

# Beyond the slopes

## Fernie offers many forms of winter bliss

BY ANDREW PENNER, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD MARCH 24, 2011

Not every family is meant to be a ski family. Take, for example, the Penners. On a recent three-day trip to Fernie Alpine Resort -one of the purest, powder-plastered mountains in North America -we left the legendary upper bowls entirely unblemished with our fanny and face imprints. (The bunny hill, not so much.) So, lacking in talent and, to be frank, a deep-rooted passion for the sport, we did the next best thing: everything else.

It had been more than 10 years since my derriere did a number on the slopes at Fernie. I was pleasantly surprised to see the growth and development at the base of the mountain. We stayed at the perfectly positioned Cornerstone Lodge, which is also home to a Kelsey's restaurant, a Starbucks, the day care, and plenty more. Unquestionably, the resort, owned and operated by Resorts of the Canadian Rockies, has become a big-league mountain with plenty going for it. Including, thankfully, many fun activities other than skiing.

Now, considering we drove the beautiful threehour drive from Calgary to Fernie only to be greeted by 24 centimetres of fresh, pillowy-soft "pow" (a pretty sweet dump even by Fernie's standards), I'll humbly admit I missed out on something bordering on "epic." And, yes, that eats at me a bit.

However, after a marathon gear-up session, we did manage to shuffle the herd over to the novice -or finding weird ways to contort your body -area.

This is how it all shook down: on his first run our youngest, Nicholas, 4, spun around backwards and ended up crashing awkwardly on his back, skis crossed, on the Mini Moose conveyor. He proceeded to invent a new way to go up the lift. On his third run, one of our twins, Aemon, 8, did a strange, end-over-ender and whacked the back of his leg with one of his skies.

Fully versed in the terrible things that can happen to someone when they crash, he started freaking out, yelling, "Dad, help! I broke my leg! I broke my leg! Did I break my leg?"

He was only going three kilometres an hour and, needless to say, was totally fine. But, yes, his day was done. The other twin, Nelson, was basically done before he started. "I want to go in," was about all he seemed capable of uttering.

My wife, Dawn, and I, drenched in sweat from helping the "drama kings" to their feet every five seconds, were completely exhausted after an hour on the hill. It was time to investigate other forms of recreation.

Thanks to the good folks at guest services, we were enlightened on our winter bliss options. There was geocaching, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing (still a bit intimidating because it involved skis), sleigh

rides, tobogganing, movie night (now we're getting somewhere) and hot-tubbing (bingo). And, off-site, we had additional options: snowmobile tours, nature walks and dog sledding.

Dog sledding jumped out at me as something worth trying. And, thanks to Colin "Curly" Mckinnon with Fernie Dog Sledding, our adventure took flight. I'm still a little puzzled as to how a few slender hounds could power our carcasses up the hills at Coal Creek with such ease; however, these are very special dogs.

And it was an awesome experience. The older boys were thrilled to try their hand at guiding one of the hand-crafted sleds while little Nicholas lay bundled in a blanket in the sled, loving every second.

We completed the day with a sleigh ride through the base of the resort, an obligatory post-ride hot chocolate, and movie night (Toy Story 3) at the cosy Cornerstone Lodge. While the kids were watching the movie, mom and dad snuck into the legendary Griz Bar for some apres ski, ahem, refreshments. Who knew "ski" junkets could be so much fun!

On our final day we squeezed in more good times, sans skies. Snowshoeing was a riot (OK, we didn't quite make it around the shortest loop), and geocaching was, well, a definite learning experience. Although it took us a while to figure out the GPS and find our first "treasure," traipsing around the base of the mountain with the troops was quite hilarious. The blind leading the blind, or something like that.

We also managed to get in a few closing runs at the spacious novice area.

Of course, the snow being perfect, the weather pristine, the Mighty Moose platter lift finally mastered, my lovable son Aemon succinctly summed it after a particularly crash-filled "plow" down the gentle slope. "Dad, that run was a piece of junk! Let's go for a burger." Yet another wonderful activity for the whole family at Fernie Alpine Resort.

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