

# CLOUDS OF POWDER

Satisfy your urge to slalom and schuss at Canada's snowiest snowsport resort

BY MASA TAKEI WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARRYL LENIUK



Ski guide and gear expert Ryan Stuart (ABOVE) gets airborne on Burnt Ridge, a popular off-piste area for Mount Washington skiers. Author Masa Takei befriends a grey jay in Strathcona Provincial Park (LEFT).

IT'S A COLD JANUARY DAY and I'm sweating profusely. Sprindrift blows stinging into my face and daylight is fading fast, but I barely notice as I concentrate on the feedback from my avalanche transceiver. This part of Vancouver Island gets an average of 10 metres of snow a year, a godsend for skiers, although not if you happen to be buried beneath it.

The device pings in the dark like the radar on a Russian sub. I clamber back down a 30-degree slope that rolls onto a snowy bench, the transceiver held in front of me like a divining rod.

How long has it been? Five minutes? Ten? The exertion of running in concentric circles through knee-deep snow has me panting. The signal gets more frenetic, as does my heart rate.

I must have crossed over this spot a half-dozen times. Forgoing the avalanche probe, I start digging furiously with my shovel.

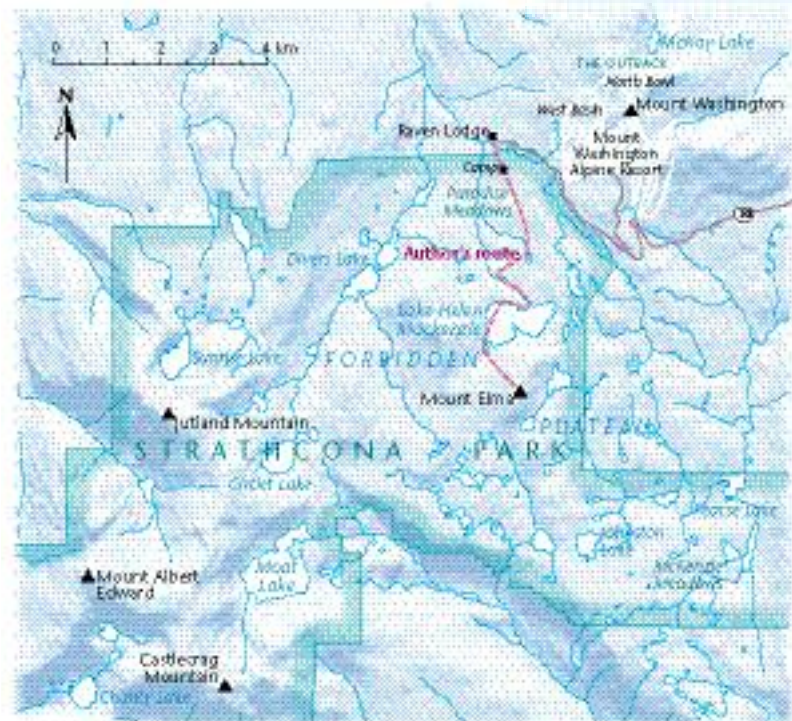
A few frantic seconds later, I find my ski partner Darryl's beacon, transmitting a metre or so beneath the surface. Next to it, cold and inert, a bottle of pale ale. I lose no time in wrenching off the top and giving the bottle mouth to mouth. Darryl stands beside me in the dusk, shifting his gaze between his wristwatch and me as I quaff down the beer. Ice particles have already begun to form in the cold brew.

"Four minutes and fifty-three seconds," he says. By his tone, I get the sense that he's less than impressed by my performance, no doubt imagining himself buried for 293 seconds.



The 1,588-metre summit of Mount Washington dominates the view from Lake Helen Mackenzie (OPPOSITE). Takei (BELOW) slaloms down the mountain's groomed Coaster run.

We diligently cycle through rounds of buried bottles to blow the frost off our avalanche rescue skills, although we're confident that we'll have little need for them over the next few days. Just the opposite, in fact. We know we'll be completely safe within the boundaries of the Mount Washington Alpine Resort, one of British Columbia's most-visited ski destinations. And even when we do roam into the neighbouring backcountry, we'll be guided by pros leading us through gentle terrain. We look forward to a relaxing ski holiday, a chance to explore some of the Island's finest lift-accessed treed runs and do some moderate touring. The only thing we'll put at risk on this trip is our six-pack (a chilling enough prospect). After four rounds of beer hunter, Darryl and I call it an evening.



**WARMTH AND LIGHT** beckon from the windows of the twin-peaked Alpine Chalet as photographer Darryl Leniuk and I climb a short slope to this showpiece of Swiss-style timber-frame architecture just east of Strathcona Provincial Park, which will be our base camp for the next three days. Established in 1911, the 2,500-square-kilometre Strathcona was the first provincial park in British Columbia. During our stay here at Strathcona Park Lodge's chalet at the base of Mount Washington, we'll be led by an experienced guide from the lodge as we sample some ski touring within the provincial park.

The Alpine Chalet proves to be the perfect home base. Our guides have completed the lodge's Canadian Outdoor Leadership Training, one of Canada's premier outdoor education programs. So not only are we in the heart of Vancouver Island ski

country, but we're in the hands of friendly experts with intimate knowledge of the local terrain.

The 12-year-old chalet is divided into two units, each capable of sleeping a hockey team. Ours is the lower unit, the Elkhorn, named after the second highest peak (2,195 metres) on Vancouver Island. The higher unit, the Golden Hinde, is, as one might guess, named after the island's tallest peak (2,200 metres). Both feature post-and-beam log construction, gas fireplaces and fully equipped kitchens. Opening an interior door combines the units, allowing everyone to enjoy the hot tub in the Golden Hinde (the Elkhorn having only a dry sauna).

Darryl and I leave our boots and clothes to dry next to our alpine-touring gear at the front entrance, then spark up the fireplace and put on a movie from the house collection before



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playing rock-paper-scissors to see who gets the master bedroom and who gets the loft.

There's relatively little in the way of après-ski here, but that's a good thing. Amenities include a standard ski bar, Fat Teddy's in the Alpine Lodge, a general store, a sushi restaurant (this is the West Coast after all) and fine dining at the Nordic Centre Raven Lodge. Which leaves us to focus on our daytime objective of exploring Mount Washington, an old-style resort with a fiercely loyal local following. The privately held, family oriented resort, owned by a handful of Campbell River businessmen, continues development on the mountain each year, the latest being expanded night- and tree-skiing trails. We also plan to spend a day pushing our tips through some classic ski-touring country on the other side of the road.

What the resort may lack in nightlife and consumerism, it more than makes up for in raw natural landscapes. Sitting halfway up Vancouver Island, Mount Washington is perched alone on the northeastern edge of Forbidden Plateau, and it catches what's dumped by cold air masses originating in Alberni Inlet and passing over the Comox and Cliffe glaciers. The mountain

Guide Geneviève Burdett (ABOVE, at left) and a snowshoeing school group take a break, while guide Shawn Quinton (BELOW, at right) and Takei cross Lake Helen Mackenzie.

**We stop for lunch on the north shore of Lake Helen Mackenzie and contemplate the benevolent mound that is Mount Elma.**



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After a long day on the slopes of Mount Washington, the Alpine Chalet (LEFT), operated by Strathcona Park Lodge, is a welcome sight. For heartier souls, camping in Strathcona Provincial Park is another option (BELOW).

gets more snow than any other resort in Canada: more than 12 metres in each of the past two seasons and a record 18.5 metres in the winter of 1998-99.

**NEXT MORNING**, we meet with Ryan Stuart, a former guide now married into the Strathcona Park Lodge family. The Strathcona Park Lodge and Outdoor Education Centre celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2008. For more than three decades, it has been turning out guides for itself and other outdoor centres with the Canadian Outdoor Leadership Training program, a rigorous three-month immersion in ocean, river and mountain environments. Stuart is playing hooky from his regular job as gear editor for an outdoors magazine to show us some of his favourite backyard lines. We slide off the Eagle Express quad chairlift near the top of the 1,588-metre mountain, with only a complex of radio towers above us. The sky is a super-saturated Technicolor blue behind the wind-shaped trees shrouded in snow plaster. Lowering my ski goggles, the world takes on an even more surreal tone as everything gets a candy-floss pink tint. Toward the mainland is a bumpy mattress of clouds obscuring the Strait of Georgia, the Gulf Islands, and most of the



**Warmth and light beckon from the twin-peaked Alpine Chalet, a showpiece of Swiss-style timber-frame architecture.**

### SNOWY STRATHCONA BECKONS

**Getting there** Strathcona Provincial Park is at the very heart of Vancouver Island, between Campbell River and the Comox Valley. Both communities serve as main access points to the park. To first reach the island, you can fly or take a ferry from the mainland. For ferry schedules, go to [www.bcferries.com](http://www.bcferries.com). Strathcona Park Lodge is 42 kilometres west of Campbell River — about six hours from Vancouver, five hours

from Victoria, and three hours from Nanaimo (including ferry times). You can also drive up scenic Highway 28 from Campbell River, which takes about 45 minutes. **Staying there** Along with the Alpine Chalet at Mount Washington, Strathcona Park Lodge has a variety of cottages and chalets dotting the Upper Campbell Lake waterfront, roughly 30 kilometres north of the mountain. For reservation

and room information, go to [www.strathcona.bc.ca](http://www.strathcona.bc.ca). For other hotels and bed and breakfasts around Mount Washington, go to [www.britishcolumbia.com](http://www.britishcolumbia.com). **Playing there** The Strathcona Park area offers all the adventures you'd expect to find at a provincial park. Mount Washington is the most popular destination for winter activities. There are more than 60 alpine trails for skiers and snowboard-

ers to explore, day or night. Once you reach the peak from one of nine lifts, you are awarded a spectacular view of mountain and ocean scenery. Paradise Meadows is popular with cross-country skiers and snowshoers. In summer, mountain climbing, ocean kayaking and wildlife watching with Campbell River Whale Watching are available, either for family fun or for more ambitious explorers.

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The Eagle Express chairlift parallels the O'Henry run as it carries skiers to the top of Mount Washington.



**Lowering my ski goggles, the world takes on an even more surreal tone as everything gets a candy-floss pink tint.**

Coast Range. A tear in the cloud cover reveals a column of vapour from the pulp mill in Powell River. Behind us are the peaks within eastern Strathcona Provincial Park, including Mount Albert Edward, a distinctive saddle with a pointed horn.

We drop into the West Basin and head for the Boomerang quad, which is shaped like, well, a boomerang as it arcs up one side, over the crest, and down the other side of the mountain. Getting off at the ridge crest mid-station puts us at the Outback, the feisty double-black-diamond glades covering more than 160 hectares worth of north-facing terrain.

But Stuart has something else in mind. We traverse across and under the basalt cliff faces of the North Bowl and soon we're boot packing up onto Burnt Ridge before following it to the northeast. At some point we ski off the edge of our trail maps. "We're definitely in the back-country now," says Stuart, standing at the top of a steep, treed pitch. He drops in for some achingly beautiful telemark turns, swooping in and out of a cloud of powder. He appears to have overestimated our skill (or perhaps we have oversold ourselves). I take off and barrel right past him, upside down and on my back.

**NEXT DAY**, we find that our reputation has preceded us. We meet with Shawn Quinton, an affable guide who immediately takes pains to assure us that tonight's overnight ski tour into Strathcona Park will be undemanding. From our starting point at the Raven Lodge, the heart of the Nordic ski centre five minute's drive from our cabin, we meander through forests and across lakes, linking portions of the cross-country trails through Paradise Meadows toward Forbidden Plateau. The plateau is the "historical home of skiing on the Island," according to Philip Stone, author of the definitive skiing and snowboarding guide to Vancouver Island. "Forbidden has given countless Islanders their first experiences of alpine and x-country skiing."

We stop for lunch on the north shore of Lake Helen Mackenzie and contemplate the benevolent mound that is Mount Elma, our modest objective for the day. We cut straight across the lake and climb up the forested sub-alpine pass, weaving a route through the yellow cedar, fir and mountain hemlock festooned with snow and old man's beard. After a reasonable amount of exertion, we're rewarded with an expansive view of Mount Washington and the Meadows below. On our way back



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out, we link up with another party to share their camp for the night.

On our final morning, Darryl and I shirk breakfast cleanup and make a dash back to the resort for an appointment with Tobin Leopkey, Island native and founder of one of the Island's elite ski schools, Section 8 Snowsport Institute. A ski instructor and graduate of the Canadian Outdoor Leadership Training program who is spoken of in reverential tones by our other guides, Leopkey had offered to do what he could to revamp our technique. I harbour doubts about how far he can get in a single afternoon, but we're keen for him to try. Back from eight years working at Whistler Blackcomb, he extols the virtues of his home mountain as we head for the lifts: a quiet hill, reliable snow, almost never icy, and an unpretentious, down-to-earth feel. In the background, the classic rock sounds of Thin Lizzy wail from the lodge speakers. "You'll see more people with one-piece suits and straight 205s tearing it up here than anywhere else," he says.

Over the next several hours, Leopkey runs us through our paces, doling out advice in digestible doses, giving us focused exercises. Something clicks and I manage to link a few turns with what feels like decent style. Even Darryl, who has been berating me throughout the trip for having unphotographably bad form, allows that I'm "looking much better."

Finally, Leopkey asks if we're ready to get our revenge on the steps of the Outback. One of its punishing chutes allows Darryl and me to pass with only a mild paddling. At the bottom, we raise our arms in modest triumph. By the time we lean our skis on the rack back at the Alpine Lodge, we must acknowledge that Leopkey has performed a minor miracle. The least we can do to show our appreciation is to buy the man a beer. After brief debate, we decide not to bury it. His skills have already been tested enough.

Magazine and screen writer *Masa Takei's* interests include outdoor adventure, travel and subcultures. Photographer *Darryl Leniuk* specializes in shooting adventure sports, such as kiteboarding, mountain biking and skiing. Both are based in Vancouver.

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