

**“As Europe struggles on from one meager snowfall to the next, western Canada is drowning in powder” by Terry Slavin**

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'Oh no. Not more snow,' said nine-year-old Adam, wrinkling his nose. The snow in question was slanting down to meet the steam rising around our ears in the heated outdoor pool. Even the most doting mother might be forgiven for thinking 'spoilt little git'.

Except that I was feeling pretty spoilt myself at the moment. After splashing around the communal pool, we would shortly be luxuriating in the even more decadent waters of our private hot tub on the balcony of our luxury condo. What a way to spend a skiing holiday - even if you have to share your hot tub with three small children.

We had come to Big White, in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, in search of family-friendly facilities and guaranteed snow. While the Alps has been struggling through a dry December and warm January, western Canada is having an epic year - Big White has a snow base nearly two metres deep, while Whistler boasts nearly three metres, and the same was true when we visited last season. Our biggest worry on one of our days at Big White was more snow overnight than the trail groomers could keep up with.

Better still, as half-term approaches and tour operators hike prices of European ski holidays by 80 or 90 per cent, Canada starts to look even more attractive. Half-term holiday dates over there aren't the same as in the UK, and because British clients make up a tiny proportion of visitors compared with some Alpine resorts, the surge in demand and prices is far less marked.

For most British skiers, Canada means the world-class resorts of Banff/Lake Louise in Alberta and Whistler in British Columbia. But midway between those two shrines to Gore-Tex lie two rapidly growing resorts that have amassed a reputation for sure snow and amenability to budget-conscious families: Big White and its sister resort Silver Star. Big White, already BC's second-biggest ski resort, is expanding fast, and all accommodation is that luxurious rarity, 'ski-in, ski-out' - but without breaking the bank.

This was the clincher for me. Commanding clunky skis, boots and poles is headache enough for most adults. Heap on the stress of sulky children struggling with their own gear and it's enough to send you screaming to your hot tub.

Even on the day we rented our gear at Big White, it was only a short walk to our condo. Thereafter it was a matter of pulling skis out of the slope-side locker each morning, snapping them on and pointing them downhill to the village and the lifts.

The days fell into an agreeable pattern of depositing our children at the bustling ski school and daycare and then scampering to explore the 2,500 acres of terrain on our own for a couple of hours. After a lunch of soup and made-to-order gourmet sandwiches at the cafe in the village centre (a bargain at C\$6, or £2.60), we left the youngest two where they were and skied with Adam, who'd made rapid progress at ski school.

On the day after the big snowfall, Adam and I set out with one of the instructors, an English actor who escapes the dusty, nocturnal world of the theatre for four months of the year to teach skiing in the sunny Canadian uplands. Adam had insisted on him taking us to remote Gem Lake, a haven of long, cruising blue runs dropping from the windswept top, with its stunted, snow-shrouded trees known as 'snow ghosts', through pine forests to the valley floor.

But we strayed onto an ungroomed trail, and as Mark, the instructor, coaxed an increasingly frustrated Adam down the slope, he distracted him by telling him that 'O Go Slow', the run that this one fed into, was named after Ogopogo, a Canadian Loch Ness monster who is reputed to inhabit nearby Lake Okanagan and snatch the infants of settlers during the blue moon. As late as the 1920s, ferries plying the lake were fitted with harpoons to prevent Ogopogo boarding and swallowing the passengers.

Then again, I reflected over a bottle of Okanagan wine that night, maybe Ogopogo was just a product of the new settlers over-indulging in the local firewater; you could easily combine a trip to Big White or Silver Star with a Sideways-style exploration of the region's numerous wineries. Unfortunately, the skiing was too good over our 10 days in the area, and the children too busy with snow-tubing, mini-snowmobiles, family movie nights and even rock climbing, so the closest we got was sampling the wine lists in the resort restaurants.

The restaurant we enjoyed most was at Silver Star, the Victorian mining-town-themed resort that is two hours away from Big White by car or shuttle bus (£30 each way), or a short hop over the Monashee mountains by helicopter (which amazingly works out about the same price). The brightly painted clapboard shop fronts and boardwalked main street may feel a bit Disney, but it has a prettiness that Big White lacks, with a few cafes, including one mid-mountain, where you can enjoy home baking al fresco and soak up the sun.

We ate at Putnam Station Inn, where the food and wine was of a high standard and the children were captivated by the model train that circles the room, complete with a full-size railway signal. Silver Star has the highest number of double-black diamond trails in BC - some so precipitous my head spun just peering over the edge at them - and 60km of immaculately groomed cross-country ski trails, the most extensive in Canada.

The ski hosts - volunteers who, in exchange for a season's lift pass, do weekly duty taking visitors on free tours of the mountains - are charming at both resorts. At Silver Star there are even cross-country ski hosts, eager to show off the trails where the Canadian national team does its training.

I've tried to lure my family into trying cross-country, to no avail. Now I realize that's no bad thing. With Adam and six-year-old Dylan now passionate down-hillers, and even four-year-old Maddy clamouring to join in, the back trails are the only place that I'll find any solitude. That is, unless I can get a child-snatching serpent to surface in our hot tub.