young,

Powder skis rest in fresh snow after being dropped from a helicopter (ABOVE). There's more to Golden than skiing, however — including going for a stroll with (BELOW, left to right) Casey Black, Scrapy Dave and Maya at the Northern Lights Wildlife Wolf Centre.



cliff-jumping hotshots. According to Gertsch's daughter-in-law, Katie, who also works at Purcell, two-thirds of their clientele arrive in my situation, having never skied backcountry powder. Thankfully, the company's more than 2,000 square kilometres of terrain offers plenty of customizations (though you're unlikely to find any beginner runs). Regardless of experience level, Katie says it's always a joy to introduce newcomers to Golden's backyard. And as far as backyards go, this one's hard to beat.

I ask the elder Gertsch — who lost his first wife and brother to two separate avalanches, six years apart — why he's happier on the slopes than anywhere else.

BOTTOM: SABRINA DOYLE/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC



“Mother Nature can be very hard on us, but she’s also magical. Every day is different, and it’s so special to be able to share the mountains with a guest, to show them the wilderness that’s out there.”

His style is effortless, as much a part of him as breathing, and we all watch in awe from the lip of the slope as he marks a path through the trees. Ah yes, the trees. Our day is overcast, meaning the luxurious wide bowls I dreamed of are out (the poor light makes assessing the uniform whiteness of the terrain difficult) — but glades are in. Not my forte, and not how I’d planned to get a feel for powder.

But by the time I found out, there was no time for second thoughts. We were in the helicopter, soaring over an undulating white canvas speckled with army-green spruce trees. We touch down and, like trained cadets, our group spills out and huddles around a backpack on the ground. “If you can’t touch the pack, you’re too far,” we’d been told. The nine of us knot tighter, and I find myself curled up on the lap of a loud-laughing adventurer from Vermont. Then the helicopter is gone, leaving our world a shaken snow globe.

For the first two runs, I struggle with the powder. Carving doesn’t work in deep snow — you just fall. I need to relearn how to turn: weight on back foot, guide with extra-bent knees.

At a lofty 2,300-plus metres, the Eagle’s Eye restaurant at Kicking Horse Mountain Resort is called “Canada’s most elevated dining experience” — getting there requires a 1,200-metre ascent in a gondola.

Eventually I adjust, and the light, dry snow that makes the area famous becomes less of a cartwheel safety net and more of a velvety dream. It’s like hand-surfing the air outside a car window on the highway, dipping and rising with the currents, but with trees to dodge. It’s exhilarating.

I concentrate on the white path ahead of me as I make my way down the mountain, eventually breaking out of the trees to find myself in an open meadow with the waiting helicopter in sight, ready to take us home. Wide-eyed, I slice downhill, already excited for a time when I will go heli-skiing again. The group cheers my approach. Feeling confident, I allow myself to mirror them, whooping as I thrust a triumphant mittened fist into the air, causing me to lose my balance. I finish the day with one last theatrical, painless tumble.



He’s a local legend who has seen it all in his more than 50 years working in the Rockies. Read an interview with Rudi Gertsch, Purcell Heli-Skiing’s owner, at mag.cangeo.ca/nov14/ski.