

A Haven close to Home

Snowshoers and ski tourers can combine adventure with luxury at Talus Lodge

Trent Edwards

Calgary Herald

Thursday, March 13, 2008

At Talus Lodge it is hard not to remain in a suspended state of giddiness.

Four hours after a 407 Bell helicopter whisked us over frosted peaks, forested valleys and frozen lakes to drop us off on a plateau straddling the Continental Divide, we were still on a high from that thrill ride.

After our chopper lifted off the plateau, whipping snow into our grinning faces, our ears took a moment to adjust to the silence.

Surrounded by snowy mountains, our home for the weekend felt like a million miles from the nearest city, rather than a mere 15-minute helicopter ride from Canmore.

This little piece of heaven near Banff National Park would surely have been placed within its borders had the park's founders known of its natural charms back in the 19th century.

This small plateau is surrounded by jagged peaks, a cirque and a 300-metre cliff that offers inspiring viewpoints over a picturesque valley and distant peaks.

None of these natural beauties, however, are quite so spectacular as the Talon, a 2,710-metre peak with a hook-topped shape that dominates most views here.

I suppose I shouldn't complain too loudly about the 1,500-hectare tenured area of Crown land not being part of a park, though.

The area's unprotected status has allowed Chris Espinel of Invermere, B.C., and Dan Verrall of Canmore to build a backcountry lodge up here that most people can only reach by helicopter. This means you'll likely never see more than 11 people here in a day of ski touring or snowshoeing.

"We want to keep it small," explains Espinel. "This is a really undisturbed area."

By modern hotel standards, this two-storey wooden lodge built in 2003 and a new "honeymoon cabin" nearby are far from luxurious. They have no running water and are heated by wood-burning stoves.

There's an outbuilding with pit toilets, a woodstove-heated dry sauna and a few shower stalls.

To take a shower, you fill a watering can with hot water from a pail on the woodstove and mix with cold water. Then you clip the can to a rope-pulley, pull it to the right height, tie it off and tip it over you -- straight from the olden days.

But make no mistake, for a ski-tourer this place is posh -- hot and delicious meals, a heated lodge with soft beds and, perhaps best of all, not having to carry your food, cooking and sleeping gear with you.

On a recent Friday to Monday trip, there were two groups of guests: a self-guided group of four experienced backcountry skiers from Calgary; and a self-guided couple from Calgary and Invermere who had some backcountry experience. The first group included Patti Dolan, a 49-year-old investment advisor; George Castles, a 52-year-old geologist; Irene Herremans, an associate professor with the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary; and Robert Bott, a 62-year-old freelance writer and communications consultant. The second group included John Kobar, a 46-year-old sports store owner from Calgary; and his girlfriend Katie Wells, a 41-year-old business consultant from Invermere.

Just a day before, most of these people were embroiled in high-stress jobs. But once at the lodge, those stresses seemed miles away.

Dolan, who has been ski touring for seven years, couldn't get over the "pure luxury" of Talus Lodge.

"You pay for the exclusivity," she said. "But you feel pampered."

She was right. For the next three days, we would fill our minds with beautiful sights, bask in classic Rockies scenery while snowshoeing and ski touring, enjoy powder skiing, eat decadent meals and get to know a cast of interesting strangers.

Day One

On our first day, we met up at 8 a.m. at the Canmore Heliport with our fellow ski tourers for a helicopter safety briefing. Then half of us drove down to Mount Shark Heliport, about a 45-minute drive south from Canmore, to be picked up by the seven-seat helicopter after it dropped off the first half of our group.

(The helicopter ride from Mount Shark to Talus Lodge is just seven minutes instead of 15, which lowers the cost of the trip.)

After we were all dropped off just steps from the lodge, we paired up and settled into our small but comfortable rooms.

Then we gathered in the lodge's comfy living room for a briefing on lodge living while we sipped coffee or green tea infused with orange and lemon zest and munched on coffee cake baked by Gina Chivers, the 52-year-old lodge cook.

Espinel told us that before we leave on any outings, we should mark down in the lodge notebook where we're headed, and to check in every few hours by walkie talkie (bring your own).

He also warned us to stay away from open slopes, as the latest avalanche bulletin rated the risk as considerable in the high alpine.

After packing a lunch, Kobar, Wells, Chivers and I borrowed the lodge's snowshoes to join Espinel for a trip down to the southwest side of the plateau, while the rest of the guests headed east to ski tour among the gladed slopes leading down the Alberta side of the Continental Divide.

All of the snowshoers, including the 60-year-old Espinel, couldn't seem to stop acting like kids on a snow day. We laughed and hollered as we ran down steep hillsides of fluffy powder on a snowpack up to six metres deep.

Snow sparkled on the hillsides as Espinel led us over, around and between a mix of evergreen trees topped by snow mushrooms, bare larches, cornices and cliffs.

"This is a great place to decompress," Kobar says.

Out of politeness to the others, I fought the urge to get out of our leader's tracks so as to preserve the pristine snowscape from my tracks. But I soon found myself greedily making my own tracks as I explored between groves of trees.

At 4:30 p.m. we circled back to the lodge for appetizers: a mix of cheeses, hummus, gourmet crackers and an incredible olive, feta and sun-dried tomato tapenade.

A few hours later, Chivers would make us a mouth-watering meal of butter chicken on basmati rice; mixed greens with diced pear, blue cheese, pecans and balsamic vinaigrette. To cap the feast, we savoured a fresh-baked carrot cake.

(A few guests asked for no red meat, something Chivers accommodated all weekend.)

After dinner, our motley crew of well-educated guests debated political issues and shared ideas about everything from the environment to exotic foods.

Before bed, Espinel joined me outside to admire a magical night sky clear of both clouds and the light pollution of a city. So many more stars shone brightly that it was hard to pick out the constellations.

All of the guests headed to bed by 10 p.m. Early bedtimes were essential after each day's fresh-air adventures.

Day Two

We awoke the next morning to a hearty breakfast of eggs Benedict, fruit salad, warm lemon poppy seed muffins and yogurt with muesli.

The sunny skies we had enjoyed were gone, replaced for the rest of the trip by mostly cloudy skies that hovered about the summits of the highest peaks.

We split into three groups for a day of ski touring. Kobar, who only had cross-country skis with skins (strips you attach to your ski bases to help with the uphill) joined Wells for a short tour of the plateau's gentle slopes.

"The skiing's just so phenomenal that you don't get bored," Kobar noted.

Meanwhile, the group of four ski tourers from Calgary spent their day on the northeast edge of the plateau underneath a cirque. Chivers, Espinel, and I took a more southerly route over tiny Waterfall Lake.

After a kilometre of skiing over the high side of the plateau using skins, our group reached the beginning of a 500-metre drop to the Alberta side of the Continental Divide. On the far side of the Albert River and the valley below stood a long line of jagged peaks with cloud-covered summits.

A 30-degree open slope just below us offered about 20 metres of vertical drop. We took off our skins and made some turns.

Though days old, the untracked powder was still light and fluffy. A short traverse then brought us to the natural glades that lead all the way to the valley floor. We whooped it up as we carefully picked our way through the trees.

After descending a few hundred metres, the snow became crusty and heavy. We turned around to make the long trek back to the lodge.

The journey back was tough. We had to skirt the steep hill we had taken down to find a gentler route that we could climb back up. That is, all of us skirted the steep hill except the super-fit Chivers, who raced ahead to meet us at the lodge with appetizers.

We were spent when we arrived, but happy to find a mix of cheeses, pate, apricot loaf and hot drinks.

Day Three

On our final full day, I joined the backcountry skiing foursome from Calgary for a trip up the Talon's northern flank to ski the lower part of the Talon Glacier.

Wary of the steep 40-degree slope above us, we hugged the eastern shoulder of the snow slope leading to the glacier, then quickly cut across its base to the western side. After climbing about 50 metres we took off our skins and skied down a mix of powder and wind-baked snow.

We left the glacier after just one run to spend the afternoon skiing up and down a mix of glades and open slopes on the northwest side of the plateau.

"This is a special place," Castle remarked.

Indeed. Near the end of the day, Herremans told me she would have preferred more sustained runs. But whenever she looked up, she beamed as she drank in her surroundings.

Up here, it's hard to stop feeling giddy.

tedwards@theherald.canwest.com

- - -

To Book Talus Lodge

Talus Lodge, a helicopter-accessed lodge perched on a high plateau on the British Columbia side of the Continental Divide south of Canmore, is open until April 28.

The lodge can be booked for a catered personal or corporate retreat that offers guided snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, or as a self-guided retreat that offers snowshoeing and ski touring. Stays range in price from \$950 per person for three nights (Friday to Monday; must book as a group of 10) as a self-guided group, to \$2,100 per person for a week-long guided stay (starting on a Monday or a Friday).

While anyone who visits Talus Lodge should have at least one experienced backcountry traveller in their group, you can easily stay amused snowshoeing, cross-country skiing or ski touring around the wide plateau without venturing into avalanche terrain. There are also enough gentle slopes to keep intermediate ski tourers happy on a three-day trip.

For details or to book a stay at Talus Lodge, call 250-342-9358, or visit taluslodge.com.

Online Features

CalgaryHerald.com

See more photos from Talus Lodge in the Real Life section