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Skiing the Big Three in Alberta, Canadian Rockies

Thursday, October 18, 2012

By Margie Goldsmith

"Make a pizza," says Bobbi as she skis backwards and holds onto my ski poles. I push my legs out so my skis are in a wedge. "Now French fries," she says. I close my skis so they're parallel. This is ridiculous; maybe this is how they teach kids to ski, but I'm well over 50, and I find it humiliating. When I skied in Zermatt, Switzerland, right after college, I shredded the steepest slopes and searched out the biggest moguls I could find. Now it's 45 years later, and I'm trembling just looking out at 3,000 vertical feet and 1,765 acres of powder terrain in Marmot Basin in Jasper National Park (www.JasperCanadianRockies.com).



At an age when I should be worried about breaking a bone, I'm instead trying to look hot in my brand new ski outfit, trying to make it down the beginner's slope on short, stumpy skis. Back in the 1960s, you measured your ski length by raising your hand, and your ski's length was based on the distance from the floor to your wrist. Skis were narrow then, not like these clumpy rentals as wide as snowboards. I will say, though, the snap-buckle plastic ski boots are a huge improvement over the old leather lace-up ones which had a leather strap clipped to the binding, so if you fell, your ski wouldn't fly down the mountain.

My knees are wobbling on this perfectly groomed terrain, and I'm thinking I shouldn't have come. But how could I say no when my friends, Becky and Sarah, begged me to join them skiing three resorts in Alberta, Canada. I've always wanted to see Jasper, Lake Louise, and Banff and this was a perfect opportunity. They're both advanced skiers, but when I told them I hadn't skied since the Dark Ages, they said don't worry and promised it was just like riding a bicycle – you never forget how. They were sure wrong about that.

Even if I bonk on the skiing, the trip is worth it, and costs about half the price I'd pay in the US for a winter ski trip; this is because in Alberta, winter is not their peak season and hotel rates are at their lowest. Yesterday, we arrived at the Fairmont Jasper Park Lodge www.fairmont.com inside the Canadian Rocky Mountain National Park, part of a World Heritage Site. The Lodge is spectacular --- very private and with spacious log cabins overlooking a frozen lake. We had dinner in our cabin's dining room next to a roaring fire, then headed out to Maligne Canyon, the only ice-walking canyon in North America. Following a guide, we walked on ice along the frozen canyon floor through a maze of unworldly sculpted ice formations and frozen waterfalls suspended in the air like clusters of icicles. We slid down a few of the frozen falls and screamed in joy like kids. After it was over, we looked up, mesmerized by the Milky Way.

This morning, we walked across the frozen lake to have breakfast in the main lodge. I spotted coyote and deer tracks. If we weren't so anxious to be first up the mountain, I could have stayed here for hours, hoping to see wildlife. We didn't have to rush. Marmot Basin is not in the least bit crowded, plus it has the longest high-speed quad chair in the Canadian Rockies (4,757 feet in 4.6 minutes), so there's no wait. Bobbi and I complete the Bunny Run and ride back up the ski lift. They wanted to put a lift in the back bowl, she tells me, but Marmot is in a national park and there's an old caribou herd which might wander around there, so they forbid it. I love that story. She tells me that Alberta's ski season goes from October through April and gets over 30 feet of fresh powder each year, so they usually run out of skiers before they run out of snow.

The Icefields Parkway is an aptly named 144-mile road that winds through two national parks and links Jasper to Lake Louise where we are now heading. Everywhere are hypnotic views of white jagged mountains, glaciers, and snow-swept valleys. We stop at Athabasca Glacier for a short hike, but it's so windy we're almost blown over and get back into the car. Late in the afternoon, we arrive in Lake Louise in Banff National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Surprisingly, there's no real town – just a supermarket, gas station, and some hotels.

My room at the Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise (www.fairmont.com/lakelouise) overlooks the eponymous lake, framed by a gigantic glacier and so startling that I'm glued to the window gasping at the view. It's too late to ski but not too late to rent cross-country skis from the hotel. We glide along a trail around the frozen lake past giant ice sculptures of animals, past four hockey rinks all in use, past a horse-drawn carriage on the tree-lined trail whose red-cheeked occupants wave to us. It is silent and would be perfect except I'm thinking about the Lake Louise Ski Area and the 4,200 skiable acres on four mountainsides. Am I going to have to go back to the Bunny Slope? But I can't keep up with Sarah and Becky. Do I have to ski alone?

No need to worry. Lake Louise (www.skibig3.com) has a "Ski Friends" program in which volunteers offer free mountain tours. I'm lucky because no other beginner/intermediate has shown up for a ski friend, and I have Mike Dandurand, a former ski instructor, all to myself. We take the lift to an intermediate blue run and a snowboarder flies by. They hadn't invented snowboarding when I last skied. Mike watches me ski for a while, then says he's going to ski down the hill. When he gives me the signal, I am to ski down but not take my eyes off him.

Looking at him changes my skiing completely because it makes me keep my shoulder to the mountain. Suddenly I feel like a real skier, and for the rest of the day, I'm in heaven. On the last run, Becky and Sarah are waiting. They watch me ski towards them and tell me they can't believe how much progress I've made in one day. I have to think it has something to do with the magic of Alberta: the perfect snow, the uncrowded ski mountains, and great instructors. To celebrate my progress, we order a tasting dinner with wine pairings in the gourmet dining room of The Post Hotel (www.posthotel.com).

Sunshine Village (www.skibanff.com), a short drive from Lake Louise, is Canada's highest elevated resort. Early that morning, we take the gondola up to Sunshine Mountain Lodge and drop off our bags. Talk about ski in ski out – there are two lifts, just a few feet away from the lodge's lobby.

Sarah is chomping at the bit to hit the expert runs, but I've decided to ski with an instructor. Becky, who just wants an easy day after yesterday, joins me. Our instructor, Jake Reid, gives Becky some pointers and she flies on ahead. Jake tells me to keep my head down and not to pop up after every turn. "Let the skis do the work," he says. He points to the middle of my ski boots. "Think of it as a childproof jar and you have to turn it."

That image works. Finally, I feel as though I'm floating around the turns. By mid afternoon, I decide it's time to advance to black diamond runs and ski the bumps. Jake draws a bunch of concentric circles in the snow like a topographical map. "Just plant your pole in the middle of

the bump and ski around it," he says. Soon I am flying over the moguls. Later, to celebrate our perfect day, we toast with shots of rum ("shotskis") in the resort's oversized outdoor hot tub. Giant snowflakes fall in our hair. We jump out of the hot tub, dare each other to run barefoot in the snow to the ski lift, sit in the chair for two full seconds, jump up, and run back into the hot tub, then slap high fives.

I'm too excited to sleep –not because I've gone from green to blue to black runs in three days, but because fresh snow has been falling since dinner. When I finally drift off and wake the next morning, I'm staring at nine inches of fresh powder. Sarah has skipped breakfast so she could carve the first tracks. "There are no friends on a powder day," Becky laughs. I expect Becky to also leave me, but she skis with me, meaning there are friends on a powder day. The snow continues to fall as we glide over the powder and cut our own tracks. I fall twice and each time it takes forever to get my ski back on in the thick snow, but who cares? I'm skiing power!

Late that afternoon, we headed to Banff's Mt. Norquay for night skiing. We're about to get ski passes when we hear people laughing and screaming. They're snow tubing! In addition to snowboard parks and ski runs, Norquay has a tubing park, and not just kids; there are manly grown-ups tubing. We each get into a rubber tube the size of a truck's inner tube and are pulled up the hill on an automatic conveyor. Ah luxury! We can choose one of three tubing runs, so we all start at the same time. The man handling the tubes pushes us each into a spin and we fly down the hill. It's so much fun that we do it again – this time, the three of us hold onto each other's tubes like a three-leafed clover. Going down that is both scarier and more fun, so the next run, we recruit three more tubers and go down as a party of six. Needless to say, we never make it to the ski slope that night, but who cares? We're tearing down the slope in giant tubes, screaming at the top of our lungs.

For more information: Packages are available on Travel Alberta: TravelAlberta.com, Ski Big 3: skibig3.com and Marmot Basin: skimarmot.com.