



Mt. Baldy

Words and photos by **Andrew Strain**

Ascending from the snowless valley bottom in Oliver, BC, we drive through the sage and antelope brush of Canada's only desert. It is hard to imagine that 1,300 metres higher, Mt. Baldy Ski Area is having a snow season for the ages. The village is a maze of trenches carved into the 200 centimetre snowpack at the mountain base. Driveways resemble long, narrow couloirs, giving access to the roughly 130 cabins that make up the Mt. Baldy village. While the streets are well maintained, an aging snowcat half-buried in the road bank serves as a sombre reminder that the lifts have not been fully operational since 2013. Along with my friend Dave Gheriani, I've returned to my hometown hill to check in on the situation. /





I grew up in Oliver and was first introduced to skiing—and Mt. Baldy—through my high school's twice-a-year ski program. Winter holidays were often spent at friends' cabins, drinking cheap cider in hot tubs and sneaking into the mountain pub. Back then, the skiing was secondary to being a mildly delinquent teen, but those early days on snow set me on the path that I follow today. Travelling to ski at a destination resort was beyond my family's means; without a local hill, I may have never started sliding on snow. / We dig out our touring gear and begin skinning up the 'home run' that makes a broad, gentle loop around the ski area; from the top of the double chair to the ski-in, ski-out cabins. Our host and longtime cabin owner, Dr. John Dimma, leads the way. Having just returned home from a week at a backcountry hut near Nakusp, he sets a conservative pace. There is no need to rush; we are the only group on the mountain today. As we near the summit, the clouds break and the afternoon sun pours in, giving us our

first opportunity to take in our surroundings. /

Mt. Baldy is a 2,303 metre stone-capped summit that juts above the interior plateau. A massive mountain, Baldy earns its prominence not by grade but by girth. Situated at the northern tip of the shrub-steppe of the Columbia Basin, Mt. Baldy represents the first significant obstacle in over 500 km for storm systems coming out of the south, creating a bowling alley effect where Baldy is the head pin. /

Mt. Baldy Ski Area first opened in 1968, with a single T-bar and a collection of Spartan A-frames forming the initial community, some which still remain. A second T-bar was added a few years later to carry skiers nearly 400 vertical metres above the 1,722 metre base. The gruelling Baldy T ran for nearly three decades before it was mercifully replaced in 1999 with a double chair—named the Eagle—from Mt. Washington. The ski hill itself was owned by the cabin owners until 2004, when Idaho-based Mountain Recreation, LLP bought out the community and began injecting capital for long-overdue infrastructure upgrades. /

Trees were gladed and limbed, opening up large swaths of terrain that were previously un-skiable. The hill expanded, adding a fixed-grip quad chair and a pod of new runs in the Sugarlump area; the first phase of a master plan that included over a dozen lifts and an 18 hole golf course. However, the added uphill capacity failed to offset the new expenditures. Financial reality eventually caught up to the ownership group; the hill didn't open during the 2013-14 winter and, that summer, a creditor foreclosed on the company. Save for a brief revival of the Sugarlump chair in January 2015, the foreclosure and subsequent receivership have waylaid lift operations for the past three seasons, forcing the community to find alternatives to access the mountain. /

We work our way up through the snow-ghosted spruce, increasingly sparse and stunted with elevation. Accumulated rime pulls them south, drooping

into the prevailing wind; some wear comically oversized pillows atop their arched spines. Above the protection of treeline, the wind howls across the broad summit. We cozy up to the lee side of a microwave tower while we de-skin. /

After skiing a short and mellow pitch through open forest off the northeast of the summit in silky, boot-deep snow, I probe 260 centimeters at 2,000 meter elevation—not bad for the desert. Skins go back on and Dave sets off, switching back and forth above us. John chuckles at the aggressiveness of the skin track—it's a gently rising traverse back to the run that returns to his cabin. I follow him on the less strenuous route. /

Much of the resort terrain is obscured from the summit and back bowl that we've been skiing; as we reach the northeast ridge, the runs come into view. A shallow lineament parallels the southeastern aspect and marks the resort boundary. Below, the slope rolls away into steep, open terrain that gradually gives way to immaculately spaced glades. Dave drops in and slashes a deep trench into the untouched snow. /

We wake the next day as a storm begins to rage on the mountain. With no new snow overnight there is little need to bolt out of bed. We linger for brunch and espresso while we watch the snow accumulate. /

A thick, wet blanket of cloud is slopped over the summit as we approach the top. With few markers for reference, we stumble forward through the fog, towards where we think the patrol shack is. I can barely see Dave less than five metres ahead of me when the building fades into view. The door is slightly ajar and we help ourselves to the refuge, waiting for the soup to clear. /



Out of the inclement weather, we take advantage of the pocket of cell service atop the hill, converting the patrol hut into temporary office space. Time flies, and the day is soon waning. The storm, however, is not. We feel our way past the drifted-in lift station and a rimed-over trail map, searching for the steep, gladed terrain we had spotted the previous afternoon. / Baldy's glades are a dream. Perfectly spaced fir, spruce, and pine have been stripped of their lower limbs, allowing for freedom of movement usually reserved for subalpine or temperate old growth. We charge through the forest, bouncing over bumps and rolls, and struggling to slow down for the photos we need to shoot. When we finally return to our cabin, it is dark. / Jim Barber, our neighbour on the mountain, is waiting for us. Normally a member of Baldy's volunteer patrol, he remains vigilant during the closure.



Seeing that we are merely returning late, his concern melts into hospitality and he invites us across the street to his cabin for dinner. / Jim and his wife Marion are prolific skiers. Over enchiladas and beers we hear tales of epic 'skifaris' that span western North America, darting between resorts at a whirlwind pace to cram in as much time on snow as their schedules allowed. They have, quite literally, skied everywhere. On their way home from a Kootenays trip in the early 90's, they caught a glimpse of Baldy from the highway and veered off to investigate. The mountain was closed during the week, so they returned the following weekend and were struck by not just the terrain, but the unique character of the ski area. /



A small hill on a big mountain, there has always been room for new friends on a powder day at Baldy. The ski community was warm, friendly, and more than willing to show the two Americans around. "That didn't happen at other places", Jim recalls. They moved as close to Baldy as they could without leaving the USA—Oroville, Washington—and bought a vintage A-frame back in 2002. In contrast to today's mega resorts with hour long lift lines, that welcoming and laid back attitude at Baldy remains its strongest asset. / The storm fades through the night and day breaks with crisp shadows and blue skies. My van is hidden under 20 centimetres of low density fluff—invigorating enough to limit our 'spro intake to a single shot before rushing out the door to begin our ascent. In the storm's wake, the wind is relentless and we again seek shelter in the patrol shack. The Eagle Chair hangs heavy with thick feathers of rime, starkly emphasizing the operational state of the lift. Unfortunately, by noon the wind, warmth, and solar effect has done a number on the new snow, which has taken on an unfavourably coastal consistency. We retreat after a single run to quench our disappointment with beer. /

Despite the hill's closure, Baldy remains home to a committed group of cabin owners, many of whom continue their winter weekend rituals regardless of whether the lifts are spinning. By Friday evening, smoke is rising from most chimneys. The cackling brap of a snowmobile rouses us on Saturday morning and the hill is downright packed compared to the midweek solitude we've been experiencing. Lured by the train of storms that rolled through during the week, at least a dozen skiers, boarders, and sledgers have made the trip up from the valley. /





I hitch a ride with a group of local shredders on the back of a side-by-side; it lumbers slowly up the mountain, fast enough to be convenient but slow enough to down a beer. After touring all week, my legs are grateful for the mechanized assist. The wet snow has tightened up since the previous day, with help from a light dusting of fresh covering a supportive crust. Bombing through the trees, I can hear the whooping from the crew as we hunt wind drifted stashes and it almost feels like a regular day on the mountain. The poor-man's snowcat is waiting at the base; we rally a few more laps before turning our attention to grilled meats and chilled beers. /

There is a party that night; Randall Smith, the unofficial Sheriff of Baldy, is turning 50. Most of the village has come out to celebrate, including parents of old friends that I haven't seen since high school. I solicit the crowd: why Baldy? Everyone has their own story but, as the night goes on, it becomes clear to me: the answer is there, with us in the room. /

It is snowing again as Dave and I depart the next morning, but after just a few minutes we are driving back through the sage with not a trace of white to be seen. I wonder how many in the valley have forgotten that some of BC's best tree skiing sits above them in the clouds? /

While I'm unpacking the van back at home, I get a message from Jim Barber: "You should have been here, after the storm on Sunday. 13cms of light fluffy pow, still snowing. Happy trails and ski-ya!" /

In July 2016, after 24 months in receivership, Mt. Baldy was finally sold and the new management group began scrambling to prepare the hill for operation this winter. Opening day is scheduled for December 1st. For the first time in its history, Mt. Baldy will operate seven days a week, for the entire 16/17 season. ❄️

