

What it's like to rent a winter RV and head off with friends down the famed Powder Highway

By Kari Bodnarchuk Globe Correspondent, Updated January 12, 2024, 7:00 a.m.



RV camping in an empty parking lot at Whitewater Ski Resort on British Columbia's famous Powder Highway, a 630-mile circular route with eight major ski resorts in interior B.C. where the snow is dry and fluffy. KARI BODNARCHUK

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — Remember that freewheeling year when you and your besties hit the open road to live out your ski-bum dreams with powder-filled days and late nights and rocking après? Yeah, me neither. That's why a couple of middle-aged mom friends and I grabbed our skis, rented a winter RV, and took off to explore Canada's Kootenay Rockies.

We left husbands and kids behind for a carefree week of driving the famed Powder Highway, a circular route around eastern B.C. that's home to eight ski resorts where the lift tickets remain reasonable and dry fluffy snow conjures images of ski magazine "pow" shots. We would sleep in ski resort parking lots in our spacious RV and stroll over to the chairlifts for first tracks each morning. Then drive, sleep, ski, repeat — maybe mixing in stops at natural hot springs and hip mountain towns along the way.

It didn't all go as planned on our 1,000-mile drive, but we discovered a lot about this cool part of the world and about winter RV travel. Due to demanding schedules — both of my friends work in medical professions — we decided to do a one-way rental between Vancouver, B.C., and Calgary, Alberta, so we could spend our precious time on the slopes and not have to backtrack hundreds of miles.

We chose CanaDream because it has winter-equipped RVs that sleep up to six people so we would have plenty of room for all of our ski gear. The motorhome was fully insulated (including holding tanks that function down to -22 degrees Fahrenheit); had a robust furnace, a generator, and four “coach” batteries that powered the living area; and came with tire chains (a necessity on high-elevation roads) and mud- and snow-rated tires. The Maxi Motorhome, as it’s called, averaged \$136 per night for the three of us, including the bonus kitchen and linen kits and a 50 percent discount on the \$684 one-way fee (plus extra for a safety package and additional mileage).



A quick stop outside the town of Kimberley, along British Columbia's Powder Highway, where a sign reminds drivers to carry on straight ahead for "Good times" and turn left for "Everything else." KARI BODNARCHUK

We picked up the RV from the CanaDream lot near Vancouver International Airport, put our skis in a lockable external storage compartment, and pointed the headlights due east toward RED Mountain Resort, 375 miles away. This was the first of four ski resorts we would visit on a counterclockwise tour of half the Powder Highway route.

About 85 miles after leaving Vancouver, we turned onto BC Route 3, also known as the Crowsnest Highway. We followed this two-lane highway through rolling pastoral land with farms, wineries, and small villages such as Keremeos with its fruit orchards and collection of vintage tractors, and then over multiple 5,000-foot mountain passes into a high-plateau region. The RV handled the slick and winding roads, no problem. After a 10-hour drive, we reached RED Mountain in the town of Rossland (population 4,100), located just 9 miles north of the US border. Here, we joined a dozen other trailers of all sizes camped in the parking lot.

This independent ski resort is the second-largest ski resort in British Columbia (behind Whistler-Blackcomb) with 3,850 skiable acres, but it has an understated, no-frills, family feel. There are no high-speed quads here, but it never felt crowded thanks to the extensive terrain. You can ski 360 degrees off the top of the resort's three lift-served mountains or go cat skiing on a fourth mountain that's in-bounds but has no chairlifts (pay \$15 per cat-skiing run and stop when you're tired).



MaryAnn Gebhard of Bellingham, Wash., skis through the trees and drops down into the parking lot for overnight RV camping at Whitewater Ski Resort outside the town of Nelson in southeastern British Columbia. KARI BODNARCHUK

The resort has tiny cabins tucked away on the ski hill, a new modern hostel (part of the Hostelling International network), slopeside condos, and a boutique hotel with outdoor barrel saunas, but we loved our RV spot next to the woods and just a hundred or so feet from the base lodge. We could make our own breakfast and then be in knee-deep powder within minutes, swing “home” for lunch while keeping an eye on our skis beside the chairlift, and drive away whenever we were ready — all of which we did. We could also go to Rafter's, the lodge's gritty old timber-frame bar and rock out to an AC/DC cover band like we would have done in our real ski-bum days.

What makes the interior of B.C. such a special place to ski is the abundance of light, fluffy snow (and affordable tickets ranging from \$71 to \$92). We visited in the middle of a six-day snowstorm so there was no shortage of fresh powder. That also made it trickier getting the RV out of RED's parking lot two days later. We befriended several other campers during our quest to get chains on our big tires (it's harder than it looks) and maneuver our 28-foot motorhome out of the crowded parking lot (beware of the super-long sideview mirrors that can potentially graze tree branches on narrow access roads).

It was a 75-minute drive east to the next ski resort, but we took a short detour to the nearby town of Nelson for dinner and Important RV Business: finding a place to dump our gray water and refill the water tanks — not easy tasks in the winter. All campgrounds and the town's free RV dump station were closed for the season and local gas stations that were supposed to have these amenities simply didn't.

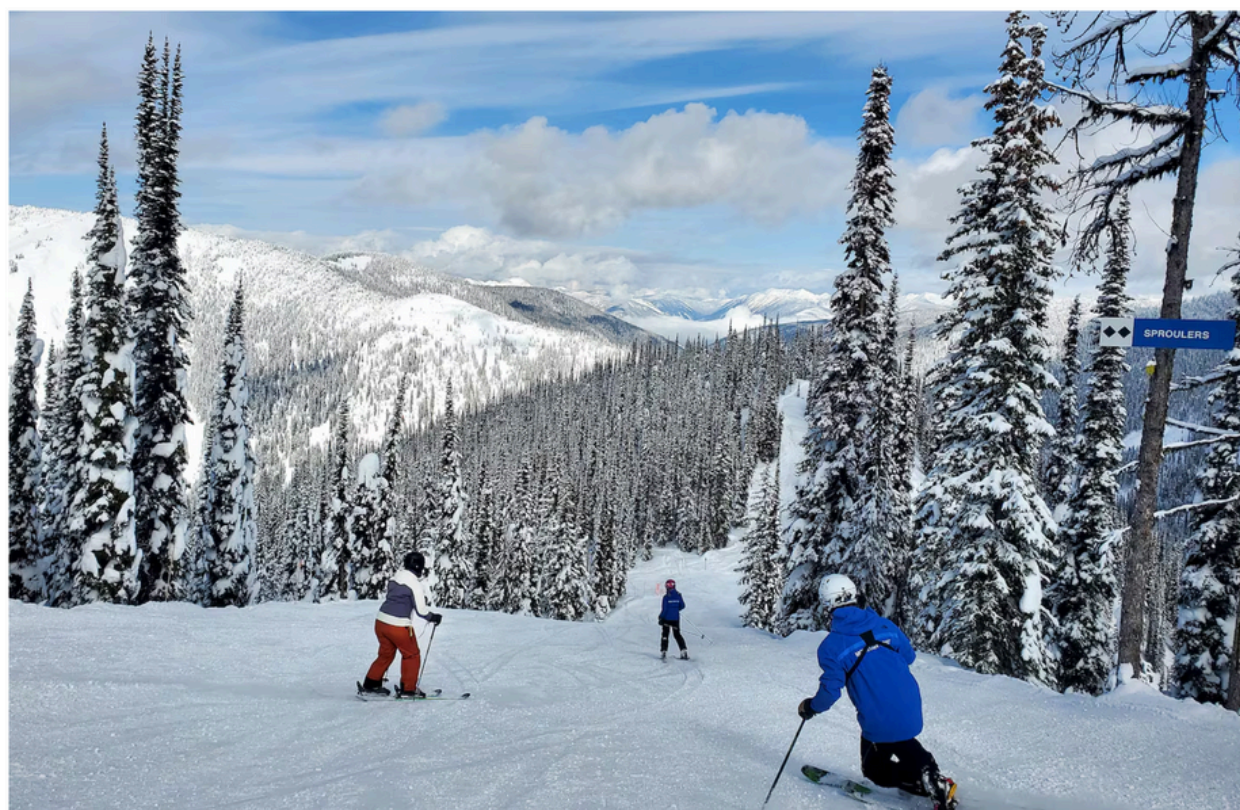


Even if you've done it before, putting chains on a vehicle can be tricky. Here, Pauli Marshall (standing) and MaryAnn Gebhard, both of Bellingham, Wash., put chains on an RV to get it out of the parking lot at RED Mountain Resort in southeastern British Columbia. The heavy vehicle can easily get stuck in soft snow. KARI BODNARCHUK

CanADream provides an app that can help you track down campsites, gas stations, and other sites, but cell service in the mountains proved sketchy so this didn't work well for us. I recommend calling ahead before your trip begins and confirming the availability of dump and water stations along your route. We ended up buying multiple gallons of drinking water at a supermarket and minimizing use of the shower and toilet.

Make time to explore Nelson, a Northampton-like, artsy mountain town with global cuisine and gear stores such as Mountain Baby: Born for Adventure. Sit outside under heat lamps and lap blankets at Pitchfork Eatery, a farmer-owned French-Canadian restaurant, and enjoy locally sourced dishes (many gluten-free).

From Nelson, it's just a 20-minute drive in good weather to Whitewater Ski Resort, a small, privately run off-the-grid mountain with a taco truck and two small day lodges. At night in a whiteout snowstorm, it took us double the time to reach the mountain and we saw only one other person: a man in a pickup truck who stopped and yelled "yeehaw!" when we asked him about the conditions up the road.



When we made it to Whitewater that night we joined two other cars in a big overflow lot that had heated and well-lit porta-potties. We discovered a sizable ding in our windshield the next morning but had thankfully pre-purchased windshield protection — a must in this part of the world since roads get sanded instead of salted so chipped windshields are common.

We spent a day skiing this laid-back resort in the Selkirk Mountains that was owned by a dozen locals as a coop through the 1980s and has remained small and true to its original vibe ever since. The parking lot sits at just over 5,200 feet with the chairlift summit at 6,700 feet, and the resort averages 40 feet of dry powdery snow each year. Forget your bagged lunch at Whitewater — the resort is renowned for its food. A former resort owner, chef Shelley Adams, has released six cookbooks with recipes of dishes she served while running the ski area café (check out the Whitewater Cooks series).



A view of one of RED Mountain Resort's four ski hills from a cedar barrel sauna outside the Josie Hotel at the base lodge. KARI BODNARCHUK

We hit the road early since we wanted to cover 153 miles and had RV issues to sort out. In the village of Salmo, an old Gold Rush and logging village, we finally found an Esso gas station that had RV propane refueling and a dump station (yeehaw!). From Salmo, the Powder Highway climbs up over Kootenay Pass (look for mountain goats along the highway's steep embankments) and then winds through Creston — an agricultural town that doesn't observe daylight savings — before swinging north on BC Route 95. It passes through Cranbrook (a good place to grab food if it's getting late, since most mountain towns close early) until it reaches the junction for Kimberley Alpine Resort, located about 15 miles off the main highway in the Purcell Mountains — home to North America's largest alpine wilderness.

Kimberley is worth the detour. This Bavarian-style town — home to the world's largest [freestanding cuckoo clock](#) at 22 feet tall — thrived after its mine closed in 2001, drawing people who appreciated its tucked-away location, its sunny weather, and its access to hiking trails and south-facing ski slopes. European immigrants built the first ski jump in town in the 1930s and the alpine ski resort was established in 1948. Today, this family-oriented ski area has open tree runs, rolling groomers, and nothing a strong intermediate skier can't handle.

Back on Route 95 heading north toward Kicking Horse Mountain Resort (146 miles away), the road loosely followed along the Kootenay River, passing through open wetlands and by Columbia Lake, which is the headwaters of the Columbia River. This driving leg offered some of the most stunning scenery of the trip, with glacial rivers, sandstone-like formations called hoodoos, and eventually the jagged mountains of the Dogtooth Range. We made time that day to soak our tired muscles in the outdoor mineral pools at Radium Hot Springs located within the Kootenay National Park boundary.



Tucked-away and lesser-known RED Mountain Resort in the Monashee Mountains of eastern British Columbia averages 300 inches of dry, powdery snow each year. You can also RV camp in the parking lot here for free. KARI BODNARCHUK

We rolled into Kicking Horse Mountain Resort later that night and tucked the RV into the corner of an upper lot, on a local's recommendation. I had always wanted to visit Kicking Horse, drawn by stories of epic bowls and steep and challenging terrain (it has more than 80 chutes and is now the only ski area in North America to host the Freeride World Tour). We found plenty of open intermediate runs and single blacks suitable for tired quads and enjoyed a 360-degree lunch at 7,700 feet (don't miss Eagle's Eye Restaurant). Then we pointed the RV east for the three-hour stunning drive through Yoho and Banff national parks to the CanaDream drop-off location 10 minutes from Calgary International Airport.

Overall, sleeping in parking lots proved a lot quieter than we expected (no crazy parties or loud generators) and more comfortable, too, once we found level sites. After a week, though, our middle-age knees were ready for a break and the "yeehaw!" factor of our carefree moms' ski-bumming getaway had dipped. We were ready to park, see families, sleep in real beds, repeat — maybe mixed in with hot baths and some quiet nights at home. Until next time.

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