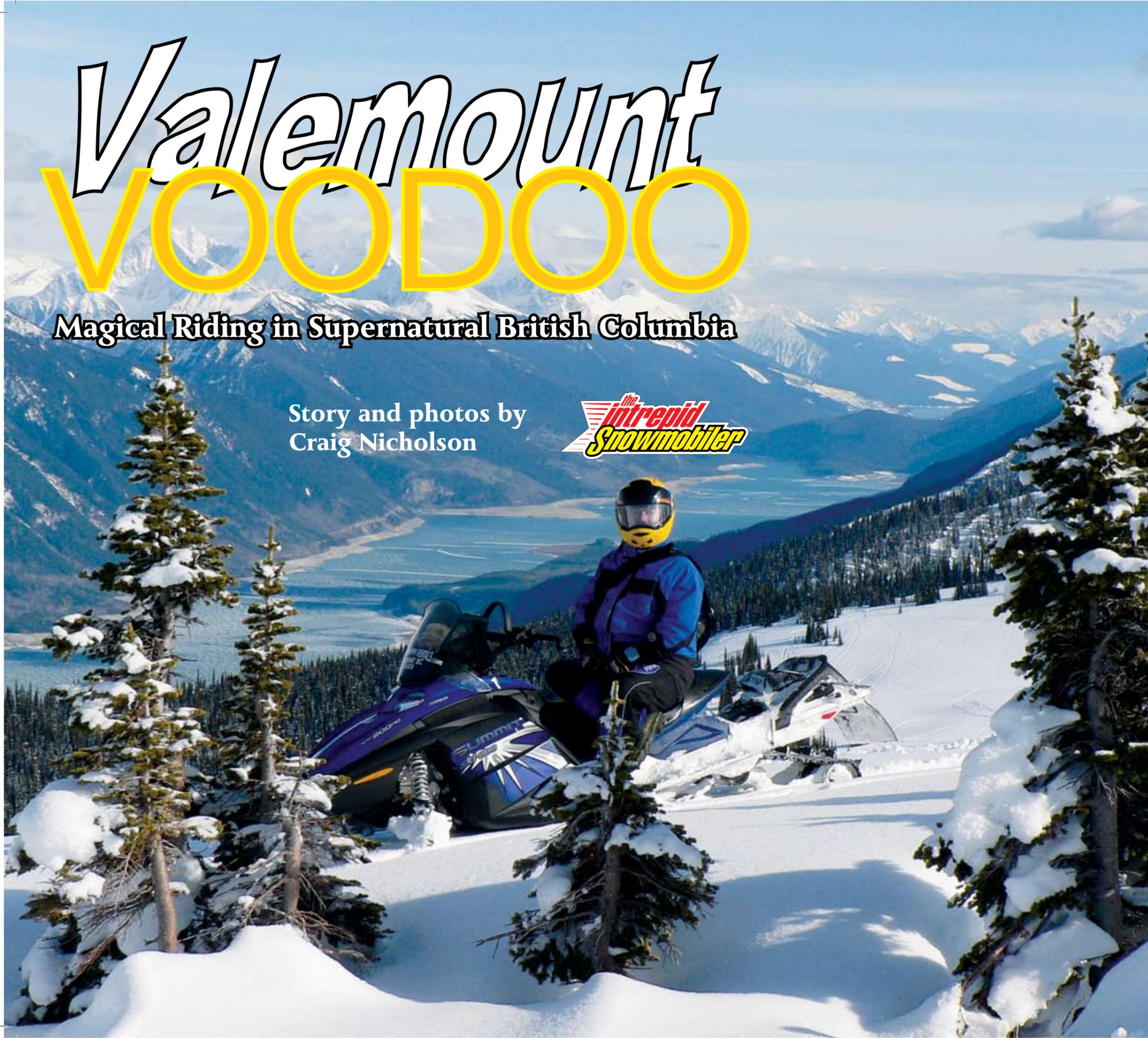


Valemount VOODOO

Magical Riding in Supernatural British Columbia

Story and photos by
Craig Nicholson



We had stopped for a break on a hill-
ock facing a spectral mountain bowl
that hooked out of sight to our left. Its
shrouded peaks seemed to be joined to
the sky by whirling dervish clouds that
wisped around them in eerie mist. Our guide, Tony Parisi, and
my riding buddy, Dennis Burns, decided to high mark that
steep, compelling slope and soon disappeared from our view
around its dark corner.

As it happened, I was the only one of our remaining
group facing the bowl. Suddenly, I spotted something wait-
ing downhill like a screaming banshee, left to right across
the slope. Double take: it was a riderless sled! Next, Tony ap-
peared on his machine, also descending lickety-split. So where
was Dennis? His upright sled was rocketing past us, as if a
ghost rider was locked on autopilot, with no intention of stop-
ping until the mountain terminated, far below in the haze and
snow dust.

As we scrambled to corral that phantom machine, an
apparition that quickly materialized into Dennis came sliding
down the bowl toboggan-style, except without a sleigh. He'd
been mysteriously bucked off at the apex of his buttonhook
turn to start a descent. So trajectory set, his sled carried on
like a thing possessed, while Dennis suffered the agony of a
severe charley horse that would nag him for the duration of
our visit. To say nothing of his memorable butt-slide! But even
that couldn't break the powerful spell of Valemount.

I had heard many great reports about Valemount's
award-winning snowmobiling. Located about 500 clicks due
west of Edmonton, Valemount is a popular destination with
Albertan mountain riders. We met sledders from as far away
as Fort McMurray, where oil sands paycheques fuel sledding
compulsions. So our late March mission was a five-day explora-
tion of this alluring region's many playgrounds, including a



Riding With The Very Best

Valemount's mountain peaks may be overshadowed by its most famous son, champion hill climber Vinnie Clark. This Ski-Doo racer and proprietor of Alpine Country Rentals, earned recent honours as SnowWeek Magazine's 2006 "Racer of the Year". So named for his dominating performance and consistency, Vinnie is the first hill climber to achieve this recognition.

"One thing I can say about Vinnie is he is consistent," said RMSHA driver and Ski-Doo Western Race Manager Mark Thompson. "As he started to show his face on the hillclimb circuit, he showed that he had the ability and talent. And he just continually improves. He is incredibly consistent at all the events, and that is really tough in hillclimbs. The hills are all different and the terrain varies so much at different races. But he stays consistent." By the time of our ride last spring, Clark had already landed on the podium 18 times with eleven wins, four seconds and three third-place finishes in 24 races entered. He had also won four King Of The Hill, three Stock and one Mod titles and you can bet he'll be at it again this season.

When he's not racing, you'll find Vinnie at Alpine Country Rentals, with his fleet of well-cared for Ski-Doo Summit rental units. Maybe if he's not busy that day, he'll even ride with you — and wouldn't that be the thrill of a lifetime! Contact: Alpine Country Rentals (250) 566-9774; www.alpinecountryrentals.com



day-trip to nearby McBride.

Valemount, population 1,224, is elevated 800 metres between the Fraser and Columbia River Basins at the convergence of the Rocky (East), Monashee (South) and Caribou (West) Mountain Ranges. With some peaks towering up to 3,200 metres, it's at the centre of some very spirited action. Shaped by fur trapping, a gold rush, railways, and logging Valemount played second fiddle for many years to Tête Jaune Cache. That was a booming railroad town 19 km north, at what is now the sleepy intersection of Highways 5 and 16. The Tête Jaune sign remains, but their primacy declined as the Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Railways consolidated, then closed operations. Now it is Valemount that thrives on winter tourism, with snow its prime asset.

The Valemount experience

We flew into Edmonton and made the spectacular, six-hour, westward trek

along the Yellowhead Highway though Jasper National Park. If you've never experienced mountain scenery and wildlife sightings, this easy-driving route is well worth your time. We spied elk, wolves, mountain sheep, and deer, many on or near the road. Even in Valemount, deer graze unperturbed by the side of the highway as if moving through a parallel universe.

So what about that renowned snowmobiling? The real measure of a superior mountain destination is abundant snow, varied terrain, uncrowded riding, and snowmobiler friendly hospitality. Valemount scores top marks in every category, and even benefits from its mystique of being slightly off the beaten track and very unto itself. It may be a village, but this "Valley of the Mountains" rolls out the white carpet for snowmobilers...big time! Restaurants, gas stations, and lodgings abound, with great service, excellent cuisine, and a wide choice of accommo-



dations from full service hotels to guest-pampering lodges and resorts. Maybe because of its relatively small size, visiting snowmobilers seem to be a more predominant winter presence than Valemount's own residents.

Early morning and late afternoon, the place bustled with the daily cycle of riders going and returning, arriving and departing, like mystical fanatics before and after the big game. Yet strangely, the slopes were never crowded. There is more than enough choice of staging areas and riding options within each. So we always had loads of elbowroom.

Over a four day period, we visited Clemina Creek twice (30 km south), plus Allan Creek (35 km south), and Chappell Creek (58 km south). The Valemount & Area Recreation Development Association (VARDA) manages each of these areas, providing ploughed parking, groomed access to the alpine, and a warm-up shelter. The smoothed access trails from these parking lots to their respective play areas vary in distance, from 17 km at Clemina to 8 km at Allan, and 26 km at Chappell (also known locally as Miledge). User fees are \$15 per rider and \$5 per passenger, which are worth it for the availability and security of not having to park on a road shoulder somewhere. The grooming is an added and much appreciated bonus. Economical season passes are also available and can be purchased by contacting the VARDA office directly.

An everlasting Never-Never Land

Located about 75 km north of Vale-

mount, Renshaw is where we snowmobiled on Day Five. It is also a managed area, with user fees collected by nearby McBride. Here, wide open alpine and rolling meadows encouraged us to ride over hill and dale all the way to the Alberta boundary. For me, Renshaw was the 'pièce de resistance' of the trip, an enchanted ride into an everlasting Never-Never Land.

I recommend that first time visitors to any of these managed areas hire a guide. When a lone access trail ends, it's easy to get confused in their vast sub-alpine and alpine terrain. Valemount also boasts countless other unmanaged play areas. A guide is absolutely essential to find the areas, get in and out safely, and to help avoid locales restricted for mountain caribou or heli-skiing.

Besides being blessed with an average annual snowfall of 426 cm, Valemount delivers a plethora of geography, headlined by searing hill climbs. Its extreme verticality means adrenaline junkies can get more than their share of height fixes. There always seems to be yet another, equally perpendicular peak nearby and ripe for conquest. Despite his injury, Dennis high-marked with the best of them on his rented Ski-Doo Rev Summit 800, earning his mountain climbing stripes and considerable bragging rights too.

But Valemount has much more going for it than up. There are plenty of benign slopes, open alpine, gentle meadows, small bowls, forest roads and inviting ridgelines where beginners can explore with ease and practice their chops, too. On two of our riding days, we toured with families



Photo courtesy of Team Snow Quest

Going Guided

When you're unfamiliar with the territory, or have finite time to get your best riding in, hire a professional guide. If avalanches are a factor, or your group includes riders of various experience levels, you need experience on your side. A good guide will ensure that you get safely to and from the best places — those most suitable for everyone's capabilities. Your guide knows all the alternatives so if one place is socked in, you may not have to wait it out in your hotel room.

A competent guide can mentor novices so more experienced riders are free to play. Most of all, your guide is better experienced and equipped than you are to assess dangers and risks that could spoil your vacation. But you want a guide who's a pro. That means someone who is certified with professional guiding courses, first aid, and mountain touring. Ask for and check references.

Your guide should provide you with a list of what to bring, ensure that you get basic training in avalanche rescue, using beacon, probe and shovel, and advise you about what to wear and carry for sustenance and comfort. A GPS and satellite phone are a must for a guide to carry and use.

A professional guide isn't cheap, but neither is lost riding time or, for that matter, your life. Besides, if a group is sharing the \$375 per day cost, it can be divvied up into a very reasonable per person fee. Even experienced riders should seriously consider hiring a guide for their first time at a new destination. Our Valemount guide, Tony Parisi, certainly fit all the preceding criteria and more. Look him up at: www.snowfarmers.com or call 250-566-9161.



from the Edmonton area whose members, each with varying levels of experience, all came away with very huge, very satisfied smiles.

And how about that indescribable scenery! Valemount's ethereal mountains are pervasive, breathtaking and awe-inspiring. How can I articulate the humbling magnitude of gazing out over an endless array of wraithlike peaks, stretching beyond the horizon like a fantasy vision? Or the captivating thrill of being above billowy white clouds, like an eagle perched

on the uppermost summit, surveying its otherworldly domain? Or how about those soul-stirring vistas, peering down into the mist shrouded valleys from whence we had ascended, or across to another seemingly impenetrable peak where we had cut our fragile marks only yesterday?

There's no arguing the incredible rush of mountain riding and Valemount embodies the spirit-soaring portents that make you shiver with excitement and gasp at the immensity of your own daring-do. No wonder so many snowmobilers

believe that Valemount Voodoo conjures up the very best mountain riding in BC.

Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling — Your Ultimate Ride Guide". His syndicated column "The Intrepid Snowmobiler" appears in newspapers throughout North America. He also hosts "The Intrepid Snowmobiler on Radio" and appears regularly on Snowmobiler Television. For more info, click www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com

WHO TO CONTACT

Valemount Area Recreation Development Association (VARDA): 250-566-4817; www.valemountrecreation.com.

CAA Avalanche Bulletins: 1-800-667-1105; www.avalanche.ca.

WHERE WE STAYED

Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites Valemount Lodge: 1-866-777-1120; 250-566-0086. www.valemount.holiday-inn.com. Impressive, newer hotel (2001) with good onsite restaurant (Summit Grill) and bar; whirlpool & swimming pool and ample trailer parking. Centrally located on Highway 5 on the south side of town for easy access to staging areas. Snowmobiler friendly and loaded with amenities, all under one roof! Fuel nearby in town.

Terracana Ranch Resort: 1-866-968-4303; www.terracana.com. Rustic log chalets, with contemporary amenities and conveniences, built on a terraced hillside overlooking the mighty Fraser River and back-dropped by the Rocky Mountains. Onsite bar and restaurant that serves a bountiful and scrumptious homemade buffet, different each day. Sauna and spa. Ample trailer parking. Located about 25 km north of Valemount, just west of intersection of Highways 5 and 16 near Tête Jaune Cache (fuel). Great base for riding either Valemount or McBride.

WHERE WE ATE

Summit Grill, Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites Valemount Lodge: 1-866-777-1120; 250-566-0086.

Riverside Bar & Grill, Terracana Ranch Resort: 1-866-968-4303.

Caribou Grill: 250-566-8244.

Great Escape Restaurant: 250-566-4565.

LUNCHES, FUEL AND OTHER NECESSITIES

P&V Gas Bar: 250-566-9977. Located just north of the Holiday Inn on Highway 5, this very snowmobiler friendly convenience store and gas station caters to a rider's every need. Great home baked cookies and fresh made sandwiches.

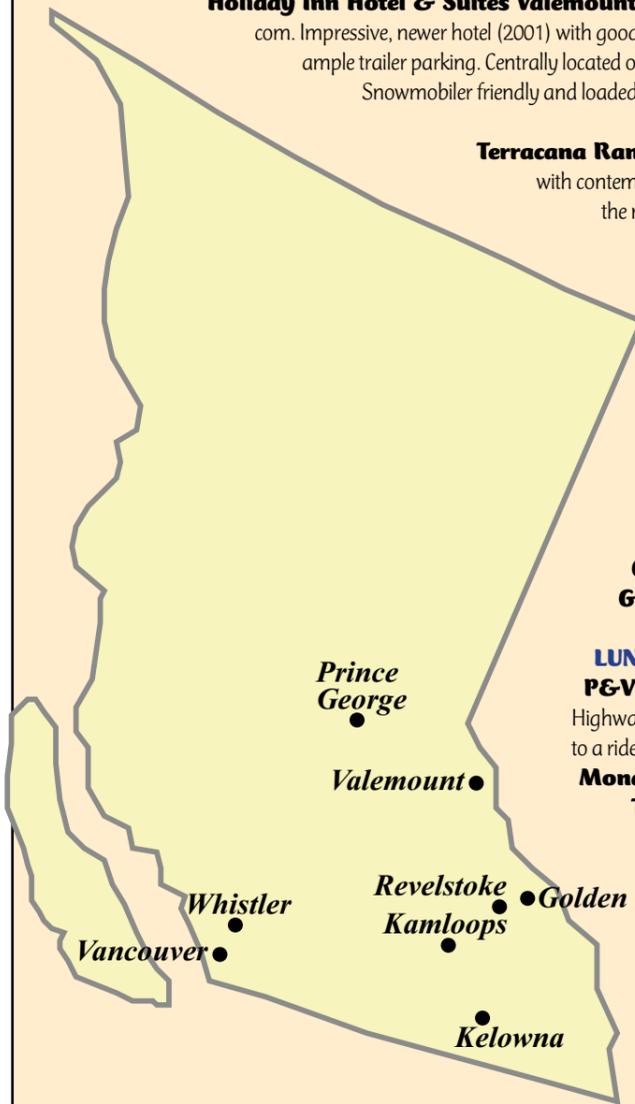
Monashee Motors (PetroCan): 250-566-4318.

Terracana Ranch Resort: 1-866-968-4303. Tasty homemade lunches including a thermos of hearty, hot soup.

TOURS, RENTALS, GUIDES AND SERVICE

Alpine Country Rentals: 250-566-9774; www.alpinecountryrentals.com. Tony Parisi (Guide): 250-566-9161; www.snowfarmers.com

(Special thanks to Sue Marko & VARDA, Tony Parisi, Vincent Clark, and Lisa Levasseur.)



Tested on Tour

By: Craig Nicholson



Globalstar Satellite Phone

You wouldn't go mountain riding without an avalanche beacon, and you shouldn't go snowmobiling without a satellite phone. It's your next best lifeline after a reliable sled. Having a satellite phone along provides the peace of mind of being able to reach help anywhere, any time — and when you're off snowmobiling in the middle of nowhere that can be a life-saving investment!

My Globalstar Satellite phone fit easily under my jacket and worked everywhere I had direct line of vision to the sky. It recharged easily in several hours. Best of all, it was a no-brainer to use — I didn't even read the manual!

All I did was open my snowmobile jacket, remove the satellite phone from my convenient Blurr chest pouch, raise the antenna, turn on the power, wait a few seconds for satellite acquisition, and then dial just like a normal phone. Although the satellite phone has its own battery power, I plugged it into the 12-volt outlet on my sled to conserve juice.

Like me, your first thought may be that a satellite phone is too expensive. Look again. The price of a handheld model has dropped considerably in recent years. Basic "emergency only" call plans are also relatively inexpensive; the key is only to use the phone as I did: for emergencies when out of cell service, not for gossiping with family and friends.

A satellite phone is an ideal gift for families to buy for themselves or their special snowmobilers. Stay-at-home spouses should also consider sharing the cost for the group their partners rides with. Click on www.globalstar.com. For the chest pouch, go to www.blurrstuff.com

Pelican Case

Pelican cases are ideal for protecting your camera, satellite phone or other electronic gear during storage or transit. My strong, lightweight, Pelican 1200 is totally watertight, crush-proof and dust proof. Twin, double-throw latches keep it securely

closed and a Pressure Equalization Valve seals it tight. Inside, foam cushions the contents on all sides. Several sizes, shapes and colours at www.pelican.com

Eat Snow In Valemount!

Eating snow is what you'll probably do if you try a daring stunt like in this photo. That kind of high flying is best left to the pros, but you can get up close and personal with some of their best by booking this Valemount mountain riding package!

Every avid trail rider must try mountain riding. It's a totally different style of snowmobiling, as different as apples and oranges, even though both are fruit. For the "been there, done that crowd", your snowmobiling experience can't be considered complete without a mountain adventure. But unless you can trailer to your high country destination of choice with your own mountain sleds, you're into a major logistical challenge. So here's a turnkey way to add oodles of powder and peaks — plus lots of unforgettable riding — to your sledding résumé.

Three key Valemount players — Alpine Country Rentals, Cougar Mountain Lodge and Snow Farmers — have partnered in a "Ride the West with the Best" package that really delivers all the goods for parties of 4 to 8 sledders. Two topnotch, professional and experienced guides accompany you every day and make all the arrangements to get you and your Ski-Doo Summit 800cc mountain sleds to and from the various staging areas. These guys are exceptionally skilled riders who can show you the ropes and all their tricks too!

The Valemount tours run Sunday (arrival day) to Friday (departure day) and include the above, plus 4 days of incredible riding, 5 night of pampered lodging (with hot tub!) at Valemount's best resort lodge, along with all meals and transportation to and from the Edmonton airport (You pay your own flight costs.)

At just under \$3,000/person, it sounds pricey, but knowing these folks, you'll get more than your money's worth and the quality trip of a lifetime that you probably couldn't put together on your own (at least not without a huge amount of effort and a lot of luck!)

Actually, it's a good deal. Do the math: on your own, the cost of hiring two top guides for 4 days at the going rate could run you almost as much as this whole package! You can even customize your tour to add family skiing or to ride with champion hill climbers like Vinnie Clark (see "Riding With The Very Best" side bar) or Clark Kuster. For more info, click on www.snowfarmers.com

