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CaliFernie dreamin'

Only thing bigger than Fernie is its reputation as a powder mecca and a Wild West boom town

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FERNIE, B.C.—Robin Siggers has a badge of honour hanging on his office wall and a horseshoe tacked over his door.

"Every little bit of luck helps," says the mountain operations manager at B.C.'s legendary Fernie Alpine Resort. "This business is full of drama – it's a world all its own."

So is the scenery outside Siggers' office where one of the Rocky Mountains' most fearsome and fantastic headwalls of rock, ice and snow reaches for the heavens.

Thankfully, the hotel's front-desk clerk – an Ottawa native and veteran snowboarder – has already braced me for the jaw-dropping sight that awaits as I prepare to hit its slopes: "It took me a month to adjust to Fernie. When you see that headwall the first time, you just realize that this is a really mammoth mountain."

Siggers knows that better than most. As the former top dog, so to speak, of Fernie's four-canine avalanche rescue team, he's seen the best – and the worst – this mountain has to offer, from the tip of its 2,134-metre Polar Peak to the depths (it gets an average nine metres of snow each winter) of its five massive bowls.

"This mountain has a mystique and a cult following because we have the terrain *and* the snow. In reality, 70 per cent of our clientele can't ski it, but they don't really want to. They just come here because they've heard of Fernie and say to themselves, 'I've got to go there.' People are always looking for the new, best thing. That's what Fernie has going for it."

It's also got a big reputation – especially among Brits, Australians and Europeans – as a powder-skiing mecca with a Wild West atmosphere and surround-sound scenery, just five kilometres from the charming old mining town of Fernie (pop. 5,000-plus) in B.C.'s interior. The town is such a pleasant diversion from the slopes, with its main drag of



SUSAN PIGG PHOTO/TORONTO STAR
Farley, 4, a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, stands guard as part of Fernie's four-canine avalanche rescue squad. Fernie has the distinction of having had the only live avalanche rescue in Canada.

JUST THE FACTS

FERNIE ALPINE RESORT and its sister property Kimberley Alpine Resort (more on that next Thursday) are part of the Powder Highway, more than 700 kilometres of B.C. interior roads linking eight major ski resorts and 47 backcountry operations, including cat- and heli-skiing. See KootenayRockies.com

FERNIE HAS 111 RUNS, 10 lifts, just over 1,000 hectares of skiable terrain and is slated to open Dec. 8. It is 300 kilometres

century-old hotels, cafés and shops (stocked with the newest ski and boarding gear), that oil-rich Calgarians have been fuelling a building boom of pricey condos and chalets here, prompting locals to dub them "Californians."

Everything you hear about Fernie is true, from the characters riding its high-speed lifts to the crowd packing the slopeside Griz Bar, where naked table sliding was a tradition until a nail caught a body piercing, sending the table (and no doubt the slider) into serious rehab.

What used to be a local secret has grown, thanks to a takeover in 1998 by Resorts of the Canadian Rockies and a subsequent doubling of terrain, from just 150,000 skier-visits a season in the late '90s to about 300,000 last winter.

The ski and boarding crowd here is largely young – and fearless – but it's a nice family hill, too, with challenging greens, a host of kids' programs and a spectacular view from its new Lost Boys Café perched at the top of the Timber Bowl Express Quad, a must-stop for its gourmet baked potatoes.

But last winter proved to be so bountiful for snow, it seemed that avalanche warnings were posted everywhere, prompting at least one avid young skier to ask her parents: "Is it even safe to ski here?"

It is, thanks to Fernie's 30-member team of snow experts.

Siggers first came here back in 1977 when Fernie had just a couple of T-bars and most locals made a living logging or hauling coal out of the mines. "The powder skiing was just phenomenal," he says, with a flash of the grin and good looks of actor Owen Wilson. "There were a couple of dozen of us who had the place totally to ourselves."

In what would turn out to be a harbinger of things to come, Siggers was hired as a ski patroller in 1979 when one of the regulars was injured in an avalanche. By 2000 – when a fateful call would come on his two-way radio – the province would have mandated that every major mountain have an avalanche team, and Siggers would be head of Fernie's, which included his yellow Lab, Keno.

The wooden plaque hanging over Siggers desk from the Canadian Avalanche Rescue Dogs Association, just hints at the whole story: "First Live Find," it reads. "Congratulations Keno and Robin."

In fact, it should say *only* live find by an avalanche dog in Canada.

On Dec. 19, 2000, Fernie staff was getting ready to open lifts for the season. Snow already filled the bowls and hung off the mountain's craggy ridges. Staff, including young lifty Ryan Radchenko, had been warned to stay in designated safe areas, "but Ryan was on a break, so he didn't think it applied then," says Siggers, rolling his eyes.

(There hasn't been an avalanche death within bounds of a ski area in Canada since 1983, although a record 29 people died in backcountry areas in the winter of 2002-03, including seven Alberta teenagers on a school trip near Revelstoke, a number that dropped to seven last winter in part because of concerted avalanche warning and prevention efforts in response to those 29 deaths.)

west of Calgary and close to the newly expanded Cranbrook Airport. Five-day lift and four-night stay packages start at \$579. Regular day-lift passes range from \$24 for children to \$72 for adults. Call 1-800-258-7669, see skifernie.com or www.skircr.com

FOR A BIT OF Wild West entertainment, come during the Kokanee Snow Dreams Festival Jan. 25 to 27, 2008, declared the "best deck party" by *Ski Canada Magazine* in 2006. The famed Griz Days, with snowmobile races and the Dummy Downhill (works of "art" attached to skis and sent crashing off the end of a ski ramp) is March 7 to 9, 2008.

THERE'S LOTS of hotel and condo accommodation at or near the mountain and regular shuttles from town. See fernie.com and request a copy of the *Fernie Guide*, which lists accommodation, shopping, dining and other activities in the area.

GET A COPY of *Dining in Fernie*, a listing of Fernie eateries, including hot spots such as Mojo Risin' in the historic Royal Hotel where you can grind a few rails in the backlot between beers. It even includes prices.

"We spend over \$150,000 on explosives alone and blast most days," says Siggers. Trained staff monitor snow density, wind, temperature and humidity "every day, all day." But sometimes even that's not enough.

As Radchenko stood in the Currie Bowl, tonnes of snow broke loose from the ridge and barrelled down the slope.

"Statistically they say you have about a 50 per cent chance after 30 minutes. Less than four per cent of people ever survive being buried more than two metres deep. Once you're six feet down, you're as good as gone because it's going to take half an hour to dig you up," says Siggers.

Avalanche dogs undergo intensive training for this moment – much of it through almost comical, but deadly serious, fetch and tug-of-war games, like Farley, a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, is playing right now on a snowy peak with his owner Jennifer Coulter.

"It's just remarkable to see them," says Siggers, who spent years training Keno, who died last spring at age 12. "We practice and work the dogs with scented articles that have been buried 70 centimetres down and left out overnight. The scenarios just get more and more difficult and complicated. The scent of a live, buried person is like a bonfire for a dog – as soon as they get near the smell, they find the person."

While the area where Radchenko was buried was relatively small, the clock was ticking as staff frantically used probes and Keno and Siggers were dispatched from separate spots on the mountain.

"I had to ride the lift to get there and I was looking at the guys searching underneath – talk about the longest 15 minutes of your life. They were bringing Keno from the base on a snowmobile and we got to the site at almost the same time. Within two minutes Keno had found Ryan's glove and then we dug him out."

Radchenko was unconscious – he was buried in a metre of snow but luckily with his hand reaching above him.

"He was rushed to hospital and he was back an hour later," says Siggers. "That was just a huge relief and that's what a lot of people don't understand – how much of a shocking situation it was to be in."

It is, ironically, that almost killer appeal of Fernie – particularly its unpatrolled backcountry – that attracts the most die-hard skiers. And it's why ski patrollers marvel at how many skiers and boarders continue to head out of bounds.

"There are tons of young kids who come here to go skiing the Fernie backcountry and they go out bulletproof and invincible and they don't have a clue how big a risk they are taking. And they get away with it – it's called negative reinforcement – they get away with something that's inherently dangerous and then it seems safe.

"Skiing in the mountains, in the wilderness, that's a Canadian recreational lifestyle. We don't want to say, 'Don't do it.' It's just that you have to be sensible and know when not to. And that's the trick."

The Canadian Avalanche Association, which was formed in the wake of the 29 deaths, now spends about \$650,000 a year on backcountry safety programs and education and has seen a steady decline in avalanche deaths. The Canadian Rescue Dogs Association (CARDA) and, of course, dogs like Keno and Farley have also done their part.

"We always said in CARDA that if a dog actually found somebody alive, we were going to take him

FOR MORE on avalanche safety see www.avalanche.ca or call 250-837-2435.

FOR MORE on B.C. see www.HelloBC.com

to the best restaurant in town, sit him at a table and get him the biggest steak on the menu," says Siggers with a laugh.

"We didn't actually do that – but we got him a big T-bone at the butcher."

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