

ON PISTE

PURE GOLD



WORDS BY **LESLIE ANTHONY** | PHOTOS BY **MATTIAS FREDRIKSSON**

STANDING ATOP THE GONDOLA at Kicking Horse Mountain Resort on a bluebird day, taking in the alpine drama on offer—a 360-degree view of three mountain ranges, five national parks, and the sprawling town of Golden, B.C.—it’s hard to fathom how such magnificence was conjured from a small, local operation known as Whitetooth Ski Area. Yet hundreds of metres below, its handful of linear runs scratched from the forest as if by the claws of a grizzly, Whitetooth hummed along for decades before Dutch engineering firm Ballast Nedam, convinced of the upper mountain’s potential, opened Kicking Horse in 2001. They weren’t wrong: it immediately gained a reputation as a big mountain destination of note, prompting Resorts of the Canadian Rockies to bring it into their fold in 2011. Yet, despite ascending into the pantheon of global ski consciousness some 16 years ago, Golden remains humble and genuine, populated by guides, artists, parks employees, rail workers, forestry workers and a few ski bums escaping the growing crush of Banff and Whistler. One of the latter is ever-smiling big mountain slayer Dave Treadway, whose wife Tessa’s family provides him a second home in Golden. He’s joined fellow skier Chad Sayers, photographer Mattias Fredriksson and I on a tour of the area. And we’re starting here, at the top, from where everything Kicking Horse flows.



Chad Sayers stakes a claim.



Sayers looks a gift horse in the mouth.



Dave Treadway kicks up his heels.

ON PISTE



Eye of the eagle.



The highest of fine dining...



...The finest of low dining.

THIS IS SERIOUS SKIING, WITH SOME EQUALLY SERIOUS STATS TO BACK IT UP.

WE ALREADY HAD THE LAY OF THE LAND, having spent the previous day lapping trees on the south side of CPR Ridge (it's unclear to me if the name is a nod to the Canadian Pacific Railway that begat Golden, or the heart-stopping nature of the ridge traverse), later testing its extensive north-facing chutes. I then head to Redemption Ridge, which separates Crystal and Feuz Bowls. The chutes tumbling into Feuz are wider and more forgiving than CPR's spiny inventory, with a few exceptions—The Steps, choked with enormous rocks, and The Dutch Wallet, which requires you to lower yourself in with a rope. This is serious skiing, with some equally serious stats to back it up: four bowls, four sharp ridges, 1,260 metres of vertical, with two-thirds of the 128 numbered trails being black diamond, and another 60 bearing the siren-call of double-black. Most of the mellow terrain exists in the bottom of the

bowls and on the mountain's lower apron (née Whitetooth), where two of three chairlifts reside.

Despite superb snow quality and excellent coverage, and the mountain's lodges being full, it feels like no one is on the hill. The fact that it's -30 °C might figure into it, but hell, here at the edge of the Purcell Mountains, we're sandwiched right against the Rockies, where skiers sack-up for the cold. At least that's what I tell myself. It's testament to this mountain's riches—and a little help from the sun—that I barely notice my toes freezing solid.

Nevertheless, I could get used to this kind of space, and I will, after meeting Treadway, Sayers and Fredriksson for lunch in the Eagle's Eye, Canada's highest restaurant, located right where we stepped off the gondola. In addition to great food and merciful fireplace warmth, its floor-to-ceiling windows afford one of the all-time great vistas in skiing.

ON PISTE



AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY, Golden became an internationally recognized mountain destination because of the Canadian Pacific Railway, which established it as a hub. Recognizing its passengers might want to explore the postcard landscape, the railroad imported a handful of Swiss guides in 1899. Building homes for them on a hillside overlook, it created a de facto Swiss village that its occupants christened “Edelweiss.” Though Golden’s economy has always centred on rail and forestry (there was never any gold), skiing and mountaineering continue to be a draw. In addition to Kicking Horse and its easily accessible out-of-bounds touring, Golden is a staging area for over 20 commercial backcountry ski operations—including Golden Alpine Holidays, Chatter Creek, Great Canadian Heli-Skiing, as well as Fairy Meadow, Mistaya, Sorcerer and Purcell Mountain Lodges, to name a few—and only an hour from the touring riches of Rogers Pass.

This isn’t to say other attractions don’t add considerably to the town’s charms. There’s a funky bookstore, museum, wolf sanctuary, abundant sledding, and a budding food scene—from casual-yet-elegant Whitetooth Mountain Bistro, to atmospheric Eleven22 occupying a renovated century house, to true fine-dining at the Cedar House, isolated on a peaceful, wooded

mountainside outside town. Poking around one day, I discover rough-and-ready Riverhouse Tavern, where everybody knows your shame. In only a dozen years, Chris “Soap” Soper has turned this former print shop/dentist office/Sushi bar/coffee shop into a skate-and-snowboard-themed pub that seems like it has been there forever. Spend a night sampling its wide selection of microbrews with a hockey game on the tube and you might feel like you’ve been there forever. For those with more upscale tastes, the Donaldson family’s Whitetooth Brewery is nearby, where you can settle in for classy snacks and flights of West Coast-influenced and Belgian-inspired beers.

One thing that catches every visitor’s eye in Golden is the wall mural commemorating a century of Swiss guides, reminding me how these men shaped the mountain culture of their adopted Canadian home. Sons and daughters of these same Swiss families still dwell around Golden, some continuing the guiding trade. Another Swiss guide, heli-pioneer Rudi Gertsch, has operated Purcell Heli-Skiing since 1974, a day-ski operation popular with Kicking Horse visitors who have money to burn on classic B.C. pow.

For the town, the addition of Kicking Horse has helped foster a real mountain community with the people that call this place home. In early

season, townsfolk are invited onto the mountain for bootpacking that will help lower the risk of avalanches later. Ski patrol organizes two consecutive two-week shifts of 15 volunteers to break down the weak lower layers that tend to form in the continental snowpack. It’s a good activity for shoulder-season workers, and a good deal for the resort, as it allows them to open more terrain early on and be confident in the the stability of the base over the winter.

After lunch, while Fredriksson and Treadway descend to meet Tessa and the couple’s ski superstar rug-rat, Kasper, Sayers and I follow the sun on the well-marked 20-minute hike to the overlook on the resort’s marquee Terminator Peak, before dropping into adjacent and virtually empty Super Bowl for a long, leg-wobbling run to the bottom. It’s easy to see what motivates people to come to this place: the ratio of time spent skiing to time spent riding lifts is remarkably high, the terrain is plentiful and diverse, and the density of skiers so thin that you soon stop noticing them. Who wouldn’t want more of that?

HIGH FIVES

Kicking Horse Mountain Resort – kickinghorseresort.com
Tourism Golden – tourismgolden.com
Glacier Mountaineer Lodge – kickinghorselodging.com
Cedar House – cedarhousechalets.com



Not a cybernetic organism in sight.



Treadway cast in Golden light.