

Skiing at Norquay, Banff Sunshine, Lake Louise (Ski Big3)

While it took over 30 years for Harford Ski Club to return to Banff, Alberta Canada, the long wait to ski the 'Ski Big 3' did not disappoint! We had a total of 24 members on the trip, including vintage members and several new members. It was absolutely a fantastic trip with mostly great ski conditions, enjoyable events with Blue Ridge Ski Council, and much warmer than expected weather. I heard mostly highly favorable feedback from everyone on the trip, many expressing memories and experiences that will last a lifetime. Our vendor SkiCan did a great job planning and executing our glorious trip.

Several members were a little hesitant to sign up for this trip, considering the high probability of really cold temperatures in Canada in early February. But thanks to the 'polar vortexes' of recent times, we enjoyed warming up into the 30s – and yes, even the low 40's, while folks back home experienced temperatures below zero and even worse wind chills.

We started our adventure as usual at BWI in the early morning of Jan.31 with a long travel day ahead. United did a superb job with all our flights departing and arriving on time and no lost luggage! We did have a bit of a rush through the Denver airport with about an hour layover between flights, whilst having to do an estimated 30 minute walk and ride between gates and terminals. This took an unfortunate toll on myself as I was fighting a stomach bug that day and I lost my breakfast just after getting seated on our plane to Calgary. This was a first for me, and it was a heck of a way to secure a vacant seat between myself and Karen Doggett on the flight! The extra room was rare, but I wouldn't recommend getting that space by the means that I took. I kept an extra bag from a seat pocket to keep handy the rest of the day; luckily I didn't need it and decided to keep it as a souvenir.

Upon arrival in Calgary our group was split in half to ride the buses to Banff. Due to delays with other flights we ended up sharing buses with 2 other clubs. We eventually checked into the lovely Banff Springs Hotel at roughly 6 PM. They had arranged a Welcome Reception for our club, the only club that was lucky enough to score rooms at the hotel. We mostly dropped our bags in our rooms and headed to drinks and heavy apps that left our hungry travelers highly satisfied. Unfortunately, I was still sticking with Ginger Ale, and somehow the staff picked up on that and brought me a huge bowl of pumpkin soup, hoping to help my upset stomach. Talk about being surprised and feeling a deep sense of Canadian hospitality!!! After the reception we mostly collapsed in our rooms anticipating a fun week of skiing.

The majority of us started our first day of skiing at Banff Sunshine. It was about a 30 minute bus ride followed by a 15-minute gondola ride to the base of the ski area.

Sunshine has the highest elevation of the SkiBig3 mountains and sits atop a glacier. We found Sunshine to have the best snow conditions of the 3 mountains and by the end of the week, many told me it was their favorite mountain. We enjoyed the high 20 – low 30 temperatures although there was a bit of fog and clouds with flurries making vision a little tough, but the afternoon weather turned better. For the last run of the day about half the group decided to ski down vs others who decided to ride the gondola down. Turns out the trail was the original road that buses used to use to get skiers up to the base area. Those that skied down found it a bit challenging, including some undesirable polling and unexpected dips and icy patches. But they learned from their mistakes and had a successful run later in the week by taking the JackRabbit lift to get around the polling.

Later that evening we had the Blue Ridge Welcome Reception at High Rollers Bowling and Beer Hall, a local bowling alley and sports bar that many locals declared as having the best pizza in Banff. The pizza did not disappoint nor did the sliders, fries, salad, roasted veggies and tasty desserts! Several other clubs traveled Sunday to Sunday on this trip, and therefore they had reserved the entire venue for us from 5 – 9:30 with 2 sessions. Those of us who arrived on Saturday had the early session starting at 5 and those arriving on Sunday had the later session starting at 7. I thought this was ingenious as there were ample seating and food to go around. We all enjoyed comparing experiences of our first day of skiing.

On Monday many of us went to Lake Louise, enjoying the roughly 40-minute bus ride with breathtaking scenery along the way. Weatherwise we basically had a repeat of Sunday. Some of our group headed directly for the Rock Garden, a favorite amongst avid skiers. However, conditions were not favorable with lots of ice patches and big rock obstacles. While some of us were disappointed we took the advice of some of the best skiers who did the run and did not care to do that run again. Instead we found Larch and Larch Poma to be great runs.

On Tuesday the majority of us returned to Lake Louise as we had our second Blue Ridge event, an Après ski at Lake Louise at the Whiskey Jack Lodge. Once again we found heavy apps, delicious pulled pork, chicken and beef brisket. It was a delectable delight following another spectacular day of skiing.

Our group had various experiences on Wednesday. Some took the day off and checked out great food and shopping in Banff. Others indulged in a very informative tour of our historic Banff Springs Hotel. A few decided to ski a shorter day by visiting Norquay, the smallest and the most local feeling resort that is only a 20-minute bus ride. Three of us, John Kampe, Mike Peters and myself, ventured 2 hours away to Kicking Horse, an option offered by our vendor Skican. We were in between the clouds most of the day with temps reaching into the 40s and high clouds above and low clouds / fog down in

the valleys offering some spectacular scenery! It was like having a Sunset glow all day long. We enjoyed lunch at the Eagle's Eye restaurant, officially the highest elevated restaurant in Canada at 7,700 feet. Unfortunately, we had a long wait for our food which reduced our skiing time, but we enjoyed the panoramic views and photo opportunities. We found some of the best tree skiing the week offered just off the appropriately named 'Stairway to Heaven' lift.

The final two days were mostly split between Sunshine and Lake Louise. These turned out to be gorgeous blue bird days with lots of sunshine, great visibility and afternoon temps reaching the low 40s. We were experiencing the start of Spring skiing, with chunky slopes in the morning and softening conditions in the afternoon. Many of us took fresh pics since the views looked very different from earlier in the week. Some of us ventured to the Top of the World and the back bowls of Lake Louise given the better visibility. At Sunshine we enjoyed the morning sun and steep runs from the Goat's Eye lift and then rode and skied across the Great Divide lift and runs, branching briefly into British Columbia. All enjoyed the wide-open bowls and trails.

Our final Blue Ridge event was our farewell banquet at Sulphur Mountain on Thursday evening. Sulphur Mountain is not a ski resort but, a mountain in the Canadian Rocky Mountains overlooking Banff. The gondola ride with gentle narration and music from the indigenous tribes along with a comfy blanket made for a unique sunset experience. We enjoyed breathtaking views from the 4 levels of observation decks and boardwalks. Once again, we were spoiled with plenty of delicious food to go around. After dusk many of us returned to the observation decks to take in the stars and planets and hoped to gaze upon some Northern lights. Although Mother Nature didn't give us a show, our cameras did pick up back lit skies from neighboring towns on the other side of the mountains. We capped off the night with dancing and enjoying the DJ's tunes. I particularly enjoyed everyone singing along to the requested 'Sweet Caroline'.



This report would not be complete without sharing some other unique experiences from the trip. First on this list is the activities and atmosphere at the Banff Springs Hotel. Many of us enjoyed the extremely heated hot tub, the warmest outside pool I've ever felt, the welcoming and relaxing Runkle bar, the various 400+ million old fossils found in the limestone tile throughout the hotel, not to mention the gorgeous views behind the hotel. There was extremely convenient ski and boot storage, and the staff was prompt with handling our equipment. There was even an outdoor skating rink that some used to relive earlier times (Allie!). Our club got it right by staying at this unique hotel both times we have visited Banff.

There were a couple of near disasters with mix-ups with ski equipment. I was the worst offender by not paying attention at the end of a day at Lake Louise by picking up a similar looking pair of rental skis and loading them onto the bus. Unknowing that I did this, Ernie and Lisa got on the same bus and Ernie informed us that his skis were stolen. Luckily as the discussion went on, I realized that I was probably the culprit. Our bus was full, and as usual, another bus was added leaving in 10 minutes. I had time to confirm Ernie's skis were on the bus and then walk back to the racks and find my rental skis and get loaded on the next bus. Disaster averted! That was the last time I picked up my skis off a rack or off a bus and failed to look for my name on the sticker. Dan also had a similar problem when he got off the bus at Lake Louise only to find he was the last one off the bus and the pair of skis left were not his personal skis! He asked the driver for assistance, and he recommended looking through the racks to see if he could find them. He did indeed find them and exchanged the pair that was left behind with his own, the culprit knowing none the wiser. Ironically, he saw the person carrying those skis checking them into our hotel ski storage area and kept a lookout for that fellow the rest of the week!

Another disaster was avoided when we went to ski our 6th day at Lake Loise and 2 in our group failed to pass the lift ticket scan. We recalled that only the Full IKON pass included more days than the IKON Base or military pass, which only included 5 full days. As a result Steve and Kim both had to buy a day ticket at the window for Lake Loise. This turned out to be a reasonable \$79 USD for the day, vs. what would have been astronomical had we been somewhere like Park City or Vail! But they both agreed it was worth doing the unexpected day at Norquay, to which they fulfilled the Trifecta challenge which included the official Trifecta patch and a free beer!

The only disappointing topic on this trip was injuries. The first happened on the first day and resulted in a shoulder injury. The others were both knee injuries; one midweek and the other on our last day. All made it home OK on the plane rides and some enjoyed a ride through Denver airport on the way home, as we had yet another long walk between gates. Best wishes for full and speedy recovery to all the injured on the trip!

On Saturday morning we bid farewell to Banff, the warm 40 degree weather (60 degrees in Denver!), the various wildlife of elk, ram, deer, and red squirrels, and by the late evening we were back to the frozen tundra of Baltimore. The following week at home our temperatures finally rose back up to 40s. For the first time we brought warm weather back from Canada!

Many thanks to all who joined us for the trip. It will once again go down as one of my top favorite club trips ever. I was happy to lead the trip and appreciated all the wonderful comments, feedback and memories. Until next time.....Think Snow!

