

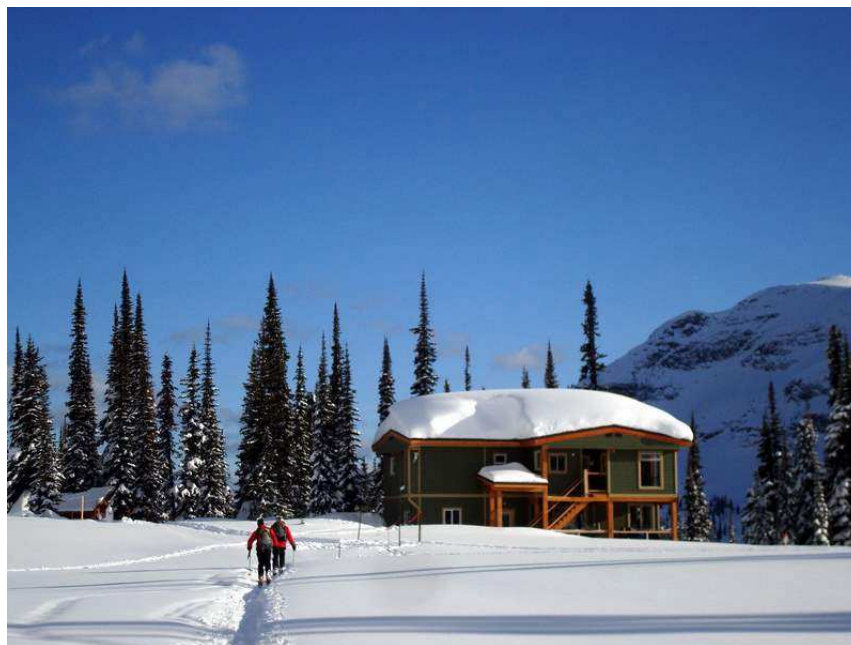
Sol Mountain Touring: Backcountry Comfort in British Columbia's Monashee Mountains

By Debbie McKeown

When I first spot Sol Mountain Lodge, it looks like a small dot in a wilderness of untouched white. The helicopter almost skims the top of the snow-laden trees as we make our final approach. It touches down, is quickly unloaded and takes off again, leaving me here for the next four days. Sol Mountain Touring's backcountry lodge is located in Canada's spectacular southern Monashee Mountains mid-way between Vernon and Revelstoke, British Columbia. I feel like I have been transported to another world.

I am greeted by Aaron Cooperman, one of the friendly owners of Sol Mountain Touring and a certified ACMG mountain guide. Aaron's first priority is getting the new guests on track with some basic safety training. We are outfitted with avalanche beacons and instructed on their use including a practice session of burying and searching for them.

Sol Mountain
Touring's high
safety standards
require snowshoers,
cross-country skiers
and backcountry
skiers to wear the
beacons at all times
when away from
the lodge.



And then ... the reason I came. I strap on my snowshoes and head out to explore with Aaron and several other guests. It is snowing hard for much of the day, adding fresh powder to the significant



existing snowpack. While this makes for slow going, I feel privileged at the opportunity to enjoy such pristine wilderness. There are simply no other tracks, animal or human. When the sky clears slightly, the pale light of the sun magically shines through a snow squall. I come to a descent and run down it, suddenly feeling light on my snowshoes.

Late in the afternoon we return to the lodge and settle in. The atmosphere is easy and informal, while the comfort level is high with a distinct resort feel. It is sometimes difficult to remember that this is a backcountry experience. The eight warm and comfortable bedrooms are well outfitted with hooks and shelves for gear and clothing.



Shared bathrooms and showers have ample hot water, as the lodge is fully serviced with indoor plumbing and electricity. A large and spacious living/dining room serves as a meeting place for



guests and guides to re-live the day's adventures, while a quiet enclave can be found in the upstairs yoga room for reading or stretching. Each evening I am newly impressed with the level of comfort and thoughtfulness

the owners of Sol Mountain have infused into the lodge, from large windows perfectly framing the mountain views, to appetizers and drinks served beside a roaring fire after a day of snowshoeing.

Snowshoeing destinations are almost limitless in the expansive area surrounding the lodge, including the lakes and mountains of Monashee Provincial Park. The meadow adjacent to the lodge provides ample opportunity for an easy romp, while the longer and more challenging trek to Mission Ridge is immensely rewarding with its big vistas of peaks and valleys. We are overall in open terrain with little to obstruct our views. It snows every night of my stay, making each morning fresh and beautiful.

My last day at Sol Mountain is especially satisfying as several of us head out on a 6-hour loop hike with Caribou Pass as our farthest destination. Our route follows rolling terrain, mainly sticking to a high bench. The sky opens to reveal 9000-foot snow-covered mountains to the west, and trees create sharp shadows as the sun hits them. We gradually climb toward Caribou Pass for views of Peters Lake, the next valley and beyond.

Descending the pass is the trickiest part of the day as a lip overhanging the drop gives

way and sends us all for a slight tumble in the soft snow. From that point, one at a time, we quickly cross an avalanche area before starting to loop back toward the lodge. We traverse the side of a slope for about an hour and despite cold blowing snow, our views are possibly the best yet. Finally we reached an open ridge where we start our easy descent to the lodge and the gourmet dinner that awaits us.

After such a rewarding hike, I bravely decide that I will celebrate by enhancing my daily sauna experience with a traditional roll in the snow. My trail companions gamely bring along cameras to capture the moment. The wood-fired cedar sauna is a short walk from the lodge and a welcome evening gathering spot. As for my snow-roll ... well, I may have been in contact with the snow for a fraction of a second, but if you blinked, you would have missed it!

After four days of winter bliss, I reluctantly pack my snowshoes for my helicopter departure the following day. I know that when I leave Sol Mountain, I will take with me



memories of the evening glow of snow-covered trees outside my window, completely undiminished by streetlights or other signs of humanity.

Practical Information:

Winters are long and snowy at Sol Mountain. The ideal time for snowshoeing is March and April when the snow has settled slightly and temperatures tend to be warmer.

Sol Mountain Touring is accessible via helicopter transfer from Cherryville or Revelstoke, British Columbia. Helicopter flights are arranged by Sol Mountain Touring and are included in the price of the vacation. Detailed travel information is available on <http://www.solmountain.com/>.

Meals are provided using locally sourced ingredients including organic meats. In addition, wines from British Columbia's internationally renowned Okanagan region are available at the lodge, as are a selection of beers. Specific dietary requirements can be accommodated with advance notice. I am vegetarian and had consistently wonderful and imaginative meals for my entire stay at Sol Mountain.

Three, four or seven night stays can be arranged. Self-catered or guided-only holidays can also be organized. The owners of Sol Mountain are happy to work with you to customize your stay.

