

Fernie beckons hard-core, novice skiers alike

Lauren Krugel, The Canadian Press
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FERNIE, B.C. - Dan Savage considered himself a "hard-core" skier when he and his wife moved to Fernie, B.C., more than a decade ago.

"I wanted the steepest and I wanted the deepest," said the owner of the local website Fernie.com.

"The terrain here's very steep, and the snow is very deep. It's a real skiers' mountain."

Savage's perspective shifted when his children — now five and seven — entered the picture.

"I came here as an experienced skier and loved it, and I'm loving what they have for families as well."

The lower runs at Fernie Alpine Resort, he said, are "really kid-friendly."

Novice-friendly, too, I would discover when I strapped on my snowboard on a crystal-clear January day.

My friends and I began with some gentle runs from the top of the Elk Chair, and then worked our way up to tougher runs via the Great Bear Express Quad.

The powdery-soft snow cushioned my knees throughout my many, many tumbles — for the most part. I caught an edge on one rare icy patch, and sported an impressive purple bruise on my knee for more than a week after.

At Fernie — about a 3 1/2-hour drive from Calgary — 30 per cent of the runs are considered beginner, 40 per cent are intermediate and 30 per cent are advanced.

The variety makes Fernie a good place for skiers and snowboarders to hone their skills, said Will Barbour, with Tourism Fernie.

"It's a really great mountain for setting your sights and ticking the boxes as you work through the different runs," he said.

Fernie is known for its five massive bowls. A few were closed due to avalanche danger when I went, but they have since reopened.

Fortunately we were able to play in the Lizard Bowl, accessible from the Great Bear chair.

"The Lizard Bowl is a nice starting point, for sure. It has some nice, more mellow terrain and funnels out into some wonderful big wide-open groomed runs," said Barbour.

Barbour came to Fernie from Australia three years ago and stayed for one main reason: the snow.

"I came to ski for six weeks and my first day was a 40-centimetre day. It snowed almost two metres that week. And I thought, 'this deserves a bit more of my time.' So I stayed," he said.

There are plenty of activities in Fernie besides downhill skiing and snowboarding. Visitors can cross-country ski, snowshoe, go dog-sledding, ride horseback, take a helicopter ride and snowmobile.

There's also cat-skiing, in which skiers can hitch a ride on a massive grooming machine to remote backcountry terrain.

Fernie has a variety of lodging options right at the hill, including the Wolf's Den Lodge, Cornerstone Lodge, Cedar Ridge Estates, Griz Inn and Lizard Creek Lodge.

"There is a very rare amount of ski-in, ski-out properties, which is fantastic," said Sarah Windsor, with Resorts of the Canadian Rockies.

"You just have a real good variety of lodging. You've got everything from your basic hotel room to full chalets."

Close to a dozen friends and I packed into Elk Crossing Lodge, about a 10-minute walk downhill from Fernie Alpine Resort. It had a full kitchen where we prepared all our meals and a wide variety of board games to keep us amused in the evening. Most importantly, it had an outdoor hot-tub to soothe our aching muscles.

Savage recommends staying right in the heart of Fernie, which is just a short drive from the mountain.

"A visit to Fernie is not complete without going downtown," he said.

Savage likes to go to Yamagoya Restaurant for sushi, Freshies for coffee and Big Bang Bagels for sandwiches. The downtown also has several artisan shops, a museum, a movie theatre, bars, pubs and a hockey arena where you can take in a Fernie Ghostriders junior hockey game.

"Most of the activities and venues are downtown. What's so nice about Fernie is you can ski all day, return to the downtown and then you can walk around town."

If you go...

Directions from Calgary: Take either Highway 22 (Cowboy Trail) or Highway 2 south to Highway 3 and continue west about 90 kilometres.



On the web:

www.skifernie.com

www.fernie.com

www.tourismfernie.com