

Free-heel and backcountry with danger in mind

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CALLAGHAN VALLEY, British Columbia — There are three words I would rather never hear my guide say: “That’s a surprise.” But Dave Sarkany said exactly that as a 70-foot-wide section of snow peeled away from us and quietly tumbled down a snow bowl on Powder Mountain. We both froze.

Sarkany leaned on his ski poles and peered down the slope, factoring in this development into our game plan. I adjusted my gloves and whistled softly to myself, a good calming technique.

Within a minute, a dense band of fog swept across the valley and engulfed the mountain, like a perfectly timed curtain in a stage drama.

We could still see each other, standing about 10 feet apart on the side of a glaciated ridge in the southern Coast Mountains, but visibility had decreased so much that it was impossible to tell where the fog ended and the snow began. Without a tree or rock in sight, we had no sense of scale or perspective. The effect was dizzying.

I would have been whistling a funeral march rather than a TV jingle if I had not been positive that Sarkany could get us out of the situation safely. He is a certified member of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides, leads backcountry skiing, heli-skiing, and Cat-skiing trips in this most western province, and teaches ski touring and mountaineering at Capilano College.

Sarkany also works as head guide for the Callaghan Backcountry Lodge, which was nestled in a grove of old-growth yellow cedars about 1,800 feet below us, and was our ultimate destination that day.

The lodge sits at the upper end of the Callaghan Valley, 14 miles from the closest road, with 7,000-foot mountains rising above it on three sides. Because of its elevation and remoteness, the area is typically blanketed in powder and sees few visitors. It is possible to spend days in these mountains without crossing another skier’s tracks.

When I was in Whistler last April, the spring weather had turned the snow at lower altitudes to mush, but conditions in the mountains around the Callaghan Valley were epic.

I decided to visit the lodge for an end-of-the-season ski adventure and arranged to have Sarkany



PHOTOS BY KARI J. BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Cross-country skiers can loop around Conflict Lake near Callaghan Backcountry Lodge or explore the valley’s 19 miles of tracks.

as my backcountry guide. Our plan was to spend two days skiing around several of the valley’s glaciers and peaks, with Sarkany teaching me about wilderness travel and avalanche safety along the way.

To reach the lodge, we drove about seven miles southwest of Whistler, parked at a staging area on the Callaghan Lake Road, and loaded our ski gear and bags onto a sled. Then it was another nine miles by snowmobile along a trail that wound through dense forests of old-growth hemlock, past tumbling Alexandra Falls and the site of the future Nordic venue for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Guests can also reach the lodge by snow coach (a Hummer or a Ford F350 with rubber tracks instead of wheels), helicopter, or on skis.

The eight-room lodge sleeps up to 24 people, and has a cozy lounge with a ping-pong table, a stone fireplace, books, games, and big windows that offer postcard views of the mountains. Executive



Guide Dave Sarkany does compression tests to determine the strength of the snow’s layers and the risk of avalanche.

chef Evan Boland prepares hearty meals, from waffle breakfasts to four-course dinners with vegetarian Thai curry, and the lodge’s signature dish, chicken stuffed with goat cheese and sun-dried tomatoes.

Using the lodge as a base, visitors can go cross-country skiing along 19 miles of groomed trails, snowshoeing around mountain streams and a frozen lake, or sledging on nearby hills. Or they can ski up and down the mountains on

free-heel, backcountry skis that are much beefier and more rugged than their Nordic cousins. That’s what we did.

At 8 a.m. the first day, Sarkany gave me a primer on operating an avalanche beacon and showed me how to put “climbing skins” on my skis. These are strips of one-directional, felt-like material that have wax on their smooth rubbery side and adhere to the bottom of skis. They enable a skier to literally climb straight up a mountain without slipping backward.

With our skins in place, we began the 2,200-foot climb up Powder Mountain, passing through clusters of yellow cedar and Douglas fir and crossing big open snowfields that reminded me of a rolling desert landscape. People can ski here only with special permission from the lodge, and there was no one but us in the valley that day.

Our route would take us to Journeyman Peak, where we would have 360-degree views of

If you go . . .

Callaghan Backcountry Lodge

Whistler, B.C., Canada
877-938-0616
callaghancountry.com

Getting there: Whistler is 85 miles north of Vancouver International Airport. Perimeter Transportation (877-317-7788, perimeterbus.com) runs the Whistler Express from the airport nine times a day (adults \$58, children ages 5-12 \$39). Callaghan lodge staff will transport you from Whistler Village to the staging area on Callaghan Lake Road, where you can pick up a snowmobile or catch a ride up to the lodge by snow coach.

Prices: Day trips, \$434 (US) per person, include transportation, lunch, use of cross-country skis, snowshoes, and toboggans (backcountry gear not included). One- to six-night adventures, \$430-\$1,130 per person (double occupancy), also include lodging and all meals. Guides can be arranged for \$348 per day for up to eight people. Lodge is open late November through April.

Rental gear: Backcountry skis are available from Escape Route (4350 Lorimer Road, Whistler Marketplace, 604-938-3228, escaperoute.ca) in Whistler Village for \$26 (skis), \$13 (boots), \$17.50 (beacon, shovel, and probe), \$8.50 (skins) per day; multiday discounts available.

Other options: The Whistler Alpine Guides Bureau (located in the Escape Route shop, 604-938-9242, whistlerguides.com) offers a full-day, “Beyond the Lifts” tour off the back side of Whistler/Blackcomb (using chairlifts to gain altitude before dropping out of bounds), and an “Earn Your Turns” backcountry program that involves skinning up in order to ski down; \$170 per person, includes avalanche gear (\$32 extra for Beyond the Lifts backcountry lift ticket). Multiday backcountry ski trips, clinics, women-specific programs, and avalanche courses available.

the mountains — and of Whistler Blackcomb Ski Resort 14 miles away. We would then travel down a steep glaciated ridge to a north-facing bowl, passing over the cre-

Continued on next page

A weakness, a slide, then switch-backing the bowl

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vasses of a glacier that was buried under 30 feet of snow. From there, we would drop through the trees to the lodge, a round trip of about three miles.

We stopped several times on the ascent so Sarkany could examine the snow by doing a series of what he called “compression tests.” Using a shovel and a hand saw, he dug a pit and carved out a square column of snow, leaving one side of it attached to the main snowfield. Then he placed the head of his shovel on the column and began tapping it on top, starting out gently and then increasing the force of his blows.

His goal was to observe how the snow was layered and determine the strength of these layers. When a layer of snow fractures or compresses on the one beneath it, that lets him know there is a weakness and the potential for a slide.

“There’s a hazard,” he concluded, “but it’s not likely to go.”

And that’s why, when the slab let loose after we had begun our descent from Powder Mountain,



KARI J. BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Guests get to the lodge by snowmobile, snow coach, helicopter, or on skis.

Sarkany was surprised. The point release or “sluff,” as it is called, was only as wide as a ski where it first broke away, but it expanded outward like an ocean wave until it was 70 feet across. As dramatic as it may sound, it was considered a

small slide by avalanche standards.

“We have a couple of options,” Sarkany calmly explained, after the sluff had settled.

We could wait until the fog lifted and then continue down this slope. Or we could sidestep or skin up the mountain about 200 vertical feet, and then descend the way we had come. Even though my knees were like Jell-O from nervousness and the long ascent, I secretly hoped we would go the more challenging route — straight down the bowl.

“Whatever you think,” I told him.

As we waited for the conditions to improve, Sarkany described the terrain below us. There was a cliff at the bottom of the bowl, which we would want to avoid.

“Stay about 100 feet behind me,” he cautioned, after the fog had lifted. “I’m going to cut the slope,” meaning ski across it to make sure it was solid, or else release any loose snow so I could safely follow. “Then you can ski down behind me.”

Sarkany crisscrossed down the bowl without triggering more slides, and I carefully hop-turned and snowplowed behind him, still whistling jingles to remain calm and focused. As an East Coast skier more accustomed to crunchy conditions than deep powder, my turns weren’t pretty, but the terrain wasn’t anything an upper-intermediate skier couldn’t handle.

We continued switch-backing down the bowl until the terrain leveled out. Once we had skirted the cliff, we dropped down into the trees and followed a more moderate slope, eventually ending in a meadow right near the lodge.

We spent the final day under bluebird skies — with not a slide in sight — working our way 1,300 vertical feet up to a pinnacled ridge, and then making turns through fresh powder as we de-

scended to the valley floor.

After two days in the mountains, I ended my trip with three words every guide loves to hear: “That was amazing!”

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