

F I R S T

C O M E,

DEEP IN **BRITISH COLUMBIA'S BACKCOUNTRY**, OUR CREW
PUT THE SEASON'S BEST GEAR THROUGH A FINAL ROUND OF TESTING—
AND DISCOVERED A SPOT SO REMOTE YOU CAN STILL NAME YOUR ROUTES.

F I R S T

D E S C E N T

The Punchbowl,
British Columbia



N A M I N G R I G H T S

ALWAYS KEEP your head down when exiting the helicopter. This was our guide's last piece of advice before we boarded the chopper, and it was a good one. Without it, I'm pretty sure I'd have gotten a haircut trying to gawk at the peaks that towered above us as we unloaded at British Columbia's Mallard Mountain Lodge after a 25-minute flight from Valemount. Rotor-driven snow mixed with the overcast sky, making it hard to tell where the clouds ended and the mountains began. But soon an errant beam of sunshine gave the peaks a golden lining, providing a preview of the reason we were here: A ridge-rung valley locals call the Punchbowl, just outside the western boundary of Jasper National Park. There was terrain out there—tons of it—and much of it had never seen a ski. Owners Derek and Barbara McManus had recently put the finishing touches on the lodge, and it had just opened for business. We were among the first guests to visit.

When we stepped onto the porch the next morning, it was like the ribbon-cutting on a brand new amusement park. Slope stacked upon slope, thousands of feet above the stove-heated cabin, our base for five days of backcountry skiing, hiking, and camping. We wolfed down a breakfast cooked by our hosts, attached climbing skins to skis, clicked into our bindings, and ascended through evergreens.

We hadn't gotten far when we learned the truth behind a glorious winter mirage: Ridges that had seemed high and huge were actually less than an hour from the lodge's door.

Our Canadian guide, Ross Berg, led us to the top of one, and we fol- ▶▶

Testing grounds (clockwise from top left): Our ride takes off from the hut's landing zone. Paul McManus works the hut with his parents, Derek and Barbara. Mallard Mountain Lodge sits in an open valley with unobstructed views. Senior Editor Casey Lyons preps for another run. Mallard Peak (9,302 feet) stands directly across the valley.



PHOTOS BY (FROM TOP) ANDREW BYDLON (4); BEN FULLERTON



Punching the clock: Editor-in-Chief Dennis Lewon (left) reaches the 7,700-foot-high ridgeline. Tester Crystal Sagan (right) adjusts the bindings on a pair of test skis. Testers ascend above treeline in the Punchbowl (below).



lowed it to the perfect spot, where we could drop off the ridge into shin-deep powder. It's a heady feeling, standing far enough back from the cornice that the slope looks dimensionless, like a flat sheet of paper. Your stomach roils. And then, with a gentle push, we went over the edge, swooping down 1,000 vertical feet of eggshell-smooth, cotton-ball-soft snow.

The spring sun tracked across the sky, moving shadows around on these long, 10-hour ski days. We covered the ridge east to west over the course of the week, encoding the stories of each day in the names we gave to our first descents: Roshambo (because how else do you decide who goes first?), Vegas (it was an all-you-can-eat powder buffet), Come on Cowboy (for hut owner Derek McManus's colorful rant as he strung together a series of tight turns), and Carbon Crackup (see page 104), among others. With our legs toasted from the laps and our faces sore from smiling, we skied back to the door of the little hut where Barbara and her son Paul prepared elaborate evening feasts—burritos, lasagna—complete with appetizers and berry pie.

And the next day it was up and away again, some to those empty, snowy bowls in the shadow of soaring peaks, others exploring the valley's hidden glades and waterfalls on snowshoes. Yes, we named a few more runs before we were done, but don't worry, we left a bunch for you. —CASEY LYONS

TRIP PLANNER

Get there Mallard Mountain Lodge is in the middle of nowhere—in the best way. To reach Valemount, where the heli flight starts, fly to Kamloops and drive four hours (or drive about nine hours from Seattle).

Terrain With something for everyone, Mallard is a great spot for groups with mixed skiing abilities, even backcountry novices. **Lodge** The newly built shelter sleeps seven

(in winter; eight in summer), and is rustic but cozy, with a wood-burning stove, solar power (yes, you can charge your phone/camera/GPS), and indoor gravity shower. All meals and snacks are provided, but BYO booze. **Guide** A backcountry guide—great for both snow safety and insider beta—is included. **Cost** \$1,980 CDN per person for four nights **Info** (250) 835-4516; canadianadventurecompany.com



First come, first serve: On the ridge above Mal-lard Mountain Lodge, Ross Berg, owner of Altus Mountain Guides, rips a line he later named Vegas.

Backcountry Made Easy

Whether you're a novice who wants the safety net of a guide, or a veteran who wants someone else to cook so you can ski until dark, these wilderness lodges are designed with a single goal: Let you focus on the fun.

BY KERRY WOLFE

Altoona Ridge Lodge, Montana

This six-person back-country hideaway sits at 7,600 feet in the Flint Creek Mountains, with prime skiing just a 30-minute skin from the lodge. Ski or snowmobile in 5 miles, gaining 2,000 feet (the approach takes three hours) to reach this Swiss-inspired retreat. For a full-day challenge, skin 3 miles

to 9,300-foot Goat Mountain and shred the ridge's east side. Go ahead and work up an appetite: A traditional Swiss raclette is on the dinner menu (and the lodge's special Swiss toast soufflé is served for breakfast). Then catch the sunset from the wood-fired sauna—its west-facing picture windows offer unobstructed views. Couples: Ask about the Lover's Yurt. **Info** \$250/person/night for

a fully hosted/guided trip (minimum two nights) **Contact** (406) 239-0048; altoonar-idgelodge.com

Chic-Chocs Mountain Lodge, Quebec

A 25-mile snowcat ride brings you into the heart of moose country, where this luxe lodge takes backcountry living to a higher level. Feast on family-style meals served with fresh-baked breads. Unwind in the outdoor

spa or warm up by the fire (with a cocktail from the bar). And did we mention the skiing? The powder is some of the best you'll find in the Northeast. Beginners can try Bouleau, a gentle run a half-hour hike away. For an all-day adventure, ski 3,280-foot Mt. Coleman. The lodge sleeps 36. **Info** \$518 CDN person/night, guide included **Contact** (800) 665-3091; sepaq.com ▶▶



Snow days: Staff photographer Ben Fullerton (top) puts down the camera to nab a few turns. The test crew skins uphill—breathability testing!—on another lap. Ross Berg, with Altus Mountain Guides, has put 21 names on his map of the Punchbowl. “The area fuses the dry snow of the Rockies with the engaging terrain of the Pacific Northwest,” Berg says. “Plus, there are great lines for every ability level.”



Downing Mountain Lodge, Montana

This place is a yurt in shape only. A huge central fireplace keeps the rustic, 3,000-square-foot, 14-person lodge cozy on Montana’s coldest days. An easy, 1.5-mile ski on a snow-covered road leads to the 5,000-foot perch in the Big Root Mountains, near Missoula. Intermediate and advanced skiers can hit the bowls and glades

surrounding the lodge:

A two-hour hike to the top of the 8,100-foot ridge rewards with a 3,000-foot run to the lodge, where an outdoor Jacuzzi and BBQ await. Downing also offers guided daytrips. **Info** \$65/person/night Monday to Thursday; \$75/person/night Friday to Sunday for unguided/uncatered. Full service: Add \$75-\$100 per person. **Contact** (406) 531-1486; downingmountainlodge.com

Lost Trail Lodge, California

Easy access from the Tahoe area means you don’t need a week to enjoy this fun and funky spot, just 4 mellow miles from the trailhead near Donner Lake. The 20-person lodge boasts instruments for après jam sessions and each room comes equipped with a dog bed, bowls, and toys for canine visitors. Ski straight

from the door for easy laps along Coldstream Canyon, or trek farther for a day of adven-

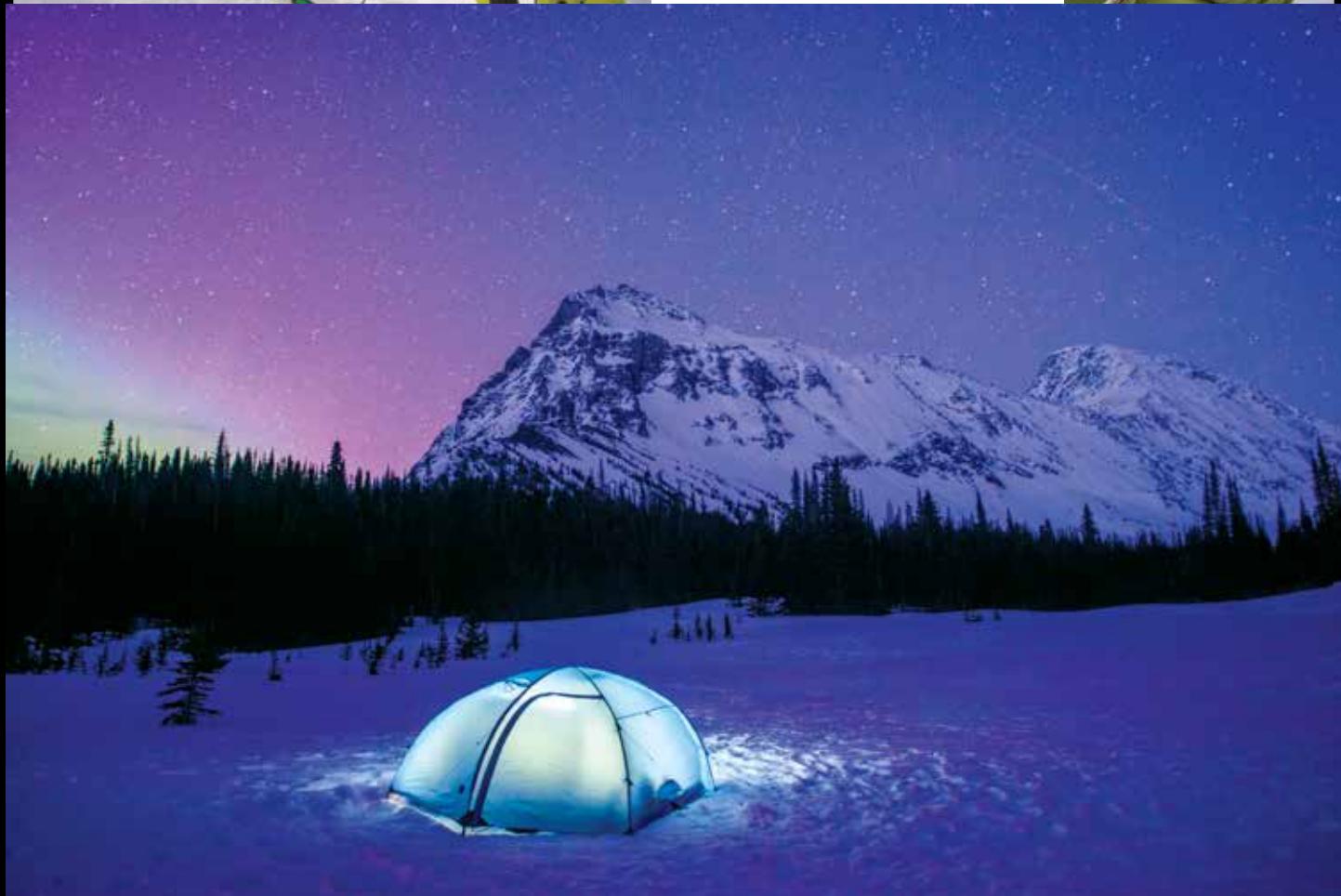
tures: Anderson Bowl offers a solid day’s worth of 2,000-foot runs. You can also catch a lift (one ride is \$25) at nearby Sugar Bowl and ski back to the lodge. **Info** \$435 for two people/two nights **Contact** (530) 320-9268; losttrail-lodge.com **Guide** Alpine Skills International: \$525/person for the two-day, Lost Trail Lodge guided tour; (530) 582-9170; alpinestraits.com ▶▶



Nights are as fun as the days at Lost Trail Lodge.



Mallard Mountain down time: Not everything was steep, but everything was sweet (left). Gear Editor Kristin Hostetter tests every layer she packed while taking test notes (right). Yes, we tested bags and tents every night, even with a warm lodge waiting nearby.



Powder Creek Lodge, British Columbia

With more than 17,000 acres of terrain, there's ample exploring to be had here. Stick to the area within a half hour of the lodge for easier skiing, like the gentle Sugar Bowl. Then graduate to the Hour Glass line off Mistletoe Peak, with runs of nearly 3,000 feet. Built with big groups in mind, Powder Creek Lodge sleeps up to 16

in its two-story, six-bedroom cabin. Access is via an 11-minute heli flight from Kaslo. **Info** \$2,450 CDN person/week for guided/catered (minimum 8 people) **Contact** (250) 359-5916; powdercreeklodge.com

Purcell Mtn. Lodge, British Columbia

Just across the border from Canada's very own Glacier National Park, this lodge sits at

7,200 feet atop Bald Mountain, within the Canadian Rockies. Out the front door: a slew of 2,000-foot slopes. Indoor showers and bathrooms make this a relatively luxe lodge (sleeps 20). Like most B.C. lodges, access is via a short (15-minute) helicopter flight. **Info** \$1,450 CDN per person for three nights in a shared room **Contact** (888) 767-8989; purcellmountainlodge.com

Yurtski, Montana

Skin 11 miles along a sled trail to this cluster of yurts near the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The yurts, which sleep eight each, sit at over 6,600 feet within three main bowls. Each yurt contains a wood-burning stove and a fully equipped kitchen. Yurtski's catered option: a three-course meal prepared by chefs from nearby Missoula

(extra fee for beer and wine pairings). Your terrain: The Southern Swan Mountains boast numerous runs on 30- to 38-degree slopes, or drop off the back ridge for some steeper skiing. For a long last day, ski down from 7,796-foot Morrell Mountain for a 3,000-foot descent. **Info** \$225/person/night for fully guided and catered **Contact** (406) 721-1779; yurtski.com