

High and Mighty

Spring Sledding near Valemount, BC



My mouth was watering. My stomach gurgled. My body's reaction to mountain sledding is normally not so visceral...I was bloody starving! Over the years, I've experienced many aromas while snowmobiling, but never as delectable as the one emanating from the sled ahead on that day we explored the mountains of North Blue. Was it some kind of new scented oil? A scratch and sniff sled promotion? Whatever, it certainly smelled tantalizing...triggering memories of when Mom cooked her famous roast of beef. Amazingly, that's exactly what was happening high in the backcountry!

Yes, our very own Guiding Gourmet, Steve Masse, had wired a six-pound roast into the curve of his muffler. Pre-seasoned, pre-cut, and then wrapped in an oven bag and multiple layers of foil, his succulent recipe slow-cooked, wafting its enticing scent up and down the slopes. I had visions of being surrounded by the world's largest wolf pack, or worse, stampeding grizzlies out of hibernation early.

But tough luck for them...just when I had started hallucinating about Yorkshire Puddings, Steve stopped for lunch. Believe me, we made short work of his creation, ingesting huge slabs of juicy beef, slathered with horseradish and Dijon mustard, and sandwiched between hunks of fresh bread. Yummy-yummy...just like our spring riding in Valemount and area!

Valley of the Mountains

They did their best to wear us down that week. In the end, we left fully satiated, but bone tired. I bet our ecstatic, ear-to-ear grins attracted more than a few curious glances on the flight home...

Jim Reavell and I had arrived in Valemount, the "Valley in the Mountains", toughened from almost 10,000 kilometres of trail riding. Or so we thought. But the high and mighty slopes of Valemount thoroughly tested our endurance...survivable thanks to skilled guides and easy-handling '08 Ski-Doo REV-XP Summits, not to mention those blissful hot tubs!

As I had planned, we plunged right into mountain riding our first day, without much opportunity for acclimatizing our oxygen-deprived muscles to higher elevations. Then we rode for five consecutive days while a regular rotation of fresh guides put us through our paces...super-fit, local experts who made each manoeuvre look far too easy...

One day, the way back involved a hill climb, with a veer to the right near the top. It was the same route we'd entered by, but our return necessitated standing on the left

running board to side-hill... not my strong suit. I was doing okay until I hesitated for a split second in mid side-hill, indecisive about which track to follow. My forward momentum slowed and that was all she wrote.

I lost balance and tumbled off the sled. It teetered precariously for a moment, and then slowly rolled over me, headed downhill. There was no stopping it, so I kicked out and managed to pass it over my body without much physical contact...but surprisingly, that applied force was just enough to flip it right side up again. No matter...with swiftly gathering speed and an empty saddle, my Ski-Doo disappeared down that long, tree studded, slope — a sled on a mission of its own.

Game over, I thought, picking up pieces of the broken windshield. My mind started tallying up the cost of a helicopter to lift out the rest of the wreck, followed by a massive repair bill. Resigned, I staggered to my feet, carefully shifting over the hillcrest until I could look all the way to the scene of destruction at the bottom.

I couldn't believe my eyes! The track made by my sled was a straight beeline downwards, avoiding all the trees...and there it was, stopped by deep snow, with



Where's the beef...



...cooked and ready to eat!



SUPER, NATURAL
BRITISH COLUMBIA

CANADA

Story and Photos by
Craig Nicholson





What Goes Up...



...Must Come Down...



...Come to a Stop...



...and Keep on Running!

no additional damage, except to my pride. The good news was that I rode it out and then for the rest of the tour; the better news was that the entire repair bill was only \$39.95. Now if I could only buy back my pride that cheaply...

I need to go on record up front: I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, a mountaineer. I was weaned on groomed trails, and like many flatlanders, my preference is to keep my butt firmly ensconced on the seat. So on the slopes, anyone who sees my posteriorly-challenged riding style immediately knows my pedigree...I'm the only one sitting while all around me are standing. Notwithstanding this aberration and my healthy fear of heights, I think mountain riding is a blast, and few places do it better than the Valemount region. So read my lips: your snowmobiling experience will never be complete until you try Valemount mountain riding yourself!

Something for Everyone

And you know what? All snowmobilers, regardless of skill level, can treat themselves to unforgettable fun in these mountains. Here are the basic necessities: a reliable mountain sled; the right gear; an experienced guide; snowmobile-friendly services; and most of all, a snowy playground with lots of powder.

That's where Valemount shines. This friendly village of about 1,300 souls is located about a six-hour drive west of Edmonton, near the intersection of Highways 5 and 16. It's nestled in the Robson Valley, part of the Rocky Mountain Trench, surrounded by the Cariboo Mountains and Premier Range to the west; the Monashee Range to the south; and the Rocky Mountains to the east.

Valemount offers a host of all the services and amenities sledders need, from

multiple hotels to numerous restaurants and several gas stations, including the popular P&V's, where savvy riders load up with their take-out lunch feasts. It's also the home of champion hill climber Vinnie Clark's Alpine Country Rentals, offering current-year Ski-Doo Summit rentals, repairs and much more.

Valemount offers three managed areas – Clemina Creek, Allan Creek and Chappell Creek – with maintained, trailhead parking



John Markoff's crew taking a break.

The Big Ride was our best trip ever...and our group of six has been riding together for a lot of years! I connected with the Valemount folks at the snowmobile show in Toronto and we were challenged beyond belief by this totally different snowmobiling experience. Without a turnkey operation like The Big Ride to make it easy, I wouldn't have known where to start planning or who to call. We really got our money's worth with no hassles and are already talking about returning to Valemount next winter to visit Sue and Tony.

John Markoff
Oshawa, Ontario

lots and regular grooming to the Alpine. Clemina and Allan provide snug cabins with woodstove, firewood and an outhouse. Both also deliver a good variety of riding

choices, so that beginners and boondockers can each find more than enough action to suit their relative levels. But that's not all...for more advanced adventure, there are several unmanaged areas too, such as Horsey Creek, Keyhole, Oasis and North Thompson.

I originally visited Valemount two winters ago (SGC Fall 2006, Volume 28, Number 3). The hard-working and hospitable people who hosted me through the Valemount & Area Recreational Association (VARDA) impressed me. They had big plans for Valemount snowmobiling, including developing an all-inclusive package deal for visitors from afar, so I decided to return sooner than usual to check their progress.

VARDA has been busy. Most obviously, it has substantially enlarged the parking lots at Clemina and Allan to accommodate more trucks and trailers. A second groomer and drag is now in operation, enabling a regular and frequent resurfacing schedule that ensures riders will have smoother access to the alpine. Additionally, VARDA produces a snowmobile area guide and has distributed a new User Guide to help attune riders to issues such as caribou closures. Behind the scenes, VARDA is working with government agencies on a Sustainable Resource Management Plan for the region that will help protect snowmobile play areas.

Fortunately for snowmobilers, the VARDA Sustainable Resource Management Plan now also includes the Blue River area, farther south on Highway 5. Here, local volunteers like Steve Masse are working on developing two new managed areas, South Blue and North Blue. Both are presently accessible right from town, behind the Esso station, albeit with limited parking. A groomer is already in place, and a drag is top priority, probably for the upcoming winter. Meanwhile, between the groomer's front blade and a



Taking a break on the way into North Blue.



Loving the Mountains! (l to r) Zack Meyer, Tony Parisi (guide), Terry Cyr, and Carl Kuster (guide)

We flew to Edmonton for The Big Ride and rode with the most beautiful scenery and conditions that every true sledder must experience once in their lifetime. With over seven feet of snow stacked up on Valemount's mountain slopes, there was no limit to our riding pleasure during our four days of boondocking and hill climbing. What a rush! We were also very fortunate to have Carl Kuster and Tony Parisi as our guides. Hanging out with these experienced mountain guides was more than the thrill of a life time, never mind how much we learned about deep powder mountain riding. There is no doubt that I will try my best to round up another crew for a return visit!

Terry Cyr
Restoule, Ontario

32" diameter Douglas Fir log fixed to drag behind, their access trails were already being smoothed for our visit.

Blue River adds at least eight new play areas to the Valemount & Area arsenal and is the hot new destination among many avid mountain riders.

The Big Ride

Soon after my previous visit, Tony Parisi (Snowfarmers), Sue Marko (Cougar Mountain Lodge) and Vinnie Clark (Alpine Rentals) introduced "The Big Ride". For anyone who wants to try mountain riding for the first time or to explore new playgrounds, The Big Ride is an excellent turnkey operation. This all-inclusive package offers four days of primo mountain riding on current Ski-Doo mountain sleds, along with five nights of lodgings and all meals, plus two guides, ground transportation, fuel and oil, among other items. All you need to do is to pay your way to Edmonton with your own snowmobile gear and The Big Ride will pick it up from there.

With fuel costs rising, The Big Ride will probably be priced at slightly more than \$4,000 per person this winter, which sounds like a lot of coin. But having snowmobiled with its principals and costed out all its included components separately, I can attest that The Big Ride is good value. It eliminates all the long distance



Big Ride guide Tony Parisi (l) and Jim Reavell (r) stopped at a warm up cabin.

If you are a true lover of snowmobiling, mountain riding is a must. It reminds me of the good old days, sledding before trail systems were in place... we made our own places to play! We clocked 400 km in our five days of riding, half getting up from where we parked into the Alpine. The other half was vertical: ascending or descending, then catching your breath to take in the awesome panoramic views of mountaintops and valleys from thousands of feet up. Despite the almost 9,000 kilometres of trail riding already under my belt, I was sore for several weeks after from using different muscles in the mountains!

Jim Reavell
Campbellford, Ontario



Everyday we stopped for lunch bought from P & V's Convenience store.

organizing, guesswork and uncertainty, and puts your snowmobiling vacation squarely in the hands of professionals who will deliver the most unforgettable adventure you may ever have on the snow. You won't get lost, you will ride the best available snow, and you will go sledding each day, because these guys know where else to go if visibility is poor in one area or another. The Big Ride is an extraordinary way for snowmobiling buddies, couples or families to share the ultimate experience.

But don't take my word alone...check out their website at www.snowfarmers.com and read the testimonials from The Big Ride participants that accompany to this article.

You will have noticed that I haven't talked much about what it's like to ride in the mountains. That's because no words can do it justice. For those who have never been, mountain sledding is indescribable... mind-blowing...absolutely beyond anything you can imagine, and as different

from trail riding as apples and oranges (see trail mix pg#). You can make it thrilling and exciting...either with adrenalin-pumping, heart-stopping action or with breathtaking, extraordinary views and scenery...or both. You can try to emulate the riding techniques of your guides or just go along for the ride with your own style and pace. Either way, you'll have the adventure of your snowmobiling lifetime...and that's what high and mighty in Valemount is all about!

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Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling (To order: www.snowgoer-canada.com). — 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

- Tourism British Columbia: 1-800-435-5622; www.HelloBC.com
- Valemount & Area Recreational Development Association (VARDA): (250) 566-4817; www.valemount.org/varda
- The Big Ride (250) 566-9161; www.snowfarmers.com

Where We Rented Sleds and Gear

- Alpine Country Rentals (250) 566-9774; www.alpinecountryrentals.com

Where We Stayed

- Canoe Mountain Lodge (250) 566-9171; www.canoemountainlodge.com. With 47 spacious, well-appointed and well-equipped rooms, this clean two-story hotel has ample parking and offers a steam room and large hot tub. The Canoe Restaurant is located across the street.



- Cougar Mountain Lodge (250) 566-9119; www.cougarmountainlodge.com. This cozy bed and breakfast caters to snowmobilers and can sleep up to eight individual riders. The rate includes great food, a comfortable living room area, outdoor hot tub and a gear drying room. With personal, friendly attention, hostess Sue Marko makes each group of sledders feel right at home!



Where We Ate

Breakfasts

- The Great Escape (250) 566-4565 (excellent hot oatmeal)
- The Grill (250) 673-0033

Lunches

- P&V's Convenience Store and Gas Bar (250) 566-9977 (hearty take-out sandwiches and great cookies)

Dinners

- Caribou Grill (250) 566-8244; www.caribougrill.com. (Primo steaks and seafood – try the Seafood Chowder)
- Canoe Restaurant (250) 566-9175 (mouth-watering lasagne)
- Cougar Mountain Lodge (250) 566-9119; www.cougarmountainlodge.com (Sue's a great cook!)

Where We Fuelled Up

- Valemount Petro Canada (250) 566-4151