

A Backcountry Trip Across British Columbia's Glaciers

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THE Spearhead Traverse is a two- to four-day backcountry ski trip into the unpopulated alpine realm that awaits just beyond the boundary ropes of Whistler Blackcomb, in British Columbia. The epitome of high (and cold) lonesome, it's a journey of glacier crossings, impossibly fresh snow and winter camping in tents and huts.

Our group had gathered to try the traverse, but our first challenge was getting out of Whistler Village. The streets were jammed. The ski school, too. The morning lift line for the Whistler Gondola reached across the plaza to shake hands with the line stretching from Blackcomb's Excalibur Gondola. Such is the modern wintry life at Whistler Blackcomb, North America's largest ski area. (And it will only get more crowded as Whistler gears up for the 2010 Winter Olympics.)

Yet somehow, amid the crush and the flash, it was our group that made people stare. A guy squinted at the backpacks, ice axes and touring skis, then whispered to his instructor. Some people pointed. But we didn't mind.

A skier in search of winter quiet and the opposite of après-ski chic would be hard-pressed to find a better way to return to Whistler's roots than by skiing the Spearhead, the first extended traverse on skis through the Coast Mountains of British Columbia.



Whistler and Blackcomb belong to different mountain ranges, separated by the deep cleft of the Fitzsimmons Valley. The Spearhead Traverse scribes a big horseshoe from the top of one resort to the other, around that valley. Skiers use Blackcomb's lifts like a giant stepladder, riding to 7,500 feet in the Spearhead Range, then heading southeast into the silent heart of Garibaldi Provincial Park.

Upon reaching the valley's end, they return west along the spine of the parallel Fitzsimmons Range. Twenty-one miles and 13 glacier crossings after leaving Blackcomb, skiers emerge on the slopes of Whistler Mountain and ski to the base area for a celebratory beer. Most of the route stays above 7,000 feet.

Our group first tried in midwinter 2007, led by Martin Volken, a Swiss-born, internationally certified mountain guide who owns Pro Guiding Service in North Bend, Wash., outside Seattle. But we were turned back by ripping 40-mile-an-hour winds.

In late March, we tried again. That time the conditions were in our favor. The sky was Windex blue, and a few inches of soft snow covered everything. From the top of the uppermost Showcase T-Bar, Mr. Volken led our group of four across the Blackcomb Glacier and past a sign for the ski-area boundary, where everyone put on climbing harnesses and attached adhesive climbing skins to the bottoms of their touring skis.

At East Col, the last lift-tethered thrill seekers peeled off toward steep runs with names like D.O.A. and Body Bag Bowl that empty back to the resort. We were startlingly alone in wild country. “Amazing,” said Rob Morris, a facilities manager for a Seattle law firm and a veteran backcountry skier. “Just 20 minutes outside of Whistler.”

We zigzagged up the Decker, aimed for a notch and skied a short pitch onto the wide belly of the Trorey Glacier. The Spearhead generally keeps to this pattern: ascend a ridge, ski down to the head of a mellow glacier, reattach climbing skins, push across to a col, or gap, on the far side, repeat. But don’t confuse repetition with boredom. There was far too much to gape at.

About 10 million years ago, the same geologic shifts that pimpled the Northwest with volcanoes heated up once-low hills. They rose like muffins in an oven to nearly 7,000 feet. All around is a choppy sea of dips and swells. The views got even better when we reached the notch between the Tremor and Platform glaciers. Here, at the route’s high point of 8,500 feet, almost the entire second half of the tour was spread out before us.

THE Spearhead isn’t the most taxing of backcountry treks, with only about 6,000 feet of total climbing. Still, skiers should be in good shape, and able to tolerate winter camping and make turns while bearing a 40-pound pack. Trying the Spearhead without knowledge of weather, avalanche conditions and safe glacier travel, or without a guide, is foolish.

Then there are those names on the map that seem increasingly foreboding the deeper you trespass into the wild: Tremor Mountain, Shudder Glacier, the Ripsaw.

In May 1964, Karl Ricker and three fellow graduate students — all members of the University of British Columbia’s Varsity Outdoor Club — hopped off a train at a logging camp near Whistler (there was no road from Vancouver) and began to hike 5,000 feet up what would become the ski hill. “It was just solving one puzzle after another,” said Mr. Ricker, a retired geologist who lives in Whistler.

The challenges echo in the names the group gave to features on the traverse: Detour Ridge, Refuse Pinnacle. That first trip took nine days. The addition of lifts at the top of Blackcomb in 1981 made the traverse more accessible. Today perhaps several hundred skiers do the traverse annually. Most go in spring, when daylight lingers and weather in the capricious Coast Range is usually favorable.

On our trip, we camped the first night at Quiver Col, digging platforms for the four-season tents. But the spillway of the Ripsaw Glacier was too tempting. In the softening light, I chased Mr. Volken and his perfect turns nearly 1,000 feet down the broad glacier.

The next morning the alarm clock shrieked in the bitter dark. The worry of bad weather was written on Mr. Volken’s brow. But when he stuck his head out the tent window, he grunted what sounded like approval. In the sky, the front was a pencil line pushing south of us. Since we were up, he got us moving well before eight.

After we swung behind Mount Fitzsimmons at the head of the valley, high above those teetering séracs, or columns of ice, and gaping crevasses we'd seen the day before, the Overlord Glacier offered a surprise: a long, gentle ski run. By the time we were done with the Overlord, the glacier looked like an oscilloscope.

"I'm surprised that we get to track up a beautiful glacier like the Overlord," Mr. Volken said, shaking his head. "You can see it from Whistler, right? There's 30,000 people that can see it."

Usually on the Spearhead Traverse skiers spend their last night camped at the Himmelsbach Hut (elevation, 6,175 feet) on Russet Lake. It isn't some cheese-and-prosciutto-stocked European-style rifugio, though. It is, instead, an unheated, corrugated metal Quonset-style thing with plank bunks for about eight people. Still, after a tent it can be a welcome sight.

Under Mr. Volken's guidance, we made such good time that we arrived there before 1 p.m. There was lunch, coffee and talk of what to do. Somebody mentioned hamburgers, and our debate ended. Packs were shouldered, and the group pushed on for the last two hours to Singing Pass and the "Musical Bumps" — Oboe, Flute and Piccolo summits — that separate the hut from the pubs in Whistler Village.

Soon we'd be dodging skiers and pulling into the Longhorn, where the waitresses walk around wearing bandoliers of shot glasses. We would be a little dazed, but also a little glad to be back in a warm room near a hot meal.

But we'd also be wondering how soon we could escape again.