

Castle is King

The Haig turns Castle Mountain into a ski destination for the whole family

JIM BARR

Special to the Sun

Interested in a secret? There is this little known place with terrain so stellar and snow so thick that it rounds up a few firsts for ski resorts here in Canada.

At 2,000 vertical feet, the double diamond run pegged "Lone Star," found within the south chutes of Castle Mountain ski resort is Canada's longest continual fall line.

On Saturday I launched into this double diamond adventure with some serious yippin' and yellin.'

Top 10

Not only is this south western Alberta destination known for its lengthy runs but also for its steep and deeps, so many that next to Whistler-Blackcomb, they have Canada's most advanced avalanche control team.

The resort has to have a strong bomb squad since it has the same amount of bombing sites as its coastal cousin and this year the crew has been busy.

"This season has been

phenomenal for us, the snow just hasn't stopped falling," said Castle's Andrew Rusy-nyk. "We are currently ranked number nine on the planet for our snow pack, beating out Whistler and Fernie."

The shredding options at Castle just improved big time with the installation of its new Huckleberry triple chair flanking the slopes of Mount Haig.

This new addition to the mountain (it's official opening is this weekend), not only increases much needed intermediate and beginner options, but also opens up a whole new mountain to play on.

"We are heading up Huckleberry today to get at the new backcountry options," said Rocky Mountain House resident, Don Lasn. "Haig bowl (a short hike off the chair) offers some incredible skiing, big wide open spaces through the trees ... it's some wicked terrain back there."

As you head into this new area make sure you stop in and get some local advice from Tom Ross, head of ski patrol and his crew. In a cabin at the top of the chair

lift, you'll find the latest avalanche conditions and first-hand advice about the terrain you are about to shred.

It's important to stress this, backcountry area is not patrolled nor avalanche controlled - you are on your own - so of course you'll require the proper gear and avalanche knowledge.

"In Haig bowl people will find a mixture of open treed runs on slopes of over 35 degrees," said Ross.

On the opposite side of Haig, an hour and a half hike will earn you a run on Chimo's with its 55 degree pitch; found a wee further up the ridge KC's, a brutally steep 58-degree chute that will keep the heart racing.

You may have caught a glimpse of the terrain in this year's Warren Miller, where Castle's own Pete McGee, along with a few friends, made the first descent down Haig's East Face.

It's a charmer

It's cottage country at Castle; a snow filled cottage country.

The base area is home to the Castle community, a mix of sturdy mobile homes and



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Castle Mountain's Andrew Rusykyk makes an assault down Canada's longest fall line, Lone Star on Saturday, Jan. 21.

brand new town house complexes, some still under construction. It makes for a small town charm that sets Castle apart from other ski destinations.

You won't find any mega swanked out resort properties here, but stay on mountain at the Castle Mountain Ski Lodge; no Starbucks or commercial restaurants, but feast on the menu found at the new Barnaby Steak House and the

T-Bar Pub & Grub, featuring some mighty fine pizzas.

I stayed just up the road at the Angler's Ridge Bed & Breakfast with the hostess with the mostest, Wendy Meerveld.

Not only does Meerveld's place feature some stellar food and a relaxing environment to rest those legs after your assault on the Castle, but she can also provide some invaluable adventure options.

Meerveld and Rusykyk work together to produce the Crowsnest Guide, www.crowsnestguide.com, featuring the best of the best for the area surrounding Castle Mountain. She can point you in the direction of premium sledding and Nordic ski trails, which are in abundance in the area and of course, where the best snow's at on Castle.

Get over to www.skicastle.ca for more information.

Jasper festival is about endurance

MICHAEL BROWN

Edmonton Sun

This year's Jasper in January has been more about chili than chilly. The unseasonably warm temperatures were only bested by the heat generated by the competitors of the 19th annual Kokanee Chili Cook Off held on Jan. 19 at the Amethyst Lodge.

The first thing to notice about Jasper in January is what a perfect place to judge whether the person you're with is truly right for you.

Where else can you go from

a chili cook-off to wine tasting in the span of two days; two polar opposites, yes, but a much-needed dichotomy that acts as the litmus test of compatibility.

I believe I can speak for the majority of men when I say most are looking for someone who walks into a chili cook-off, orders their height in beer tickets, rolls up their sleeves, and then pulls out their own spoon wrapped neatly in a monogrammed bib; then, the next night, dress to kill, and high brow it with the best of them at the Taste

of Canadian Wine and Cheese hosted by the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge.

Lost in the fun is the fact that chili cook-offs are not only fiercely contested but personal. My money was on the Sawridge Inn's lime-accompanied chili and its Rocky Horror booth. However, Earl's Restaurant "Slapshot" chili was deemed by the judges as the one to beat while Jasper Electrical won out as the people's chili.

All I can say is thank goodness for the comfort the Jasper Inn. I've learned that Jas-

per in January is more of an endurance event than a sprint. This means comfort is paramount. Thus, we made a mini suite at the Jasper Inn command central. The Jasper Inn has that cosy feeling you come to expect with a mountain stay, and a bathroom as big as my dining room.

A steam, sauna and a swim at the Inn proceeded Saturday night's main event, which may go down in history as the greatest bargain in the history of bargains - Taste of Canadian Wine and Cheese at the vaunted Fairmont Jasper Park

Lodge.

It would have been a good deal at twice the price and half the wine. Does it get any better than fireside wine sipping at the historic Fairmont Park Lodge, I ask?

In my mind, a good equalizer for all this borderline gluttony and fun is to trot out the "skinny skis" and head out cross-country. I know a hearty zip around the picturesque three-km loop of Whistler Campground is in no way an activity that could ever possibly count as a Karma counterbalance, but

at least there was motion.

To get in on all the bacchanalian good times of Jasper in January there is still time. Get yourself into a room at the Jasper Inn, (I recommend the mini suite value and comfort wise) and be in Jasper by 7 p.m. for the a Wine in Winter Tasting at the Lobstick Lodge. On Saturday up at Marmot take in the Avalanche Safety Day demonstrations. Saturday night it's more wine and cheese as the Sawridge Inn hosts the Ducks unlimited Auction. For more, go to www.jasperlive.com.