

# CAT-SKIING

not just for guys!

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STORY AND PHOTOS BY BECKY LOMAX

**Screams of glee** filtered through firs until one at a time, we popped out of the whitened trees to meet the cat. Chatter piled deeper than the snow. With Mother Nature flinging a foot of light-as-air powder at our feet, “wows” turned into “stunning” and “beyond my wildest dreams.” With each run soaring beyond the previous, laughter leaped off every turn.

For most of us, a three-day all-girls cat trip in the Lizard Range of eastern British Columbia provided the right tools to feel the fun. Cloaked in the supportive environment of Powder Cowboy's Girlski, 12



women—early twenties to fifty-some-things—discovered that cat-skiing wasn't as extreme as we'd presumed.

On the first day in the cat, palpable tension crawled aboard. The few women with cat-skiing experience doled out as much encouragement as they could. Stopping en route to learn avalanche protocol only inched the tension higher. Then one by one, we dropped down the first slope, soon finding our familiar ski rhythms.

Led by Powder Cowboy's girl team, we gathered confidence, bit by bit. With

Romping in powder provides equal opportunity fun.





ABOVE: The views and the skiing are both awe-inspiring.

LEFT: Loading the cat at Powder Cowboy.

BOTTOM LEFT: Lead guide Kir Knechtel organizes the girls to take a run.

the expertise of a seasoned professional, veteran ACMG guide Kir Knechtel hand-plucked an endless supply of powder romps. She launched each run with an honest menu of what we could expect—a few turns in “schnarby windpack” followed by soft snow in the trees. With reports from the snow safety team assessing slope stability, she upped the quality of each run while building up our abilities. “Our guides were strong, confident, and competent individuals,” says Patty Christie, attributing their guidance to notching her skiing skills higher.

Acting as tailgunner, Olivia Sofer picked up strays flopped in the fluff. Smiling as she played caboose, she waited patiently for those of us stopping for photos or mishaps. When Kir lassoed us at bottom, we were different—giggling, tasting confidence, and itching for the next run. Cat skiing seemed no more difficult than resort black diamonds.

In three days, we never skied our tracks twice, but blew through ridges, bowls, chutes, and glades. With fat boards included in the fee, we floated through powder with not a mogul in sight. How could moguls bump up when the 6000 acres sees only 24 skiers per day! Jill Vogan noted, “There’s

so much untracked that you can ski at the end of the group and still get freshies.”

At the bottom of each couple-thousand-foot pitch, our no-caffeine-needed driver Libby Olsen zoomed up in the snowcat. With finesse, she spun the big red Princess around steep switchbacks and across knife-edged ridges to deliver us to the best runs. After she sent us off with cheers and a wave, she raced to meet us at the bottom with a giant smile and “Dude, how was it?!”

As temps hovered in frigid zones, riding back up in a warm snowcat far surpassed a chairlift. After each run, we climbed aboard to snack on wraps, home-baked cookies, orange wedges, veggies, hot punch, and a large bag of chocolates.

Corralling ourselves back in the Princess, we patted each other on the back for good skiing. We even mocked our original fears. “Despite our varied ages, we made an extremely compatible group with strong camaraderie,” says Christie. “Everyone was enthusiastic, encouraging, and fun without the boisterous bravado we heard in the boys’ group.” Even the guides noticed a difference.

At Powder Cowboy’s Girlski, we bucked two notions—that cat-skiing is for extreme adrenaline junkies and that it’s a sport mostly for men. We discovered that cat-skiing is definitely for girls. On the final day after one run, Diane Carlson quips, “That was so good, I’m giddy.” We weren’t the same skiers who climbed into the Princess the first day; we were confident, ready to devour all the cat skiing we could. □

**FYI:** Powder Cowboy headquarters is in Fernie, B.C., but cat-ski trips run from Bull River Guest Ranch, 61 kilometers (37 miles) west of Fernie. Two-, three-, and four-day trips run between December 30 and April 1. Rates vary between \$952 and \$2700, with lodging and food included. Girlski 2008 is scheduled for January 13–16 and March 9–12. (888-4CATSKI [422-8754]; 250-423-3700; www.powdercowboy.com)