

LAI DBACK COUNTRY

Baldface Lodge is known for big terrain, deep snowfall, and rabidly loyal guests. And at this catski wonderland, an uptight attitude simply doesn't fly.

BY JOSH DEAN

Rain was falling hard on Nelson, British Columbia, which meant that Baldface Lodge — that redoubt in the piney wilds above town — was getting hammered.

The pilot lifted the helicopter from the shiny tarmac, made a 90-degree turn, and darted across the lake, tucking the chopper into a ravine deep enough to provide shelter from the clouds. We stayed uncomfortably close to the trees as he climbed up the valley, and as the ground shifted from brown to white at the rain/snow line, the clouds thickened and the heli dropped into a meadow. Under ideal flying conditions, the pilot would have dropped us right at the lodge; happily, we were not experiencing ideal flying conditions.

Through the blinding snow, it was difficult to make out much around our landing spot, but already two snowcats had arrived, and their drivers were piling up the luggage of guests who would be taking our spots on the helicopter for the trip back to Nelson. Adjusting to the brightness of the landscape, I looked up to see a line of dark shapes descending through what I now recognized as a huge field of powder. I could see little puffs each time a figure turned — small ones for skiers, and huge walls of white for the snowboarders.

At the bottom, a group of four dropped onto the cat track, unbuckled their skis and boards, and trudged over as if delaying the inevitable return to regular old life below.

“How was it?” I asked the first two men we passed on the track.

The first one just laughed. The second stopped and gestured upward at where he’d been. “I think you’re going to be very happy.”

Baldface opened in 2002, the passion project of Jeff Pensiero, an American who followed a girl (now his wife) to Canada and realized that he loved the mountains as much as the woman. That was three years after Pensiero and two friends — one of whom was the late snowboarding legend Craig Kelly — pooled

their money, won tenure to 32,000 acres from the Canadian government, and began to search for investors while mapping out plans to build a plush but cool lodge and cat operation. They weren’t out to be just another backcountry lodge, but wanted to fill what they saw as a hole in the market. The three were snowboarders, and nearly every exclusive backcountry operation in existence seemed to cater first and foremost to skiers.

It wasn’t that Pensiero had in mind a lodge that would be for snowboarders; he simply wanted the place to operate with the mind-set that snowboarders had just as much interest — and money to spend — as skiers, and that there was a certain customer, whether on skis or a snowboard, who desired a more freestyle experience, in every definition of that word.

Baldface’s accommodations are plenty nice, and got even



SKIERS AND RIDERS AT BALDFACE ARE TREATED TO A 30,000-ACRE TERRAIN PARK FOR GROWN-UPS.



NICK DIAMOND (2)

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nicer this past winter when a new lodge building replaced the prefab metal structure that had housed the original rooms — a move necessitated when the old structure collapsed under especially heavy late snows in May 2011.* And the food, which relies heavily on local Canadian beef, chicken, fish, and produce, as well as the highly underrated British Columbia wines, is also great. But it's really the experience — on the snow and after it — that makes Baldface special.

From the beginning, Pensiero hired guides with the idea that they would be nothing like the “uptight” versions he encountered at most heli and cat operations, and he's quick to note that this isn't a criticism, per se. One reason most backcountry guides are so straightlaced, he says, “is that it's really severe terrain,” the kind where keeping your customers in line is critical to keeping them alive. Baldface, on the other hand, is “a lot less extreme,” at least in the Alaska/heli sense.

From day one, Pensiero set out to offer an environment that allowed middle-aged guys (and girls) to embrace their inner children without worrying first and foremost about getting buried in a slide — or at

least about getting yelled at by a guide for not strictly following orders. At Baldface, he says, “you get out of the cat, and the guide gives you a high five and leads. It's just like going to a ski area” — a ski area with more terrain than you can experience in a year of visits, world-class tree skiing, and fresh tracks every run.

Because the runs are at a lower elevation, with fewer perilous hazards — there are no deadly cliffs, and the avalanche risk is very low — skiers and riders who go to Baldface are treated to what is essentially a 30,000-acre terrain park for grown-ups. Fluffy, dry snow falls from November through April (400 inches is not unusual), covering every surface in what feels like bottomless

powder, and making for an endless variety of natural features to jump on and over. Of course, if you just want to make powder turns all day, that's fine too. The vertical feet add up; each day, guests make 12 to 14 runs averaging nearly 2,000 feet, with a maximum of 3,600 when conditions allow.

I'm the kind of person who rarely ventures into a terrain park, and when I do, it's almost always in transit to somewhere else, but during my first trip to Baldface, in 2008, I found myself flying off stumps, rocks, and indeterminate lumps — in part because that's what everyone else was doing, and in part because conditions were so perfect that it didn't matter if I could actually land the right way or not. When the powder is up to your armpits, even the falls feel good.

I woke on the first morning of this trip to find that it had snowed 22 inches, and judging by the pile atop my cabin, that was just more of the same. This was especially welcome considering the season I'd had so far, a season in which my local mountain (Hunter, in New York) barely cracked 50 inches the entire season, and painfully terrible conditions on trips to Lake Tahoe and Park City. The season had made me pessimistic about the future of the entire ski industry.

Baldface cured me of that feeling in no time.

For the first day, my friend Chris and I were placed in a cat of excellent snowboarders, including two

OF THE THREE CHOICES ON THE LODGE'S SELF- ASSESSMENT, I'D CHOSEN “EXPERT,” THE MIDDLE OPTION BETWEEN “ADVANCED” AND “STUPID FOOL.”

Terrain varies from wide-open faces to tight but perfectly spaced trees, all of it covered in foot after foot of hero snow.

NICK DIAMOND, OPPOSITE; GREG VON DOERSTEN





GREG VON DOERSTEN. OPPOSITE: NICK DIAMOND



professionals. Of the 10 on board, Chris was the only skier, and after a single run, it was pretty obvious that I was easily the weakest rider in the bunch. And I'm pretty good. (Of the three choices on the lodge's self-assessment, I'd chosen "expert," the middle option between "advanced" and "stupid fool.") In terms of quality or ability, this wasn't typical.

Though it was founded by snowboarders, Baldface still attracts more skiers than riders (55 percent versus 45 percent), and most visitors don't end up in a cat full of stupid fools, but we happened to come during an annual gathering organized by a snowboarding magazine. It attracts a handful of devoted readers and friends of the magazine, all of them absolute shredders — old and well-to-do enough to afford Baldface but still possessing enough ability to back-flip off snowy stumps. At least half of this year's group was made up of return visitors like Chris and me, which is actually a little low considering that 65 percent of Baldface clients come back.

How well I compared to a professional like Jamie Lynn, or even some of the "amateur" riders in my cat, wasn't even slightly an issue once we were on snow. As is the case with any good heli or cat operation, a general rule of thumb is that you shouldn't waste your money unless you know you're competent in the backcountry, in variable conditions — and especially in deep snow.

Baldface operates three cats, and the guides focus on finding the best snow areas throughout the 60 mapped zones in the tenure on any given day. When it's snowing as hard as it was in late March, certain areas were essentially closed for the season, since a single week of snow had left five or six feet of fresh powder on the ground. (The snowpack was 16 feet deep by this point.)

We were also limited to some degree because our guides were concerned about an unstable layer in the snowpack. With its big menu of low-elevation tree runs, avalanches aren't a big concern at Baldface, but the mellow guides still put safety first, and with the torrents of snow that had been falling, our lead guide, Andy, was being cautious. For the first couple of runs, he dug some snow pits, and kept us off of the steepest and most exposed terrain — which didn't actually matter in the slightest. Every run was at least waist-deep, and every single run ranked among the best of my life.

After one of them, a 1,500-vertical-foot fall-line plunge through some of the steepest and most perfectly spaced trees you'll find anywhere (it's known as Cheeky Monkey, and is legendary among guests), I plopped down next to Chris in the cat, panting. He looked less exhausted but just as happy. And as a guy who's skied all over the world, and who lives in the Pacific Northwest, he can be hard to impress. "I think this is the deepest snow I've ever skied," he said.

There's as much action in the lodge as on the terrain, since the "play hard" ethos doesn't stop when the cats do.

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The terrain is heli-licious, but you'll board the bird only on arrival day; constant storms make snowcats the logical transportation.

Owing to the odd coincidence of showing up to two shred-centric events at Baldface, my picture of how snowboarder-y the lodge is is more than a little skewed. But what makes Baldface seem so snowboarder friendly isn't that it's owned by snowboarders (though that contributes, certainly); it's that, by and large, most lodges cater foremost to skiers, in as much as skiers far outnumber snowboarders among the constituency of global travelers who desire and can afford to spend money on luxury backcountry lodges.

But Baldface is split nearly 50-50, and the skiers who come here tend to share a mind-set with most of the people who snowboard. It seems stereotypical to say that snowboarders are, by and large, more relaxed, but it's generally true. It also seems stereotypical to say that snowboarders are, by and large, rowdier, but that's also generally true.

And certainly, Baldface has a reputation for evenings that can be as exhausting as the days. Nights are long, and bar tabs longer. There is Jagermeister on tap. At least once during your visit, a spontaneous dance party will break out. Someone has fireworks, and they will go off.

That said, easily the wildest of the six nights over two trips that I spent at Baldface came at the direction of a group of skiers led by an entrepreneur and movie producer named Parker, who visits the lodge at least once a year. Parker's second visit in 2008 coincided with my lodge debut, and on the final night, he announced that he was a little bittersweet. The plan had been for Parker's brother to come with him, but his brother had to cancel due to the early arrival of his new infant son. But in the baby's honor, the absent

brother had a tribute: Anyone in the lodge who wore a T-shirt with the baby's face on it drank for free. And at that Parker handed out the shirts. What happened from there I barely remember, but I remember a Roman candle fight. I remember that I had an absolute blast. And I remember a guide scolding the skiers on my cat the next day for smelling like booze.

In comparison, my second visit was tame. Which is good, because sharing a cat with people so proficient in the art of snowboarding requires one's full attention. Two days in, I was wiped out but already lamenting the fact that we had only a single day of skiing left. We'd been hanging out at meals with a Norwegian couple who'd been living in New York. They had it right: They'd booked back-to-back four- and three-day trips, giving them

a whole week at Baldface. Like all backcountry lodges, Baldface isn't cheap, and they'd certainly shelled out for the luxury of an extended stay, but neither of them (an academic and a graphic designer) had any regrets. It's how I felt the first time. I didn't regret for a minute the \$2,000 I spent on three days of riding, even though it exceeded my typical vacation budget by an order of magnitude.

The final night at dinner, there was a new face at our table. His name was Matt, and he was a lawyer from Lake Tahoe on his third visit of the season. In total, he'd been to Baldface nine times, and he was clear that this number would only grow, and fast. "I get three ski trips a year, why would I waste them on anyplace else?" he asked me. After a lively discussion of other excellent and worthy places, he was unconvinced by any arguments to the contrary. "The worst day here is the best day anywhere else," he said, and polished off a glass of wine.

It was dumping when I fell asleep, having fled the dance party early, and when I woke up, it was snowing even harder. As hard as I've ever seen it snow. Chris and I geared up and headed for our cat.

Chris stared up into the cascade of flakes. "It's days like this when I'm glad I'm not heli-skiing," he said. ●



FROM LEFT: JAMIE WARNER; GREG VON DOERSTEN