

Powder hunters: 'Living a dream' on a Snowcat Safari

Powder Mountain's 'Snowcat Safari' program expands terrain to 2,500 acres.

By Mike Gorrell, The Salt Lake Tribune

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Eden » The night before, the threat was too much snow.

Not because of avalanches. The prevalent 20 percent to 25 percent slopes in Powder Mountain's snowcat skiing area are not prone to slides of much size. But with those moderate pitches, pile the snow too deep and it can be difficult to get going fast enough to plow through thigh-deep drifts.

As it turned out, the 12 inches of new snow that accumulated by daybreak (on top of 8 inches the previous day) provided deep perspective into the meaning of Wasatch powder to eight out-of-state visitors to Powder Mountain resort above Ogden.



Father and son Chris and Braxton Tissot of upstate New York carve their turns into the backcountry slopes of Powder Mountain as part of their Snowcat Powder Safari that gives customers access to untracked slopes. (Francisco Kjolseth/The Salt Lake Tribune)

"Living a dream," said David Perlmutter, a 40-year-old financial systems consultant from Brooklyn, N.Y., of his participation in the resort's Snowcat Powder Safari.

"Incredible. I've never done anything like it," added his friend, Mark Baez, 42, also a financial consultant from another New York City borough, Queens.

Baez really hadn't. Although Perlmutter tries to ski out West twice each winter, this was Baez's first Western trip. Hardpack he knows. But powder was foreign to him. While the 10 percent density snow wore him out, particularly as it thickened when lingering storm clouds gave way to sun-drenched skies, he beamed about his day.

"I've skied for 20 years [back East] and I've never experienced anything like this," Baez said upon calling it a day after seven runs, each descending 800 to 1,000 vertical feet. "I didn't know what to expect, but it was better than I thought. When my legs were listening, it was good. That's why I know it's over now. My legs quit listening."

The chance to have satisfied customers like that -- eager to come back for more -- prompted Powder Mountain to establish the Snowcat Safari program a year ago and to expand its terrain this winter to roughly 2,500 acres.

A snowcat, which seats 12 and has a plug for iPods, can transport groups to one of three canyons off the resort's backside, to ungroomed terrain featuring a mix of open slopes, snow-covered conifers and glades of

aspen and birch. The resort reserves the canyons for snowcat groups.

"We want to maintain our reputation for having untracked powder," said spokeswoman Carolyn Daniels. "We're very protective of it."

That's what attracted the diverse group that joined Perlmutter and Baez earlier this month. There was a father-and-son combo, Chris and Braxton Tissot, from Saranac Lake, N.Y. A couple of high-school buddies from Boise, Kevin Rigenhagen and Joel Holsinger (now living in Atlanta), were on an annual boys' trip. An Australian couple,

Michael and Leona Turra, run a ski resort outside Melbourne -- Mount Baw Baw -- and regularly visit the U.S. in their off-season.

They gathered by 8:30 a.m. in the yurt next to Powder Mountain's main parking lot, were outfitted with avalanche beacons and ordered a sandwich lunch before being ushered into the snowcat by Paul DeLong, director of guest services or "Adventure Pro," as his name badge states.

"We've got good snow out here. It should be a beautiful day. All aboard," called DeLong, a seven-year resort veteran since retiring from his John Deere job in Waterloo, Iowa.

He is one of a half dozen guest services employees who take turns guiding Snowcat Safaris, accompanied by ski patrollers who bring up the rear, ensuring stragglers get down. Three quarters of the people DeLong meets are from outside Utah.

"Eight or nine years ago it was the other way around," he noted, reflecting post-Olympic increases in the publicity Powder Mountain has received in national ski magazines.

On this day, DeLong and ski patrollers Jim Furlong and Dan Kojetin shared padded blue seats with their guests, chatting about snow conditions and weather, where in Utah to get good sushi, Furlong's former career driving Union Pacific trains, and Kojetin's future job teaching English in South Korea.

"The staff did a nice job. They were really friendly, down-to-earth, normal people," Chris Tissot said later.

"It's a bonding experience when you're out there," said Daniels, and not just between guides and guests.

That's why Crumpler Bags, a company that makes all kinds of handbags, reserved an entire snowcat for a reduced price of \$2,600 and took some preferred clients out just before the Outdoor Retailer Winter market trade show.

"There is nothing like solidifying relationships over a nice serving of freshy freshy gnarr gnarr [powder]," wrote Crumpler USA general manager Lindsay Cousley in a snowboarding blog.

For Chris Tissot, the Snowcat Safari offered a day of quality time with his 15-year-old son. "You get to know each other," he said. "At home, they have their friends and you start to lose touch with who they are. Cat skiing is a good trust thing. You have to have confidence, think, be aware. Those are all good life skills."

Skills not lost on his snowboarder son. "I feel amazingly lucky," he said. "I don't think I've ever ridden anything so deep. Every time you duck down, you're up to your waist. It's amazing powder, a beautiful day, perfectly worth it."

Ski down, ride up. Ski down, ride up. And so the day went, sometimes starting from the same point on a ridgeline, but always veering right or left to untouched tracts.

It burned out Leona Turra, but in a good way.

"I got a little scared going through the trees, but I'm happy," she said. "I like being able to ski where others haven't been, laying down first tracks. I'm not a good snowboarder, but I feel like I've achieved something. That's important for me" and for Powder Mountain.

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