

AN RV LOOP TO THE HEART OF SKI CULTURE

PARK AND RIDE

BY DAN KOSTRZEWSKI 🐾 PHOTOS BY ILJA HERB

A HEATHER MEADOWS SKY
Tailgating in space

Watching the green sky dance is a sight not often seen from Mount Baker's upper lot. But day traffic is long gone from Heather Meadows and only a handful of vehicles remain, including two high-mileage vans, two pickups with beds in the back, and the 21-foot slideout RV that photographer Ilja Herb and I will call home for the next 17 days and 1,900 miles. And right now our camp chairs are perfectly aligned for a private showing of the Northern Lights.

In the past two days at Baker, we stared the embers down at a ski patrol bonfire, dropped a hidden Giffin Brothers chute before breakfast and dined on homemade chicken soup refrigerated in a snowbank and reheated in MSR pans. Tomorrow, we will tour to Little Alaska, but the backdrop of silent double chairs, a shuttered lodge and the maintenance shack afterglow is setting this scene. And this crowning perspective is only possible because we are parked in a perfect spot.

Staying slopeside is one of skiing's great luxuries. Booting up by the heater, skipping traffic, and stumbling home from the pub in ski pants are small extravagances that make a big difference. And by sticking around after Bombardiers and Pisten Bullies light up the night, those who remain see a mountain scene most day skiers miss.

But proximity now comes with a price. Luxury hotels, trophy homes and million-dollar timeshares are driving affordable beds down the road. Clock-tower gentrification has shifted neighborhood demographics upscale and, in this environment, even the package deal is no longer much of a deal.

Yet all is not lost for skiers banking paychecks to ski all winter. Throughout the Greater Northwest, the back lot remains open to overnight camping. And these open spaces are a grassroots alternative to overpriced and overdeveloped villages.

Rules and regulations are all over the map, but the beauty of places like Baker is nothing is official and there is no fee. With no money down but prime real estate, we brew coffee on our propane stove the next morning and skin directly from our front stoop before the chairs are even open.

We tour out the gate then scramble up a sugary south-facing chimney to regroup on a tabletop plateau. Million-dollar views of Baker and Shuksan fill each frame, but the liftless basin below is a paradise of emptiness. Visibility turns thick so we ski the treed local's line and roll out as the fog rolls in.





RED MOUNTAIN
Where there is smoke...

Whitewater is a known vortex and we get stuck on the access road untangling chains on a powder day as locals speed past. The dually makes Lot B and feels the attraction as we spend three days savoring kind lodge breakfasts and deep back-side runs, without the distraction of phones or e-mail. But the lot is quiet except for Kane Davis, an aspiring ski instructor with a van plugged into the shop for five dollars a day. We scour the ridge with Kane for a rumored high camp living in down hammocks, but are sent away with a stern local's warning.

Paranoia seems strange, but it becomes clear at neighboring Red. Few ski towns have as much history as Rossland, whose lineage runs from Olaus Jeldness' first national downhill race in 1896 and Western Canada's first chair in 1947 to Olympic hero Nancy Greene. Red was once tagged as the hill that time forgot, yet its recent past has moved at a quicker pace. In June 2004, Red Mountain was purchased by an investment group led by California millionaire Howard Katkov. Townhomes now tower above roundabouts, a contentious golf course is moving

into the watershed and \$1 billion is being pumped into new development.

The condos are dark but the vans are rocking as we park the RV under a watchful high-wattage bulb. Tomorrow is FreeSki Day, a 2,500-skier madhouse, classified part hippie fest, part local holiday and part pool scene from Caddyshack. The morning upload is packed with hostelling Aussies, fit Karhu couples and old souls skiing with old friends, which is where we find Crazy Dave, Special Ed and Gretsky.

These three search and rescue vets—Dave Braithwaite, Ed Evans and Graham Thorne—have more than 200 missions and 60 Red Mountain seasons between them. Ed is a Rossland postman with two kids on the freeski circuit, Dave is a former patroller, and Gretsky is a few nips in. They invite us to meet them at a cabin in Squaw Basin and figure if we can find the log structure, we'll be welcome inside. Then they disappear into Red's famous trees. So we make a lap, skirt the boundary and look for the smoke.

The first door we try at the Yodel Inn is locked, but a few turns downslope—



"HEY!" "HUH?" "HOW YOU DOIN'?"



PARK
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tucked into the timber—we stumble into the Stagger Inn. Inside we find oysters steaming on the woodstove, Scotch from the flask and real heritage instead of village sameness. This 60-year-old cabin, rescued from ruin by local caretakers, is grandfathered so long as it remains standing.

On the double-chair return, Ed reveals that these three rescued their own 1920s cabin in the hills, but it doesn't share the same protection. Expansion will push past their secret find and paid huts are on the backcountry horizon, but this trio has a plan of its own. "As locals, it's just part of our thing to have these cabins," Ed says. "If that happens, we'll just build ourselves a new cabin a bit deeper in the backcountry."

Back in our lot we help push a fifth wheel out of the mud, share a campfire with its owner then head to Rafter's, the nostalgic pub on the third floor of the 1947 day lodge. Inside this off-kilter establishment, we find our crowd celebrating. Toasting pints and sharing nachos, we are left with a bittersweet taste, wondering if this local color will survive this real estate scheme.

A MAN'S CASTLE

Take me to the trailer park

If Red was in flux, Fernie was our hell. The lot is no longer friendly, which we discover by plow light and plow siren during a 5 a.m. eviction. In daylight, we ski run after run of hard moguls. Village chainfood does nothing to cure our persistent hangovers and we return to a parking ticket.

At the far end of the gravel road and the opposite end of the spectrum sits Castle Mountain. Blue-square expansion and 93 new homes seem a familiar story at first, but local attitude and ownership created a solution as unique as the expansive Southern Alberta landscape.

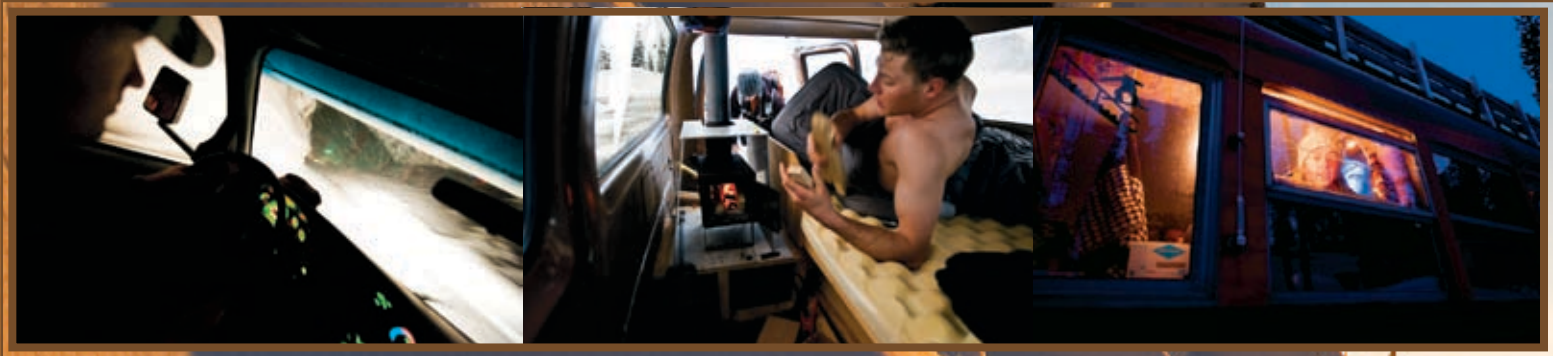
T-bars were installed at West Castle in 1965 and farmers with campers put down the first roots. A rocky municipal ownership and denial of destination-style expansion led to the area's 1996 purchase by 150 local shareholders. Seventy-five more skiers bought into the concept and the current 10-year plan—developed with community input—has quadrupled ski terrain, added infrastructure, and tagged 225 as the magic number of vacation properties to fund quad chairs and provide regional economic stability.

During a day of wider perspective, we ski Canada's steepest sustained fall line with Castle ambassador Andrew Rusynyk. While ridges disappear toward the international border, Andrew gives us the area's view on sustainable development. "When it used to be called West Castle Park, there were RVs and modular homes spread out through the base area. People just put them wherever and laid claim to the area," Andrew says. "When it became Castle, we sold some lots, but we still maintain our RV park with 40 units because it's a core part of our history."

In the plowed and powered park—where four shareholders winter—\$1,650 (plus tax) reserves a seasonal space. Parked in one spot we find Bret and Jesse, Castle Mountain's park crew, inside the Skullbus. Jesse's ride is wintering here, but Bret's silver trailer is more comfortable for company, so we head down the road to match drinks and trade stories around his one-legged kitchen table.

Residents are grumbling about cost increases, they say. And no one is excited that a planned relocation might land the park next to the sewage pond. But these guys have spent the winter steps from the lift on ski-area wages. Unlike other ski areas that push out folks who can't buy in, these two are part of the master plan at Castle. And for them, this arrangement is a perfect accommodation.

The narrative starts to get cloudy, but the night is still clear, so we stand up cautiously and navigate by headlamp back to our plug-in on the long edge of the parking lot. After a whiff of bonfire behind the hostel, we set the mini Weber on the ground outside our RV. Firing up the coals and cooking brats under a star-studded Alberta sky, we savor the taste of a true village before crossing the line.





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ALPENTAL TOM AND THE WELCOME ORGAN; WAKE-UP CALL; AIRING IT OUT.

LOST VAIL, MONTANA If a guy wants hot tubs and parties...

The Alberta–Montana border is rough and we get the full vehicular cavity search. Even after vacuuming every square of carpet at the car wash, two guys on an RV ski trip just don't smell right. But the customs agents find nothing to keep us out. So we spin south to St. Patrick's Day in Whitefish, midweek Snowbowl powder, and laundry day in Missoula, finding more and more space in every lot.

Four days after gaining entry to Montana, we are trailing five behind Scott Grasser's red Yamaha on a hill climb atop the Continental Divide at the small ski area of Lost Trail. The ride is fast, the run is empty and our crew is getting a private lift to the Burn an hour before opening on a powder Thursday. At the top of his family's ski area, Brother Scott turns us loose and we drop into standing dead timber with diamond dust in the air.

One run later, we are peering down shots too steep to see. But our guide, Monica Thomas, a Montana–bred skier with a tattered pack and a shining sun helmet, assures us these will go. A seasonal job with the forest service allows Monica to ski all winter on income from only a few ski–area shifts and two nights tending bar. Everyday status has landed her volunteer responsibilities both as morning snow control and grass–roots public relations. And she knows every nook and every line.

Many shots later, the crew lines up layered stacks off Rendek Ridge, named for a firefighter killed in a 2001 burn. As the two of us hang back by the prayer flags, Monica gives me the inside line on the “Lost Vail” atmosphere. Like the attitude in rural Montana, the rules are loose. Camping requires only a check-in at the office and, even with no power and nothing open at night, the back corner location is hard to beat. This lax policy allowed Monica and her boyfriend Mike Simonsic, a groomer at Lost Trail, the freedom to spend most weekends last winter inhabiting a 26-foot Dutchman in the lot below.

“The best part was Mike would get up to go work and I'd lie in bed,” Monica says. “Soon you'd hear the plow fire up and you knew you were an hour out from getting up. So I'd do some yoga, hang out, eat something, throw my gear on, and walk across the lot to go skiing. At nine on a powder day when everyone was running to stand in line, I'd already been there for an hour.”

With a generator cranking the heater and open seclusion in the lot, Lost Trail seems a perfect spot to stay for skiers who comfortably relax into space. As we part ways with Monica, families from Idaho are uncorking plastic vodka bottles and hippies from Hamilton are sharing microbrews while making camp, but we have other plans for Easter weekend.

THE LAST LOT AT ALPENTAL Is that Zappa on the hi-fi?

We start Good Friday after sleeping out a storm with anxious semis at an Eastern Washington rest area. Yet positive omens accumulate at Alpental with a spot between truck campers in Lot 3, a skier's breakfast on the house and extra tickets from a shop girl. We ski a sunny day in the near backcountry, meet the girls for happy



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hour and then head back out for turns under Friday night lights. A lowland migration packs in as the drinks start flowing cold and the coals burn hot.

Tom Lyons, who is encamped across the lot, invites us into his carpeted 28-foot RV to play us a tune on his keyboard as a welcome to the neighborhood. It is warm and smoky inside with an imported Canadian woodstove radiating heat and a fat rack of ribs marinating for the grill. “It’s like family up here,” Alpentel Tom says. “Some of these people have been coming here for, like, 20 or 30 years.”

In the Northwest, blending ski culture with RV convenience is a longstanding ritual. Washington areas such as Stevens Pass and Crystal Mountain actively encourage this behavior, hosting between 50 and 100 campers during peak weekends in designated lots with fees, reservations and hookups. But Lot 3 has a more radical element and a more interesting history.

The patch of public land at the end of Alpentel Road had long been free and open. But after Booth Creek took control in 1997 and one too many incidents flared up, management hit the lot hard. Bonfires were snuffed, a fee was levied and a curfew enforced. A 14-day limit was abruptly cut to two.

Strict rules gave rise to a reaction, and the lot sparked a reasonably organized effort to Free Lot 3 with all the collateral elements—website, bumper stickers and a manifesto of populism. The master plan, which received opposition from many camps, was mitigated and expansion was scaled back. At the same time, avid skiers started policing their peers so the right to assemble didn’t disappear.

Attitude shifted when Boyne USA leased the area last season from new owners, CNL Income Properties. Both sides eased toward truce and a conciliatory strategy started keeping the peace. Fees went uncollected and tension simmered down so much that lot regulars gave their security guard a Christmas present. Lot 3 remains both free and out on the fringe, but community action like theirs could save us all a space in the lot.

Our overnight parking spot means we are sleeping in on Saturday when Bryce Phillips calls early from Seattle to opt out. The weather says a wet storm is rolling in for Easter, but we see only blue after lifting the window shade. So we convince Bryce to fight Saturday traffic and ski with us on the last day of our trip. Then I sleep a little longer, make some oatmeal and we wait for the weekend rush to hit.

A few lineups later we are on the sundeck of Alpentel’s Chair Two, where visibility allows perspective on a bootpack in the foreground and Mount Rainier in the distance. We watch Bryce race his vapor trail down the line in snow so light displacement seems instant. His smears look satisfyingly deep for March, but coming home to our scene, raging in the back lot, feels just as sweet.