



# Beauty in the Backcountry

Backcountry skiing deep into the Canadian Rockies' rustic Skoki Lodge

Story: Donna Williams Images: The Lake Louise Ski Area and Donna Williams

# Back Country

'...skiing the last few kilometres was magic, the trees heavy with snow, the hardest part over, the promise of chimney smoke and famed hospitality around the corner.'



I look up at the ink black sky, switch off my headlamp and marvel at the myriad of a thousand, trillion stars. The sky as a unifying global fact, calls up a memory of standing on a remote sandy dune on Australia's Fraser Island—the same ink black sky with a different litter of stars. I stand and shiver at the impressive 60 degrees celcius dividing that memory and where I am now.

It's 5:30 am and I am darting outside to answer a call of nature, climbing snow stairs to a frozen throne of an outhouse deep in the Canadian Rockies. My warm flanelletted bed is tucked up under the rafters of charmed rustic, warm Skoki Lodge. I switch back on my headlamp to further navigate the task at hand. Same starry heavens also requiring different clothes I further reflect; I smile while muttering frozen expletives.

Our 11 kilometre trek to Skoki Lodge started from the bustling ski resort of Lake Louise in Banff National Park. With packs on our backs, long light-touring skis under foot, the skies offered a nondescript grey backdrop, releasing a steady dusting of soft white flakes and temperatures demanding serious gloves and many layers of warmth. The winding trail through giant fir trees had us as moving figures in a monochromatic black and white photograph. With frosty exhales, we found our rhythm in a mesmerizing sort of way.

Small undulating hills and vales, the trail firm underneath, with deep sinking powder on either side of the rough track, unknown surprises with each new bend. The unaccustomed need for balance on long skis and the distant memory of breakfast welcomed the sight of Halfway Hut, a chance for rest and chocolate and the thawing of water bottles.

Refreshed and apparently half-way there, an exciting in and around navigation through aptly named Boulder Pass had us staring across large, flat, frozen Ptarmigan Lake. Red poles perpendicular to its white windblown surface marked the route across. The snowy dense air had only two or three poles visible at once. Head down, instead of counting poles, I was waxing lyrical, imagining what Canada's famous poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen would write about this place. I'm sure I was brilliant but 'winter's icy tongue, wrapping herself around my body' is all I can recollect.

Finally, Deception Pass. This is where any aspirations I had for climbing Mt. Everest (in a dream, once) officially evaporated. Having placed climbing skins on the bases of my skis I could climb straight up. This did not make it easier, and I found the breathtaking scenery was doing just that, taking my breath. Up. Up. Up. Oh hello man walking with mere boots heading in the other direction, with your friendly smile and twinkling eyes. Nothing like a youthful male to make an older woman focus and remember to be charming and stop panting.

The summit of Deception was welcome, nothing short of dazzling, no doubt a combination of hypoxia and its true beauty. It politely offered its long sloping downhill of a backside as an apology. The snow had stopped but the



travel *THERE*

temperature was dropping and the day was closing in. Kindly, skiing the last few kilometres was magic, the trees heavy with snow, the hardest part over, the promise of chimney smoke and famed hospitality around the corner.

I was appropriately giddy and exhausted the moment I spied the beautiful log structure, its collection of skis out front proving that we all do eventually arrive. Shaking off the snow and stepping inside, trembling hands undid gators and laces, removed woollen hat and coat, fingers raking through disheveled hair. Truly the most delicious bowl of soup and friendly faces had me feeling relieved and at home.

Skoki Lodge was built in the backcountry 80 years ago. Recently its structure was updated for warmth, but it remains as rustic as when it was built in the quintessential Canadian log cabin style.

PREVIOUS PAGE Climbing Deception Pass. Skoki Lodge outhouse. CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT Beautiful Skoki Lodge. The welcome interior. A magical setting in the backcountry. A guestbook full of praise. Hitting the trail to Skoki Lodge. The infamous Skoki fare.

Kerosene and candles for light, a wood burning fireplace for ambience and warmth, down doonas, flannelette sheets and two gorgeous dining tables and pine chairs pulling you in for some of the best food I have ever eaten. 22 people can gather here, friendships are made fast and conversations are easy. I'm already planning my hike in this summer.

Managers Leo and Kate (Titanic lovers of the forest?) are married and committed to the efficient perfection of the place.

Leo deftly stoked the fire and kindly stroked my ego, saying my huffing and puffing up Deception was more due to apprehension than any reflection of my lack of fitness or mountain prowess or years of living. Apparently, not knowing where I was going or how long it would take to get there had me forget that climbing any mountain is a hare's race, slow and steady does it. I stood a little taller that day and resolved to remember to take it all in, one step, one breath and one pole at a time.

Our ski out several meals and two days later had me remember that. Bragging rights of leaving at minus 32 degrees Celcius led us bravely out in order to be able to use them. I looked up often, the magnificent blue of the skies, the icing of white on distant peaks, the bottomless snow when we left our skis and leapt in. This snow of the mountains is not city snow, not swept to the side and navigated, but clean and cold, pure and perfect. And fun.

Being away with my husband, grown children and close friends, sharing this great adventure that required marking days off the calendar and gathering the layers of sweaters and socks, willingness and want, required fortitude, perseverance and pluck. It cemented the idea

that we must sometimes leave our lives of order and comfort and enter a world away from home to live the unadulterated joy of simplicity.

We ate, we drank, we laughed and we slept. And slept well. Except for the call of nature. The starry skies, the remembrance of old adventures and the gathering of a new one was worth every chilly trip to the loo.



### Information:

Skoki Lodge: [www.skoki.com](http://www.skoki.com)

Ski rentals, Lake Louise - Wilson's Mountain Sports: [www.wmsll.com](http://www.wmsll.com)

Ski rentals, Calgary - University of Calgary Outdoor Centre: [www.calgaryoutdoorcentre.ca](http://www.calgaryoutdoorcentre.ca)

