

Big Mountain Montana Ski Train Trip 2007

Trip report by Dave White; posted 2/26/07



When I put this trip together, I was envisioning an economical ski trip to a relatively unknown Montana destination for a group that would hopefully include the 24 people required to meet the group discount minimum requirements. What it evolved into was an ULTRA economical ski trip to NOW much better known Big Mountain Montana AND Fernie British Columbia destinations, for an unprecedented large group of **54** Red Eyes!

Right from the start, you knew this trip was going to be way different. No security checks and no photo IDs required here, because we traveled the good old-fashioned "rail" way! The silver sided, stream lined, Amtrak "Empire Builder" provided a scenic and relaxing ride all the way to Whitefish, Montana – the home of "Big Mountain". About a dozen Red Eyes upgraded to the "sleeper" berths, while the other 42 wandered freely between the coach car, diner, lounge, and viewing platforms. It was my first train experience, and I'm at a loss for words to describe how wonderful it was. For large ski group travel, I'm now convinced that it is clearly the easiest way to travel. In these days of "full plane" flights, the reality is that not all of our skier's baggage is likely to get loaded onto a plane, for weight restriction reasons. With Amtrak - baggage is a non-issue.

The accommodations at Grouse Mountain Lodge were just as promised. Everyone raved about the complimentary daily hot breakfasts, the easy access to complimentary shuttle buses, and the friendly "can do" attitude of everyone at Grouse Mountain.

Two of the four ski days at Big Mountain were what they refer to in Montana as rare "bluebird" days. Unlimited blue skies revealing spectacular summit views of the Rocky Mountains, Glacier National Park, and the vast Flathead Valley. One look at some of phenomenal Red Eye photos from this trip, and you will know exactly what I'm talking about. While the clear skies brought some cool nights and windy conditions at the summit, it was actually quite balmy compared to the -20 degree bitter temperatures that paralyzed Wisconsin while we were in Montana.

29 Red Eyes made the early morning motor coach departure on Friday for what turned out to be a spectacular day of skiing at Fernie, in the Canadian Province of British Columbia. We saw several elk herds on the way up to Fernie, a couple of which put our motor coach into a four wheel evasive maneuver to avoid turning the elk into hood ornaments. One of the unexpected services at Fernie was the free tour guide ambassador program. Most of us took advantage of these friendly tour guides for much of the day at Fernie.

The Saturday night "Moonlight Dine & Ski" option turned into a harrowing adventure. While the dinner at the summit chalet was wonderful, and the nighttime views were awesome, the moon did a disappearing act before the ski trip back down the mountain. The lack of any significant moonlight, and a few logistical errors in judgment, lead to what some are referring to as the "Big Ravine train wreck on skis". While the Red Eyes are a proud and talented group, we obviously have some shortcomings in nighttime navigation skills.

In addition to the wonderful skiing, some of the Red Eyes took advantage of side trip opportunities to snowmobile in the Rockies, go dogsledding, and go cross-country skiing in Glacier National Park. The Montana outdoor entertainment options were virtually endless.

We spent our last night in Montana enjoying a festive Super Bowl party (yes gambling is legal in Montana...) and a delicious Italian halftime buffet at Grouse Mountain Lodge. After the football game we enjoyed some more Red Eye BINGO and distributed a wonderful assortment of prizes and souvenirs.

Finally, I would be remiss, to not recognize the dedicated Red Eye "bar flies" on the Big Mountain trip. Lead by our ski-less "lady on crutches" (Amy Wieczorek) and Jon ("smokem if you gottem") Seep, there were no dehydration issues on this trip. Rumor has it that a select group of seven hard living Red Eyes, who just can't get enough, continued the post party celebration well into the night in downtown Whitefish. Who would have guessed that playing ping-pong at 2 am in a Whitefish bar would be such a challenging and memorable event?...

It was a fabulous trip, and it went by way too fast. As the trip leader of such a large group there were some challenges, but it was a wonderful group of 54 people, and I truly appreciate the great friendships that I have with so many.

Amy W. had a slide show of photos from off the hills. Click here to see all of the photos: <http://www.kodakgallery.com/l.jsp?c=ajptivy.5nqyko72&x=0&y=-57xqno>

A few of the choice selections are pasted below:

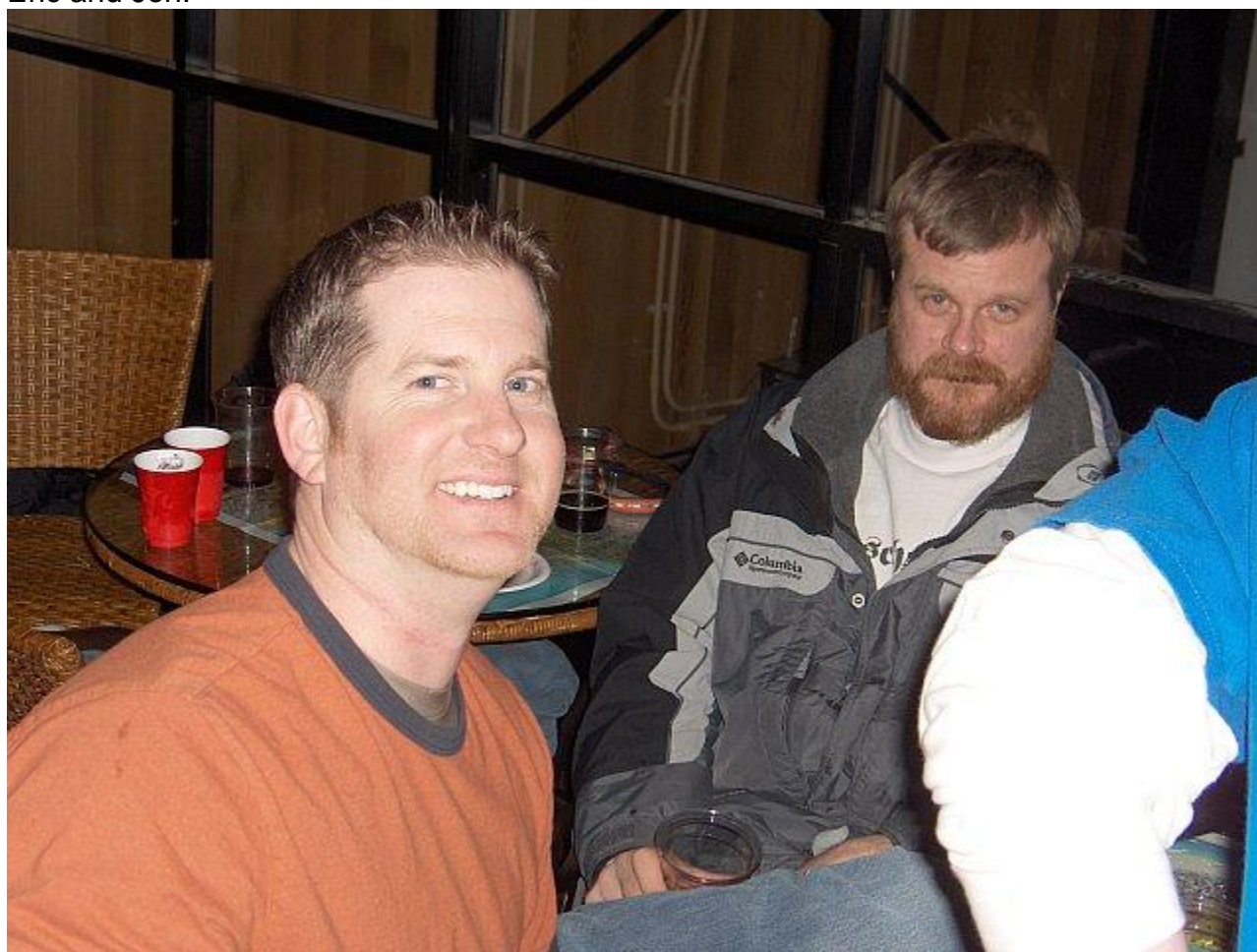
The late night bar crowd:



A Pair of
Wangs:



Eric and Jon:



Hot tubbing:



Hot Tub Dave in his natural element surrounded by women:

