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Posted on [February 6, 2018](#) by [bobcoxblog](#)

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NELSON, B.C. – When the modest parking lot was full an hour before the lifts started running, you had an idea something was happening on this Wednesday in late January.

When you looking out at the very ordinary double chairlift and saw a significant lift line at 8:30 for that 9 a.m. opening, you began to get the idea.

Locals in the community of Nelson had decided that 25 centimeters of overnight snow (10 inches), along with a similar total the day before, warranted a ski break from work. And it doesn't take many skiers and boarders to create a lift line at Whitewater Ski Area in British Columbia. A crowd might be defined as 1,500 on the hill at one time.

But numbers don't do justice to explaining the success of Whitewater. You might have turned away, for example, when you saw there were only three chairlifts here, and they are all fixed-grip (one double, one triple and one quad). Similarly, the modest size of the day lodge and other facilities.

Everything I'd about skiing Whitewater lived up to a reputation for hardy skiing and little else, which purposefully focuses on remaining the Un-Resort of the region.

"This is just a great place for locals to go skiing," said our volunteer guide. "The mountain isn't about the amenities, or the high-speed lifts, or even the grooming."

It's appropriate to mention the amenities are minimal, including basic breakfast food in the lodge, with only the three lifts, and minimal grooming – estimated at less than one third of the runs on a good day, and no grooming at all on a powder day.

And since we're talking about a powder day, the day we visited was a day for wide skis and fall-line turns, in short, a powder day to appreciate. While a lot of ski areas claim royalties as monarch of the Powder Highway, Whitewater has its advocates. And rightfully so.

Our visit in January was unfortunately for just one day, as part of a bigger swing through northern Idaho and B.C., but we hit the best day of the winter. We hit when the powder was plentiful and the mountain was open on all levels.

Whitewater is a ridge that allows skiing on both sides. A listed 82 runs are named on the trail map. But locals rarely stick to the marked runs, preferring instead to work their way through the multitudes of tree runs which flank each of the official runs. And two days of consistent snowfall was the sign to locals that this was the day.

Who does business on a Wednesday morning, anyway? Can't say for sure that the town of Nelson was closed for the morning, but by noon, the crowds had disappeared from the mountain, and presumably, business was back to normal in the town.

"People who move here are usually pretty serious about their skiing," explained our guide. "We aren't as interested on non-powder days, but look at the crowd that a little snow can draw."

Our exposure to Whitewater confirmed years of reading about this hidden gem of the Powder Highway: Hard to get to, maybe not a place for fanciful nightlife, but if you hit it on a powder day, it's as good as it gets.

There is another saying that the locals use to differentiate skiers here: "Who skis on the intermediate runs? Skiers from the States who thought they were experts."

Perhaps a little harsh, but after two days of slamming mostly high-speed groomers in Idaho, we arrived to have our expert credentials rechecked two runs into the Whitewater experience. In short, if you're used to a minimal powder day, and maybe making a dozen powder turns before slipping back onto the groomed slopes, heads up. There's no groomer to slip back onto here. And many of the runs on the 2,044-foot vertical drop are powder turns from top to bottom. Mammoth skiers might imagine a Cornice Bowl what would extend all the way to Main Lodge, for example.

As we worked our way up the difficulty chart, and our host felt we were ready for Sprowlers and a couple of adjacent Double-Diamond runs, we can't appreciate the powerful skiing going on around us. Expert runs here are designated Double-Diamond, while routing single diamonds are designated most difficult. About a third of runs are blue (more difficult) and only a half-dozen are green, or easiest.

Our day started on the Silver King double chair, where we got the message quickly that "warm up run" was probably a term from some American marketing company. After that, we progressed to the Summit quad and over to the opposite side are runs served by the Glory Ridge triple. The three chairs were crowded only for that two-hour rush in the morning, and the powder held up well until mid-afternoon. Or rather, our legs made it until mid-afternoon. The powder was still plentiful long after the legs were ready to retire.

Whitewater is located about 20 minutes from Nelson, a charming enough town with lodging, restaurants and brew pubs to round out the experience. The trip is about 4 hours by car or bus from Sandpoint, Idaho, if weather cooperates. The closest major airport is Spokane.

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