

## SPORTS

# Crossing the border to take on 'The Horse' | On Snow

by JOHN NAYE, Mercer Island Reporter Columnist  
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"Tame The Horse." That's how the sign reads at the bottom of the ski gondola. But after four days on the mountain, I'm not sure I succeeded. Enjoy the horse? Oh yeah! But tame it? Not very likely unless you can channel your inner Bad A\*\*.

One of North America's newest snowsport resorts lies a few miles up the road from Golden, B.C. Named Kicking Horse after the river that flows through town, it is all you could want in a challenging mountain, and then some.

My favorite word to describe this mountain is unrelenting. Since I was first there about 12 years ago, I noticed that there are more groomed runs now, and some good intermediate and beginner terrain too, but this is a big boy's and girl's mountain. It is not for posers, as they would just get swallowed up in the terrain.

Featuring four separate bowls with chutes, cornices, and drops galore, you might wonder why anyone would journey here? The answer lies somewhere in the juxtaposition between challenge and comfort, so let me try to explain.

First, the base area is modern enough to offer fine accommodations and eating options, including some luxurious chalets that would satisfy even the Kardashians.

Next, there is absolutely no hassle getting up the mountain when your main ride is an enclosed gondola that takes you straight to the top, spanning a grizzly bear refuge on its 3,800-vertical-foot ascent. Once at the top, the incredible view includes the Eagle Eye lodge, which is Canada's highest dining facility at 7,700 feet.

It is first class all the way, with authentic décor, picture windows and fine food. Because the gondola is right there, I'm told some locals just come up in the afternoon to have a few beers and enjoy the Alps-like view, including five national parks, then just ride the gondola back down and call it good.

The elevation of Kicking Horse is such that it is called the Champagne Powder Capital of Canada. Although I don't really know that much about Champagne, I can tell you that the snow squeaked, run after run, so it was plenty dry. The total vertical drop is just over 4,100 feet, and this vertical of steep and deep (about 265 inches annually) is what has made Kicking Horse famous.

This probably shouldn't be surprising when you realize that Kicking Horse is very proximate to many of the renowned helicopter skiing operations you've heard about over the years. With four heli-ski outfits and Chatter Creek cat-ski in Golden's backyard, backcountry adventure is easy to access, plus Golden has the biggest concentration of backcountry ski lodges in Canada.

The town of Golden itself is quite interesting. Founded originally as a base camp for the Canadian Pacific Railway, it is a real working town, located at the confluence of the Columbia and Kicking Horse Rivers. The TransCanada highway runs right through town, coming west from Calgary by about three hours and from Banff by about 1.5 hours.

Golden is home to a number of award winning restaurants, including Whitetooth Mountain Bistro, Cedar House, Eleven22 and the Island. Lodging options are numerous in Golden as well, and I thought the Holiday Inn Express offered excellent value if you wanted to stay off the mountain. I actually liked the town, which is alive with the arts and community spirit.

So what's not to like? It certainly isn't cost, as the American Greenback shines brightly up north these days. I'd say "getting there." Golden and Kicking Horse are too far to drive comfortably in one day, and flying to the Calgary airport still requires a three hour drive, though it won't seem that long because the scenery in Banff is as good as it gets.

But as an alternative to Sun Valley (about the same drive or fly time), it is a worthy candidate. You wouldn't have to ask more than once for me to return, as I'd like another shot to "Tame The Horse."

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