

An Evergreen State of Mind

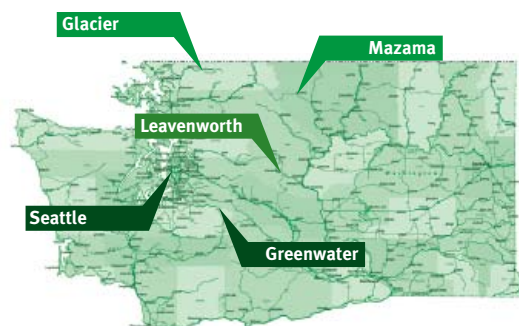
Head southward to the land of loggers and lederhosen, small ski hills and wild massifs, and you'll find common culture across the dividing line

By Dan Kostrzewski

IT'S AN EARLY START AFTER A LATE NIGHT around a smoky bonfire. The coffee shop is packed with the energy of a powder day, but the backwoods barista is moving at a glacial pace because it's his Monday. So rather than wait, I opt for drip. It's been dumping lately and I'm a bit short on cash, which is a familiar story here. After a conversational exchange, the baker/owner/barista says I can pay him later — because really, where else am I going to get sconed?

Outside the general store, I pick up an AT hitchhiker who lives in a van at the end of the road. As is the custom, he smokes up my Subaru on the transit up the canopied access road. We trade stories about hut trips, local objectives and promising towns with names like Terrace or Trout where we might someday spend a winter. I discover this part-time bartender once shared a school bus with the local lazy-eyed patroller who was in my level one avalanche class at Rogers Pass. So we talk current stability then go off-topic to weigh the pros, cons and costs of becoming a guide. But the ramble stops cold when we hit the lot.

The whole community is already here, booting up on truck tail-gates or in the lodge. This same crowd will migrate en masse from chairlift coral to quick-hit lines to sidecountry bootpacks, as fresh snow gets lapped at our family-style ski hill. The local holiday will end in the bar with everyone from college kids and new parents to the entire off-duty ski patrol, buying pitchers in a cramped corner of the dilapidated, well-loved lodge. This scene may seem familiar to Canadian skiers, but it is situated in a mountain vortex that exists outside the boundaries of Kootenay Nation. In fact, it's called Washington state, affectionately known as the Evergreen State, a prime destination for cultural exchange that runs from peak to sound to peak again.



Glaciated

Washington is home to the most glaciers in the Lower 48, so the first stop on our tour is Glacier, an unlikely ski town just south of the Abbotsford, British Columbia, border crossing that has long welcomed rebels, outcasts, hippies and more than a few wayward Canadians. In this chronically underemployed community, the whiskey of choice is Crown and the skis are fat, but Glacier is also a place where nightlife consists of a skate-ramp bonfire down a muddy spur road or sweating next to the woodstove while the bar band plays Ween cover songs.

Back in the 70s, when the sheriff stayed away due to an outlaw reputation, a small crew of Canadian Czechs migrated south to Glacier to build classic A-frames under the forest canopy. They made it an adopted home and became part of a community that has welcomed all kinds, raising pro snowsport talent such as Lucas Debari, Zack Giffin, Rene Crawshaw, Forest Burki, Tory Bland, Adam Ů and Temple Cummins, as well as local legends such as late snowboard pioneer Craig Kelly and the late father figure George Dobis, whose family runs the Mt. Baker Snowboard Shop.

The reason they all land here is the Mt. Baker Ski Area, which sits 34 winding clicks up the dead-end, two-lane highway at treeline. Mt. Baker hosts the annual Legendary Banked Slalom but is more famous for massive storms that earned it a world record for snow-fall, an unbelievable 28.5 metres during the 1998–99 season. Yet what makes the family-run hill such a singular place is not the tight, fast lines or vast sidecountry access to the beautiful Shuksan Arm and Hemispheres areas, but the intentional absence of commercial development, with slow-speed chairs and only a grandfathered Mountaineers lodge for accommodation. The edge-of-the-wilderness location is certifiably epic, with the Border Peaks to the north, the skiable cone of 3,285-metre Mt. Baker toward the coast and the aesthetic alpinist pinnacle of 2,782-metre Mount Shuksan guarding the entrance to the craggy North Cascades. *(continued)*

Clockwise from below: Original Mt. Baker badass, the late George Dobis, holds court in his family-owned Mt. Baker Snowboard Shop; Washington state homeboy Zack Giffin is happy to be first one in on Table Mountain, Mt. Baker ski area backcountry; Mount Shuksan shimmers above the lower lodge at the Mt. Baker ski area after a record storm dumped eight feet in five days, a total of 12 feet in one storm cycle. Photos: Grant Gunderson





**BUT WHAT MAKES MAZAMA
LOCALLY FAMOUS IS
THAT IT'S THE MOUNTAIN
COMMUNITY THAT ALMOST
BECAME WHISTLER VILLAGE.**

Based in Mazama, North Cascade Heli operates on 300,000 acres of steep, stacked terrain. Jackson Hole, Wyoming's Lynsey Dyer carves out her own corner. Photo: Grant Gunderson



The Mazama Model
On the eastern flank of the North Cascades, and just a half hour drive from British Columbia, is the village of Mazama, which sits on the downslope of state Highway 20. The North Cascades Highway opened in 1972 and has been the summer gateway to this American Valhalla, home to legendary Picket Range climbs, the best stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail and the popular Forbidden ski-tour circuit. The highway crests at 1,669-metre Washington Pass, the start zone for the ski ascent of 2,705-metre Silver Star, the corn circle of the Birthday Tour and the classic Fred Beckey climb up Washington's iconic Liberty Bell. But the state's highest-paved pass closes in winter because it has more avalanche paths than

WASHINGTON VS BRITISH COLUMBIA



AREA
WA: 71,000 sq mi (184,000 sq km), stretching south to Oregon
BC: 925,000 sq km (357,000 sq mi), stretching north to Alaska



CAPITAL
WA: Olympia, land of unshaven hippies
BC: Victoria, land of royalist high tea



POPULATION
WA: 6.3 million, half stuck in rush hour on the I-5 corridor
BC: 4.4 Million, half stuck in rush hour on the Lions Gate approach



NATIONAL PARKS
WA: North Cascades, Mount Rainier, Olympic
BC: Glacier, Mount Revelstoke, Yoho and Kootenay



SIX-PACK OF MICROBREW
WA: Six bills, buy it cold at the 7-Eleven
BC: Eleven loonies, buy it warm from the government



HEALTH CARE
WA: Bring your own and a stack of cash
BC: A public right, just get in line



HOMEGROWN GEAR GIANTS
WA: REI, home of the zip-off pant
BC: MEC, home of the zip-up fleece



HELI-SKI AND CAT-SKI OPS
WA: Two operations, but North Cascades Heli is truly the one
BC: 36 operations, from WiegeleWorld and CMH to Baldface and beyond



LANDSCAPES
WA: Peaks, glaciers, forests, islands and coastline to the horizon
BC: Peaks, glaciers, forests, islands and coastline to the horizon



INTERNATIONALLY KNOWN FOR
WA: Microsoft, coffee, Mount St. Helens and microbrew
BC: The Olympics, heli-skiing, softwood and cannabis



WORST EXPORT, WORST LEGACY
WA: Starbucks, creating Hanford nuclear waste
BC: Surrey girls, spreading the pine beetle infestation



STATE SLOGAN
WA: SayWA! or "Washington, the state?"
BC: Supernatural BC or The Best Place on Earth



FAMOUS PEOPLE
WA: Jimi Hendrix, Bob Barker, Kurt Cobain and Batman
BC: Bryan Adams, Pamela Anderson, Michael J. Fox and one-third of BTO



FASTEST OVERLAND ROUTES
WA: The I-5 and I-90 Interstates, average cruising speed 130km/hr
BC: Highway One and the Sea-to-Sky, average cruising speed 80km/hr



MAJOR SKI AREAS
WA: 11, in various phases of time warp, but Baker is all you need
BC: 21, in various phases of Liberal-backed development, not counting Jumbo



ADVICE TO INTERNATIONAL VISITORS
WA: Leave the weed at home, and don't say "Nelson" at the border
BC: Leave the guns at home, and don't say "work" at the border



Highway One through Rogers Pass, leaving Mazama in a state of pleasant wintertime isolation.

This townsite is not much more than an Outward Bound base, a community crag, a Nordic ski club and the office location for North Cascades Heli, a hidden gem of a heli operation with 300,000 acres of steep, stacked tenure. The center of town is the Mazama store, which sells every state essential from organic foodstuffs and strong espresso to Patagonia Capilene. But what makes Mazama locally famous is not that it was the longtime home base of Steve Barnett, who sparked the modern telemark movement in the 80s with the book *Cross-Country Downhill*, but that it's the mountain community that almost became Whistler Village.

Back in the 80s, a group of Aspen developers came to town with a plan for a destination resort designed around a footprint of condos and a model of revenue capture. They picked a place named Early Winters as the location, but the locals saw the future and fought back, winning with environmental arguments and an alternate community model based on Nordic tourism. The developers took their master plan north to Whistler, creating the village foundation for massive community expansion. But the modern legacy of this one small victory in the Methow Valley is a 200-kilometre network of meticulously groomed nordic tracks, a tight-knit community of AT sled skiers and stunning open spaces held in trust by the forces of conservation. (continued)



Clockwise from top left: Blasting through another mega-deep PNW snowpack at Stevens Pass; just over an hour from downtown Seattle, it's not uncommon for the road to Alpentel to be flanked by truck-dwarfing snowbanks; the symbolic volcanic high-point of Washington state's free-flowing mountain culture, Mount Rainier looms over skiers at Crystal Mountain ski area. Photos: Ian Coble



Das Leavenworth

Downstream, past the catch-and-release Methow River, down the once-mighty, now-dammed Columbia and through the apple orchards and vineyards of Washington's conservative east, sits the town of Leavenworth. In 1962, the once-dying timber town transitioned into a Bavarian-themed alternate universe — a band-wagon the East Kootenay town of Kimberley jumped on 10 years later — that is a commercial cash cow of bratwurst, lederhosen and oompah bands, with shops such as Der Sportsman, the Hedielburger, Gustav's Bar and even a mountain bike shop named Das Radhaus all collectively benefiting from and conforming to the chamber's commercial vision.

Yet it's not the month-long Oktoberfest or Christmas tree lightings that draw our kind, but access to granite, whitewater, single-track and backcountry, a mix that makes Das Leavenworth the most sporting destination on the circle tour. As the cliché goes, local residents often cram multiple missions into a single day, mixing skis with climbs, floats with hikes, or bikes with brews while some festival rages in the kitschy downtown. It is precisely the over-



Downtown Leavenworth



Shall we go riding later?

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done image that has protected this foothill town from the massive *Outside Magazine* migrations that have made places like Bend and Boulder unaffordable and unlivable.

In winter, lift skiers choose between tree shots at Stevens Pass, drier storm snow at Mission Ridge and lighted skate trails or family surface tows at Leavenworth Ski Hill. Classic ski trips, such as the Chiwaukum range traverse, first completed by Washington's ski-pioneering Skoog brothers, start just west of town. But the freshest backcountry hides up the Icicle Creek Canyon, the summer approach to non-volcanic 2,870-metre Mount Stuart and the high ground of the Enchantments, a craggy wilderness area popular for backpacking and peak-bagging. A winter road closure turns the summer paradise into a sled-accessed touring zone, with 1,830 metres of relief and only a handful of yurt, cabin and hut dwellers over-wintering here. For them, it's a six-month reserve, with everything from valley chutes that shape up early to Icebox canyon lines that ski well into June.

Thinking Greenwater

No northwest view is more spectacular than the sunset over the Olympic Mountains from Seattle, the over-trafficked urban core of the Evergreen State. But looming behind the city is also the dramatic backdrop of 4,392-metre Mount Rainier, which is the symbolic, volcanic high point of the state's mountain culture. The climber's route to Rainier is around the south side, through Ashford, home of the RMI guide service and Whittaker Mountaineering, co-owned by Jim Whittaker — the first American to summit Everest — and up the road to the Paradise parking lot, the start gate for summit bids and glacial skis.

Most skiers, though, opt for the eastside approach of Highway 410 to Rainier, through Greenwater to Crystal Mountain ski area. Greenwater is a gritty gateway town of loggers and skiers centered by the Naches Tavern, which serves all kinds under rusty memorabilia from Washington's crosscut era. Crystal Mountain is the state's closest thing to a destination resort, with 945 metres of lift-accessed vert, weekend suburban crowds and a fancy new gondola scheduled to open this winter. Yet Greenwater has maintained pockets of rabid localism still evident in raging RV lots, grandfathered middle-class



Where gritty meets groovy at Greenwater's Naches Tavern, located on the road to Washington's Crystal Mountain Resort and Rainier's massif. Skiers are sometimes as common as loggers here, from front door to dance floor.

ski clubs catering to organizations, such as Boeing and the Tacoma Teacher's Union, and 70s-era condos like the Silver Skis — all contributing to a family feel that raised modern pros, such as Laura Ogden, Blair Habenicht and the entire Backstrom family.

Crystal Mountain ski area is a land of alpine bowls, tight chutes and vast borderland stashes that range from north-back and south-back shots to steep lines on Silver King, the site for last year's North Face Master's freeride contest. But like the terrain throughout the state, it is the feeling of rugged wilderness, natural power and mountain immersion that defines the true Washington experience. At Crystal the symbol of place is Mount Rainier looming over the shoulder of the ridge, but it can be felt in every Washington zone — in the glaciated peaks and valley towns, the deep lines and classic climbs and the mountain souls who make up the beating cultural heart of a magical place.

Dan Kostrzewski is a freelance writer based near Mount Baker, WA.