

MONTANA

Hooked on Whitefish

Head to this well-preserved ski town for deep snow, authentic Western spirit

By BRIAN IRWIN
Special Contributor

WHITEFISH, Mont. — Ken Manuel flipped open his notebook, thrust an extendable ruler into the snowpack and measured its depth. The 47-year-old professional backcountry ski guide for Great Northern Powder Guides plunged the ruler until, at almost 5 feet of snow, he struck soil. He meticulously jotted data into his book, slid it into his chest pocket and clicked into his skis. One push and he was off, towing a plume of cold smoke behind him.

Regardless of depth, our hope was to stay buoyant on our skis in the upper layer of the snowpack. And that's what we did as we bounded over small ledges and through broad powder bowls in the backcountry of Montana's Stillwater State Forest, all expedited by custom-made snowcats.

The Stillwater is part of the Whitefish Range, which sits in a remote corner of Montana adjacent to Glacier National Park.

At the foot of the Whitefish Range sits the idyllic hamlet of Whitefish, Mont., perhaps the most well-preserved ski town in North America. Tight zoning and a rich westerly attitude keep the Fish as it was decades ago. Chain lodging and restaurants are not permitted in the village. Cowboy hats and the occasional sidearm are common sights. This is the Wild West, spared from the gentrification that has poisoned so many otherwise great ski villages.

A few miles up the road from Whitefish sits Whitefish Mountain Resort. Formerly called Big Mountain, Whitefish Mountain Resort was founded in 1947 and hosted the U.S. Alpine Skiing Championships two years later. It's a stunning area, with a series of corrugated peaks and a host of 14 lifts stitched up and down various valleys, through dense timbers and over expansive fields of untouched powder, ready for skiers to harvest.

Whitefish Mountain Resort is a classic ski area. It offers all you need, and just a touch more, but is spared the giant crowds, exorbitant prices and egotism that has become pervasive at many areas. Instead it's honest and unhurried, comfortable but humble. It draws skiers of all stripes, not for bragging rights, but for a natural, pure experience of some of the best skiing in the country.

The area is blessed with more than 300 inches of snow per year, boasts more than 3,000 acres of skiing and a vertical drop of over 2,300 feet. And with a summit altitude of under 7,000 feet, this area spares visitors extreme heights that lead to altitude illness.

My wife, Lori, and I spent two days skiing at the resort. We'd thread through towering timbers, museling our way through deep, dry fluff and down open faces as we hopped from lift to lift, from peak to peak. We'd ski all day and retire to the Kandahar Lodge, a slopeside lodge with rustic Western flair, a roiling outdoor Jacuzzi and a tiny, unassuming restaurant, the Kandahar Cafe.

The cafe's renowned chef, Andy Blanton, has been a four-time semifinalist for the James Beard Award for best chef in the Northwest. He served us an opulent menu: steelhead sashimi with quail egg and yak tartare. Wine pairings with each dish, elegant service and impeccable cuisine transitioned seamlessly into a slumber in our room just feet from the cafe kitchen.

After two days of skiing the steep and deep, we moved into the Firebrand Hotel, a chic boutique hotel in the center of Whitefish's just-bustling-enough town village. Steel and wood scaffold the lobby, keeping in theme with the Great Northern Railroad, formerly the most popular way for skiers to visit the Fish.

My last run in the Stillwater was like skiing through fabulous exploding meringue. Soft snow aerosolized under my feet and the sun rose from the valley below, igniting the frost crystals on our fingertips and goggles. We'd skied local shots such as the South Side of A.J. to Jay's Ridge and eventually worked our way to Lost Boys, a stunning expanse that leads



The backcountry of Montana's Stillwater State Forest gets more than 300 inches of snow per year.

Photos by Brian Irwin/Special Contributor



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back to an old discarded refrigerator in the woods. The guides unlocked the fridge, pulled out a beer and passed it to me.

In winter, the ice on Whitefish Lake is solid. And so are its denizens. This place is hard to escape; it forms a tether with many people who visit. It did

for me years ago, as I once spent a summer tending bar in Glacier National Park. I was warned when I started: Toy with its tractor beam and you, too, may become enamored for the rest of your life. For me, it was too late. I was hooked long ago.

Unwilted and authentic, Whitefish is an inspiring place. Largely unchanged from the time I spent a summer there 20 years back, I lamented that this town likely won't escape freezer burn forever. Places like Whitefish are too special to go unnoticed in perpetuity. Today Whitefish still swims under the radar of most skiers, keeping its unique atmosphere preserved. Someday throngs of people may flock to Whitefish in winter, just like many other resorts that started off in the same vein.

But for now, it's a quiet and genuine place, and if you know how to angle for it, you'll find, quite pleasantly, that this fish is easy to catch.

Brian Irwin is a freelance writer in North Conway, N.H.

If you go

Getting there: Fly to Kalispell, Glacier Park International Airport (FCA). Round trip from Dallas from the mid \$300s.

Lodging: On the mountain, try Kandahar Lodge, kandaharlodge.com; from \$239 per night. In Whitefish, don't miss the Firebrand; firebrandhotel.com. Rooms from \$109.

Skiing: For backcountry cat skiing, check out greatnorthernpowderguides.com; from \$395 per person per day. In the area, explore Whitefish Mountain Resort. Day tickets from \$76 per day.

Dining: Cafe Kandahar is well worth a visit; cafekandahar.com. Tasting menus from \$90.