

Steep learning curve in Canada's toughest ski resort

Red Mountain in British Columbia has steep tree runs and terrifying cliff drops. But it now also has beginners' slopes...

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One of the challenging runs at Red Mountain in Canada.

Photograph: Dave Heath/Red Mountain Resort:



There's a popular anecdote you'll hear in Rossland, a former gold mining town that sits beneath the small ski resort of Red Mountain in British Columbia. It tells of a local who once skied the ultimate steep, powdery line between Red's tightly packed trees, emerging at the bottom as a gasping, snow plastered, beardy mess (beards are big in Rossland) to exclaim, "That was the best run of my life." He rushed back up the mountain to repeat his descent – to no avail.

This wasn't because he was eaten by a bear or swept away by an avalanche – he just couldn't find the same run again.

Red's heavily wooded off-piste terrain is all but unmapped and unless you know the exact two trees you snuck between to enjoy such a run, the chances of finding the same line again are minimal.

[Ski Canada Magazine](#)'s writers, who know a thing or two about gnarly [skiing](#), rate Red Mountain as having the country's "Best Steeps", "Best Powder" and "Best Trees". [Canada](#)'s most famous female skier, 1968 Olympic gold medallist Nancy Greene, grew up here and reckons that after having learned to ski at Red "everything else seemed easy and not very steep".

Her legacy has been carried on by young locals such as Dane Tudor, 2009 Canadian freeski champion, and Leah Evans, one of the country's top big mountain skiers. Red's reputation and their talents are built on terrain described by at least one ski guidebook as "dangerous ... and positively hazardous". Runs include Cambodia, with its mandatory cliff drops (small cliffs but cliffs all the same), and 3rd Slide, where you can easily lose your ski partner between the maze of trees. The pick-up-sized bumps of Red Towers are conveniently located underneath the rickety old Red Chair lift, so those gliding serenely uphill can be entertained by watching you slide downhill on your backside.

I'd always seen Red as a challenge that at some point in my ski career I would have to face up to. But my partner Claire is a complete novice: was it really fair to subject her to such a potentially intimidating initiation into Canadian skiing?

Well actually it was – because over the past five years Red has relented, offering something for skiers without a predilection for leaping off cliffs. It has opened a clutch of very user-friendly runs on the lower slopes of Granite Mountain, the resort's highest peak.



Here there are greens and blues with gentle slopes snaking between glades of tall, aromatic pines. They allowed Claire to grapple with the basics before her instructor Jean-Marie took her to the top of Granite for the 5km green run that loops gently around the mountain and back to the base lodge, providing fantastic views of Rossland a couple of miles below and the Columbia river valley in the far distance.

My introduction to one of the toughest resorts in Canada came in the form of an off-piste black diamond run called Powder Fields. Mountain guide Roly

Worsfold led the way between relatively open trees, powder hissing over the top of our boots as we descended through a classic British Columbian landscape where summit after summit of forested mountains marched towards us like a blue-green ocean swell. By heading away from the centre line of the run we were able to find untracked powder stashes.

This search for the fluffy stuff can make skiing at Red a solitary experience, though, as I found the following day when I joined Roly and a couple of his mates to ski the more closely packed trees of Pale Face. We all headed off on our own lines with an enthusiastic whoop or whistle to indicate our location as we snaked in and out of the trees. Eventually I stopped, mainly because a large conifer insisted that one of us should give way, and I slumped back into the snow to listen to the silence.

It was so quiet I could hear the swoosh of the snow slicing off the skis of the other guys as they dropped gracefully away beneath me, an occasional "Woo-hoo!" echoing back off the trunks of a thousand trees. Then suddenly there was no sound at all other than my heavy breathing, and no sign of Roly and the others below me. So I got back on my skis and began threading my way between tree trunks until, like the local dude who skied the "best line ever", I emerged at the bottom of Pale Face on to an empty cat track, knowing I would never be able to find that exact line again.

More shouts soon brought us back together. We'd all become spread out over about 400m. While all this whooping and a-hollering was taking place in the trees, Jean-Marie had been introducing Claire to the steeper intermediate slopes of Paradise, on the back side of Granite. These are mainly sun-kissed blues, accessed by an old triple chair manned by the kind of agreeable lifties that are rare in Europe. After about five rides I more or less knew each liftie personally and would invariably end up rubbing shoulders with them later in the day while sinking a beer in the base lodge's newly refurbished Rafters bar.

Red has some new luxury ski-in ski-out condos beside the slopes, but this shouldn't be seen as an excuse for neglecting the five-minute drive down into Rossland to wine and dine after a day on the hill.

This is the oldest ski town in western Canada, and it still has a backwoods feel. Lumber trucks grunt along the main street past ultra-cool ski emporiums; eclectic coffee houses offer a warm welcome; and we found ourselves regularly drawn to a sushi restaurant, Drift Izakaya on Columbia Avenue, for sashimi or frazzled prawns.

This combination of ski hill and ski town is small by European standards, but good skiers who enjoy challenging terrain and want a taste of "real" British Columbia rather than the overcrowded glitz and razzle of Whistler won't get bored here, especially as there are also the options of ski touring on neighbouring Grey Mountain, day trips to the equally hardcore ski hill of [Whitewater](#), and local cat- and heli-ski operations if your wallet is feeling heavy.

And since novices are also now well catered for, everyone can return from British Columbia and boast, "I've just skied the toughest ski hill in Canada."