

# THE GREAT ESCAPE

When all you want is acres of backcountry or miles of perfect pistes, plus delicious food and a comfortable bed, Banff's three ski areas, and the extensive wilderness beyond, more than fit the bill

WORDS Leslie Woit



**T**hwop thwop thwop... that sexy siren call of heliskiers. I clamber out of the Bell 407, dropping my skis and backpack in a pile on the ground. As I shield my eyes against the fierce snow blast of lift off, the helicopter roars off over snow-padded peaks and disappears into the distance. And then I remember, this isn't heliskiing. This particular helicopter won't be back for three days.

Instead, I am fly-in ski touring – reaching a remote base via helicopter, then sliding up the mountains with the help of skins attached to my skis before enjoying the ski down. No lifts, few people. One flight in, one flight out.

Straddling the spine of Canada's rugged Rocky Mountains, Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park in British Columbia can only be reached by helicopter or on skis. I have just driven the 30km from the ski town of Banff to Canmore heliport, where a helicopter was waiting to make the short flight to Assiniboine Lodge, my home for the next few days. Being 28km from the nearest road, the lodge is historically reached on skis, a journey many still choose to make. Our helicopter combines the new and traditional, speeding us to an old-school experience and across 50km in just 13 minutes.

I take in the view. A curl of smoke rises from the chimney of the rough-hewn log lodge, skis are propped

against a rack and fresh tracks – both human and animal – zigzag around the buildings. A clutch of smaller cabins hugs the frozen lake's edge. Mount Assiniboine, the tallest peak in the southern Canadian Rockies, is a sensational backdrop. The only thing missing from this iconic tableau is a Mountie and a moose.

"This place is a time warp," says Andre Renner with a smile, welcoming me at the door. Andre, fellow mountain guide Claude Duchesne and his wife Annick are co-custodians of Assiniboine Lodge. The first backcountry ski lodge in the Canadian Rockies, Assiniboine was built in 1928, by Norwegian ski instructor Erling Strom and Nicholas degli Albizzi, an Italian marquis who was also winter sports director at Lake Placid, New York. Even back then, the lure of the backcountry called. "There is not much to tell about lift skiing," wrote Strom, the original powder snob. "It is great fun, but one run is much like another." Recognising the park's potential, he and the marquis convinced the Canadian Pacific Railway that it needed to build a ski lodge at Assiniboine for "fancy clients", as part of its push to encourage the budding tourism industry in the Rockies. Strom and degli Albizzi brought the first guests over in March 1929.

These days, the lodge caters for 25 people with three delicious meals a day, plus "tea goodies" after guided ▶

▼  
**Remote Assiniboine Lodge in Canada's Rocky Mountains provides a rustic and comfortable base from which to explore the surrounding ski-touring terrain**



excursions. “This is the storybook ‘log cabin in the woods’ that everyone loves,” Andre explains. “It’s not complicated here, it’s mainly about the powder, the eating, and the sauna-ing. And then it’s time for bed again.”

After the short flight and a quick lunch, with no lift schedules to abide by there is ample time for exploring. Following an avalanche transceiver session, our group of five fixes skins to our skis and follows our guide Mark Hammerschmidt across the peaceful plateau behind the lodge. The terrain rises gently, mountains in every direction are upholstered in downy powder. A chirpy chickadee, the rhythmic brush of Gore-Tex and a little heavy breathing are the only sounds.

Groups of guests – singles, couples, friends and often entire families – are formed according to ability and expectations. I’ve joined two couples who arrived a few days earlier. It’s Anna’s first time ski touring, and Eva is pacing herself. The two men, Rob and Paul, are very strong skiers. As Anna says, when we stop between runs for much needed sandwiches and cookies, the challenge of climbing using skins isn’t only physical. “It’s a head game.” You need to have the will to keep going up for at least an hour, with only the promise of a 20-minute descent at the end. We ski down through a larch meadow, the trees get thicker and thicker as we descend. Then it’s up again, across a ridge and through a wide spaced spruce forest. The snow is

deep and creamy, and, like baking your own cake, no run down is sweeter than the one you’ve just hiked up.

“The pleasure of going somewhere under your own effort,” is how Mark characterises ski touring’s appeal. A long-time heli-guide, he’s recently jumped the fence to become a full-time ski-tour guide at Assiniboine, a career path shared by others here. “Heliskiers don’t have time to look around at the top. They’re only counting the metres,” he says, as we pause to take in the pristine UNESCO sanctioned peaks that form the Continental Divide. “They think it’s Disneyland. That we turn it on in December and then turn it off in April. Ski tourers understanding of the elements is very different, they have a better appreciation.”

The next day, as is often the way in the tombola of a weather zone created by the Continental Divide, we wake to six inches of fresh snow. After coffee, fresh muffins and a cooked breakfast, we open the door to a glittering powder world. We set off to slide up and ski down low-angle drainages to the east and north of the lodge, then up through trees and trails and along ridgelines – pretty ▶

**NO RUN DOWN IS SWEETER THAN THE ONE YOU’VE JUST HIKED UP**

▼ Lake Louise’s slopes give spectacular views of its namesake lake. Above: Assiniboine Lodge guests set off for a day in the backcountry

## BANFF

### NEW IN BANFF

#### An indulgent spa hotel

Opening in spring 2016, the Moose Hotel & Suites ([moosehotelsuites.com](http://moosehotelsuites.com)), on the corner of Moose Street in the heart of Banff, has 174 rooms and suites, spa, indoor pool, rooftop hot tubs and an Italian restaurant.

#### Wood-fired food

Park ([parkdistillery.com](http://parkdistillery.com)), right, Banff’s new whisky distillery and restaurant at 219 Banff Avenue offers rotisserie chicken, ribs, wings and steaks cooked on the grill and tasty salads. Plus, a selection of spirits distilled on-site.

#### Toasty-warm uplift

Canada’s first heated chairlift opens at Sunshine Village resort. The new fast



quad is located on Lookout Mountain, which gives easy access to some good black diamond runs.

#### Elevated eating

Refuel with a view of Mount Temple, feasting on cheese fondue, seafood chowder or a bison burger at the recently renovated Whitehorn Bistro, a short traverse from the bottom of Sunset, via the Glacier Express or Grizzly Gondola.



## APRÈS ADVENTURES

### Skate on a frozen lake

Five minutes from the Post Hotel, Lake Louise (above) is possibly the most scenic skating rink in the world. Hire skates at the Fairmont Chateau ([fairmont.com](http://fairmont.com)), perched at the lake's edge, then twirl around admiring the backdrop of the Victoria Glacier and the Rockies.

### Snowshoe under the stars

Experience the area around Lake Louise in the quiet of the night, with only the sound of snow scrunching underfoot and the stars above you. The Fairmont Chateau can organise day or night snowshoe tours.

### See local wildlife

Keep an eye out for some of the more than 900 elk (not to be confused with moose) that live close to Lake Louise. Banff National Park is estimated to have 3,200 elk. And weighing around 315kg, they're easy to spot.

### Try ice-climbing

Yamnuska Mountain Adventures ([yamnuska.com](http://yamnuska.com)) runs one-off lessons and longer ice-climbing courses for all levels, from beginner to expert. Try out thrilling ice routes around Banff, including canyons and frozen waterfalls.

much everything we can see from Assiniboine Lodge is skiable. And so off we explore. There's no rush because there's no competition for our fresh tracks.

After four or five runs, a picnic lunch – sandwiches, homemade granola bars, and chocolate chip cookies that make life worth living – is followed by a long gentle ski back to the lodge, where the new sauna and hot showers feel very luxurious. The Lodge had a full overhaul a few years ago but still doesn't have Wi-Fi: "People here are looking for a refuge," Andre says. Time for a nap before drinks and nibbles by the fire at 6pm, followed by a delicious dinner – Annick's tomato and roasted pepper soup, miso-style halibut with roasted beets, carrots with ginger and maple syrup, spinach salad, and chocolate mousse with fresh strawberries and mint. The wine and conversation flow well into the night, and then to round things off Andre makes a batch of the house tippie, cougar milk, a rum concoction invented in 1929 by the first guests. At 10pm, a pre-bed visit to the outhouse (the basic indoor loo is reserved for late-night necessities) reveals a full moon hanging incandescent above the mountain tops.

After three peaceful days like this, the time machine returns to take us the 13-minute flight back to the 21st century, and my next port of call – the Post Hotel in Lake Louise. Driving up Highway 1, we pass the town of Banff, home to the short 'n' steep Norquay ski area. Just five minutes from downtown, this is the locals' favourite, including for tubing and night skiing. A further 15 minutes up the highway is the turn off for the Sunshine ski area, whose gondola accesses three mountains, Lookout, Standish and Goat's Eye, which are open from November until May thanks to three-storey snowfalls each season. Both these areas and Lake Louise are covered by the Banff-Lake Louise tri-area lift pass. The Post Hotel, formerly called the Lake Louise Ski Lodge,



is a five-minute drive from the ski resort. The original log cabin, which now forms the dining room of the hotel, was built in 1942 by ski guide Jim Boyce and a crew of 10 men using hand tools. Back then, the concept of rustic chic had yet to be born. But the Swiss-born Schwarz brothers, self-proclaimed ski bums with a taste for the good life, bought the hotel in 1978 and transformed it. Former ski school director at Lake Louise, André Schwarz was also head honcho of the Canadian Ski Instructors Alliance, while his brother George had opened his first of several restaurants by the age of 23. Even the general manager of 29 years, Geoff Booth, is a Level 4 instructor. The Post is a ski hotel for skiers, by skiers.

The Post Hotel's free shuttle transports us to the runs of Lake Louise's varied terrain, which is spread across four mountains rising to a majestic 2,730m with 4,200 acres of pistes that include beginner, intermediate

## THE WINE AND CONVERSATION FLOW WELL INTO THE NIGHT

NOEL ROGERS

▼  
The Post Hotel, five-minutes from Lake Louise, has excellent food in luxurious surroundings (above)



## ON A SUNNY DAY LIKE THIS, IT IS TRULY SPECTACULAR



▼  
Sunshine's three snow-sure mountains offer great terrain for experts

and expert runs. Today I am lucky enough to have André as my guide. "On a sunny day like this, it is truly spectacular," he says as we stand above the inky green forests of Banff, ready to head into the ungroomed back bowls that the Lake is famous for.

We take the Summit Platter, an old-school drag-lift, an eight-minute, 410m steep ride that deposits us just shy of the tip of Mt Whitehorn. The big reveal, one of the greatest in Canadian skidom, comes as I release the platter and look towards the peaky panorama of the wide Bow Valley. Spreading out before me are the north face of Mt Temple, Victoria Glacier, Lake Louise itself, Mt Fairview, the entire Valley of Ten Peaks. These are the icons of Canadian mountaineering history, the fearsome peaks that lured the pioneers of travel exploration and brought the Canadian railway west. Standing on skis, we're faced with a terrific variety of choices. Take it easy on blue Sunset and head down towards the mainly cruisey Grizzly Bowl. But we choose instead the black diamond runs of the Whitehorn Chutes – each one steeper than the last, with narrow waists and no alternative but to go straight down. Even in the stretches between snowfalls, these faces fill with lots of windswept snow and remain wonderlands of soft, grippy white. At the bottom of Whitehorn, a beautiful valley traverse takes us to the Paradise Bowl chair and double-black diamond terrain or to Temple Lodge and the mainly blue and green runs served by the Larch quad or Ptarmigan chairs.

At the end of the day, I immerse myself in the Post's Rocky Mountain elegance – a wood-burning fireplace

in my pine-lined suite, a dip in the saltwater pool and, before dinner, a drink by the bar's crackling fire beneath the gaze of Sir Norman Watson, a British aircraft manufacturer and avid sportsman who was the former owner. Sir Norman's wizened visage battles valiantly for wall space among framed hospitality certificates and awards. A repeated winner of The Wine Spectator's prestigious Grand Award, The Post's 25,000 bottle collection features around 2,400 selections, including eye-watering verticals of super-Tuscans, Burgundies and Bordeaux.

"It's not just the wine that surprises people," says George Schwarz as we peruse a menu that includes caribou from the Northwest Territories, Arctic char and dishes with an Asian twist. Over dinner, we meet a gaggle of spirited German heliskiers, Americans from both coasts, and Brits who ski nowhere else. "A lot of people who come from the major centres of the world are amazed to find this" – George waves his hand across the linen-draped dining room that looks uninterrupted on to the vistas of Banff National Park – "in the middle of nowhere." Whether you're riding a chairlift or flying in a helicopter, cruising groomers or touring through powder, nothing beats coming home to a log cabin in the woods. \*

### NEED TO KNOW

A seven-night trip with Ski Safari (01273 224060; skisafari.com) in January 2016 costs £1,959 per person. This includes four nights' room only at the Post Hotel, Lake Louise (two at the beginning, two at the end); three nights (January 20–23) at Assiniboine Lodge, Assiniboine Provincial Park, including helicopter access from Canmore, lodging and meals, safety gear and guiding; flights and car hire.

**FAST FACTS** SIX-DAY LIFT PASS C\$592 | **MORE INFO** [skibig3.com](http://skibig3.com)



**RESORT**  
1,645m



**SLOPES**  
1,630m to 2,730m



**LIFTS**  
28



**PISTES**  
7,748 acres



**RATING**  
3/5 4/5 4/5