



FIVE STAR CATS

For Chris Booth, Jordan Houghton and Andrea Berchtold the terrain, powder and luxury of Canada's Island Lake Lodge are almost too much to handle.

STORY AND CAPTIONS BY CHRIS BOOTH | PHOTOS BY TONY HARRINGTON

How do you try to pretend what you do is work when it simply isn't? Every time someone tells me I've got it made as a skier I end up making the same old speech, that it's not all powder and blue sky days; that there's bad weather, wet boots, missed shots and countless injuries. Yet I always arrive at the same place, with blank faces looking back at me as if to say, 'you're kidding, right?' Snowy - Opulent - Privileged - Hedonistic - Incomparable - Enjoyment. That's the truest description of the Island Lake Lodge experience I can muster and it's not really helping my argument at this point. In fact, there is no way that during any stage of this article I am convincing anyone that skiing is work. So I'll stop trying. Island Lake Lodge is basically a health retreat for skiers and boarders looking to ride

powder because Yoga sucks. Located in the Lizard Range of the BC Rocky Mountains, founding members Scott Schmidt and Craig Kelly have created arguably the most legitimate five-star cat skiing operation on the planet, coupled with some of the finest tree skiing you'll find anywhere and food that will make you forget you ever visited a ski resort cafeteria. It could be argued that a day skiing at Island Lake is even better than a three course breakfast, followed by a deep-tissue massage and a beer-laden hot tub in the afternoon - all of which they also provide. Good mates Andrea Berchtold, Jordy Houghton and myself were lucky enough to spend a week living the dream at Island Lake with legendary photographer and personal hero of mine Tony Harrington, where we indulged in some very much undeserved R&R and had ourselves a trip to remember.





PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The roaring, centrally heated, fully catered, mp3-equipped Piston Bully snow cat pulls up at your doorstep at around 6am every morning and walking to it from your bedroom is about the only non-ski related exercise you'll be required to do for the day. And it's not as if skiing with your mates down dreamy, glazed powder runs exactly qualifies as exercise. Though that's not to say the terrain isn't testing, there is something for everyone, provided everyone likes to ski powder. The guides are nice as pie and will take you pretty much anywhere you want to go so long as it's safe. Ask and you shall receive. Though basic avalanche safety skills are received no matter what and subsequently you are expected to know them. Having said that, the guides are some of the best in North America and are tremendously qualified for the job of keeping you out of avalanche danger.

An average day will have you doing more runs than you have the legs for. The cat-trails are brilliantly laid so you are dropped off at the top, ski a run, then reach the bottom only to realise that despite all your efforts you still haven't beaten the snow cat, which is idly waiting to take you back up. Descending through the trees feels like being on a jumping castle, the undulating terrain gently bouncing you around as you float down the mountain with your friends beside you. Turns seem to be more for direction than speed control, as the bottomless snow lets you ski well beyond your ability level and the only thing you can hear other than the snow brushing up against your jacket are the shrieks of disbelief coming from the 'screamers' in your group. There are screamers in every group, Jordy was our screamer.

Undoubtedly the next best thing to the ride down is the ride back up, as you kick up your feet in the back for the cat, help yourself to some lunch, cradle a hot chocolate, listen to Notorious B.I.G. and share looks of 'how stupidly, ridiculously, unbelievably awesome is this!' with your mates. It's a moment worth savouring and definitely worth writing about. To top it all off the catering crew will meet you at the bottom of the last run of the day with some cold beverages, providing ample opportunity to swap stories with other ski groups as the sun casually drops over the mountains.

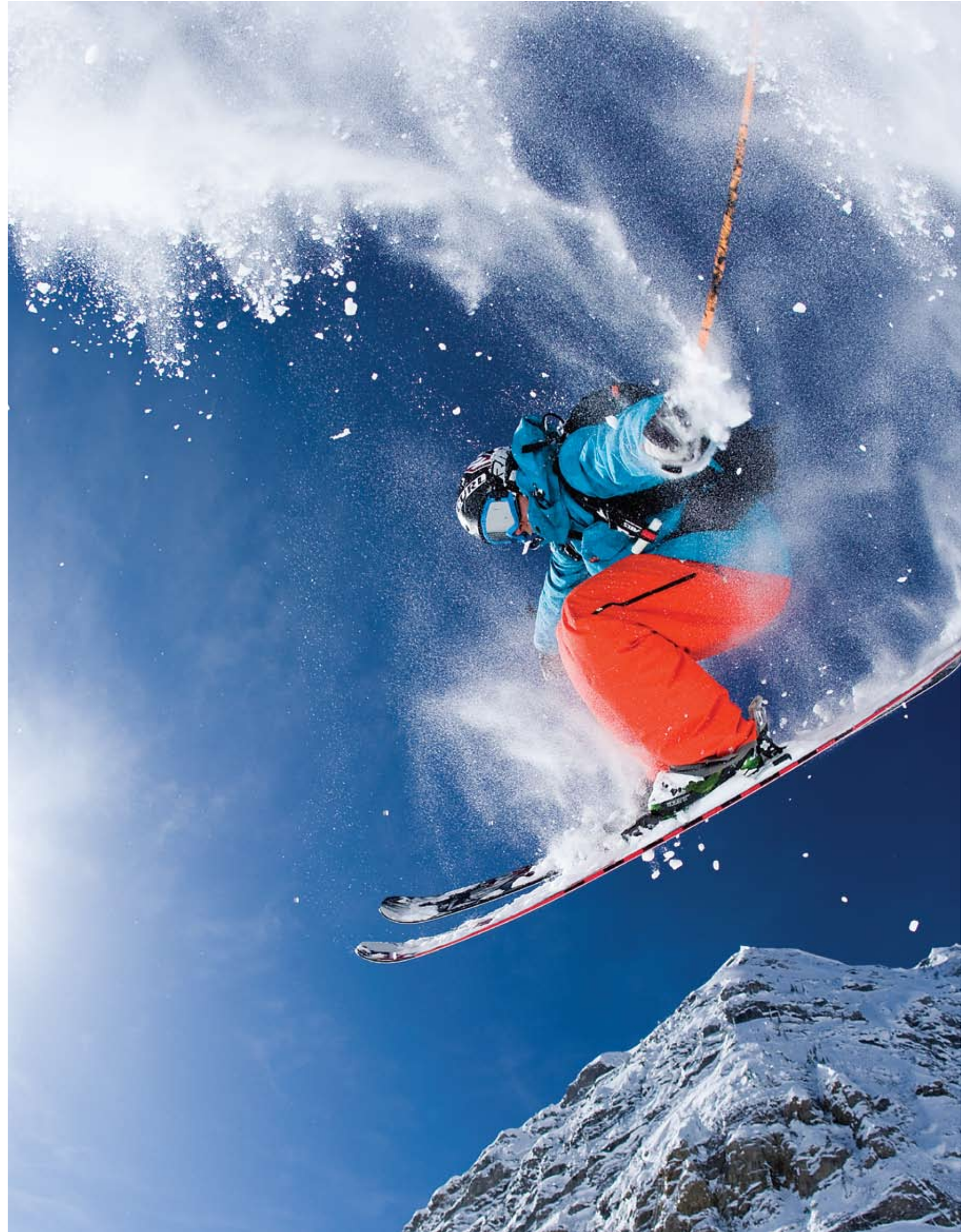


NUTRITION

On a regular photo trip, you'll eat whatever you can get your grubby paws on. Champagne and champagne-powder rarely seem to go together, so to sit through three courses of breakfast and three courses of dinner each day is better than winning lotto while having sex. I won't pretend to be a gourmand or a connoisseur of any sort, but the food was something we all collectively looked forward to each night and I did enjoy the wine list immensely.

Founding members Scott Schmidt and Craig Kelly have created arguably the most legitimate five-star cat skiing operation on the planet.

OPENING SPREAD: ANDREA DOESN'T GET OUT OF BED FOR LESS THAN \$10,000 A DAY. **SECOND SPREAD:** THE 'HOLLYWOOD' DROP - THE BACK DROP IS TO DIE FOR, BUT THE CLIFF WAS HUGE. JORDY, NOT SCARED. **PREVIOUS SPREAD:** JORDAN HOUGHTON PROJECTILE THROUGH THE TREES ON A FRESH POWDER DAY. **THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT:** A SKIER'S AIRPORT. EARN YOUR TURN. BOOTHY PRACTISES HIS BALLET FOR THE BOYS. BEAR LODGE BY NIGHT. **RIGHT PAGE:** CHRIS LAUNCHING OFF THE 'HOLLYWOOD DROP'.





REST AND RELAXATION

Island Lake Lodge is actually a couple of lodges, giant cedar wood palaces surrounding the main lodge - Bear Lodge, or Beer lodge as we came to know it. Inside the accommodation lodges the high ceilings of the spacious bedrooms give on to sprawling balconies overlooking the entire Island Lake tenure, which is apparently about a gazillion times the size of Whistler. The heated floors are a nice touch, the chess board by the fire is charming and feather-down doonas make the night pass as if it didn't exist, but for me the best part by far was sitting in my giant armchair made out of teddy bear. This place is pretty high-level luxury, yet it's comfortable, quiet and laid-back. Just like Canadians.



There are screamers in every group, Jordy was our screamer.

HYDRATION

After being in the middle of the forest for a number of days, we'd had more than our fair share of endlessly deep pow. The euphoria has to reach boiling point sometime right? So we discovered that the best way to alleviate all the excitement was one beer at a time, the true Canadian way. We also discovered the dangers of having a running tab during our stay, leaving us all a little financially embattled when it came time to balance the books at the end of our stay. Still one has to believe it's all worth it, as guests from different groups and different countries forged a camaraderie over the klaxon of pints banging together every 30 seconds in collective excitement because tomorrow we get to do it all over again.

In the end that's what Island Lake is all about. Lapping powder runs with your mates at your side, eating well, swapping tall tales over beers in the hot tub and kicking your feet up at the end of it just to laugh at it all. It's the perfect place to forget that the rest of the world exists, or that it does exist, but just isn't as good as Island Lake.

This place is pretty high-level luxury, yet it's comfortable, quiet and laid-back. Just like Canadians.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: CHRIS BOOTH, WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE.
THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: JORDY, DEEP IN THE POWDER. ANDREA, THE SNOW IS LIGHT AND THE LIGHT IS PERFECT. NO GLASS BOTTLES IN THE TUB PLEASE.
OPPOSITE PAGE: THE JUMPING CASTLE RUN. BOOTHY (FRONT) DRE (BACK). JORDY TAKING A LEAP INTO THE GREAT UNKNOWN.





DRE GOES UP (30 MIN)



DRE COMES DOWN (30 SEC)

FERNIE – ROUNDING OUT THE TRIP

After ending our epic week at Island Lake Lodge we packed our bags and loaded them into the snow cat for our ride back to the real world. Our next stop was Fernie, a legendary ski resort and certain fixture on the 'places to ski before I die' list of any keen skier. But by this point it was clear Island Lake would be hard act to follow.

It would be outrageous to compare a cat skiing operation to a ski resort; they are two completely different things. So despite the obvious fatigue felt by the group after Island Lake, we were curious to check out the resort and drive around town in our symbol of American Freedom - the Ford F150. The resort is about 10 minutes from the main town of Fernie, the town is authentic and not too IntraWest-affected. Fortunately for us, our accommodation at the Park Place Inn was splendidly annexed to the best pub in town. This permitted us ample opportunity to sample the entire array of chicken wings and quench our thirst without so much as a 30-second walk home.

When I visit a ski resort I always find myself wishing I could 'go up there' but discover that the lift goes in the opposite direction. Not so at Fernie, it is well designed, easy to traverse and as far as terrain is concerned, like a playground. A series of small peaks are directly lift-accessed, delivering you straight into the goods. Skiing in Fernie is all about bouncing through the trees until you pop out on a groomed run, which then transports you back to the bottom of the lift to do it all over again. I said I wouldn't compare Fernie to Island Lake, but to be honest, I found the terrain at Fernie to be better than cat skiing. Packed with interesting rollovers, secret stashes and steep pitches, it's a skier's mountain. It had been a number of days since the last snowfall, so despite still finding fresh tracks we were imagining what it would be like after a big dump. Just don't duck a rope, they'll probably arrest you.

Interestingly, despite warm weather at Island Lake, the snow quality at Fernie remained dry and light, much to our collective relief after seeing the unfavourable weather report the day before our arrival. Maybe it's topographical, or maybe it's just the altitude, but we found the snow quality to be consistently good wherever we went. Everything we skied had that soft shreddable feel that lets you motor along as fast as you like. So despite being fattened up with a silver spoon the preceding week, Fernie blew away our expectations and although we've effectively ticked it off our skier's must do list, I wouldn't mind ticking it off once more. 📍

THANKS

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VoB1Mo, Canada, Fernie, BC, www.islandlakeresorts.com
FERNIE, Tourism Fernie and The Park Place Lodge. For more info check out www.tourismfernie.com

TOP: AVOID BEING A DORK IN PHOTOS, THEY WILL END UP BEING PUBLISHED. CHRIS BOOTH.
BELOW: CHRIS DEFINITELY NOT BEING A DORK.



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