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PERSON & PLACE

THE
STORYTELLER:
IN DEEP WITH
RUDI GERTSCH

*This heli-ski legend has
been guiding in British Columbia's
mountain ranges for more than
50 years—and he has the
stories to prove it*

By Leslie Anthony
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"I'm probably the only one in North America who can claim they've been guiding heli-skiing continuously for 50 years," Rudi Gertsch tells me. Long-faced, square jawed and relaxed, these words are delivered with a twinkling eye and perpetual half-smile. "And I still just love to be out there. I have no official plans for retirement or to stop guiding—why would I? After 50 years of making first tracks, if I stop skiing, then what?"

Sound reasoning, and a zeitgeist statement for anyone who makes their living running a heli-skiing operation. But there's a subtext as well, and it isn't hard to detect if you know anything about the business of skiing powder—or about Rudi. Like many newcomers to this country of opportunity, Rudi was a dreamer, and the job he created for himself was, and continues to be, the stuff of dreams.

RUDI GREW UP in Wengen, Switzerland, in the shadow of the Eiger. Like most kids in the area, he started skiing early, aided by the fact that his father was a mountain guide. Though his life path at home followed in the footsteps of the paterfamilias, Rudi sought bigger horizons, emigrating to Canada with his brother in 1966.

Thinking that a metropolis would be the easiest place to find a job and learn English, the boys chose Toronto as their landing pad, figuring to spend weekends in the Rocky Mountains, not realizing these were 4,000 kilometres distant. Once the geographic penny dropped, Rudi wasted no time abandoning his brother and jumping on a plane west, where he immediately found work in Banff, Alberta, with Canadian Mountain Holidays, the growing guiding company founded by countryman Hans Gmoser. Among other re-

sponsibilities, Hans pulled Rudi into his nascent heli-skiing venture in the Bugabo range south of Golden, British Columbia. Thanks to Hans, Rudi became a de facto pioneer in a business where he remains very much at the forefront.

"Working for CMH was truly a dream come true for a young guide like me," he notes. After the Bugaboos, he worked up north in CMH's Cariboo operation for a few years, and then helped open up a new Monashees base near the Mica Dam north of Revelstoke.

After learning the heli-ropes with the CMH crew, Rudi struck out on his own



An iconic image of Rudi jumping off the Mount Norquay Tea House roof.

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in 1974 with a day-skiing operation in the Purcell Mountains close to Golden, growing it into an iconic family business with his son Jeff as lead guide. "I chose the Purcells because my experience in the Monashees was that they got too *much* snow there, and we were often weathered out waiting for conditions to improve. I also wanted a day-skiing place so I could go home every night—I knew I didn't want to spend my whole life in a remote lodge."

These days, with a small herd of beef cattle on his farm in the Blaeberry Valley just north of Golden, Rudi relishes a job that allows him to maintain year-round ties to the land. Purcell Heli's day or multi-day guests stay in town, where accommodation can be arranged to their tastes. Though he and Jeff have made a few tweaks over the years to the way they run the business, there's not a lot else they wish to do with it. "We're pretty content," laughs Rudi. "On our days off we go ski-touring; sometimes we even have the pilot drop us off somewhere."

Rudi's half-century of guiding is interesting enough to have inspired a book by the Alpine Club of Canada. No surprise, then, that his Purcell Lodge base is a veritable museum constellated with iconic powder boards, old climbing gear, alpine sketches, woodcuts, a scatter of his uncle's inventions (remember Gertsch plate bindings, touring bindings, skis?) and a large painting that journeyed far through time and space to land here. It first arrived from Europe to the old guides' house in Lake Louise, moving on to the CPR-built Swiss village of Edelweiss outside Golden, before someone decided Rudi should have it. The art-piece—depicting Swiss guides, of course—hangs over a massive fireplace splitting floor-to-ceiling windows that invite the Purcells into the room, commanding the attention of our group, who stand riveted before this diorama of old-world tradition framed by rugged new-world mountains.

But we're not here for nostalgia. The still-ski-mad Rudi snaps us out of our wide-eyed reverie and hectors us all out to the heli-pad, accompanied by Jeff. With no protests, we're in the air within minutes.

"The early days of heli-skiing were total cowboy years," Rudi reminisces through crackling headphones as we fly out over the Purcells. "One time, a group of us were out with Hans Gmoser flagging landing zones. We were easing into one and everyone was trying to figure out if we were close enough to land. ▶

Rudi keeping track of the flight schedule while guiding on one of his company's heli-ski excursions.



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Unabashed powder fiends, Rudi and his crew go ski touring on their days off from heli-ski guiding.



Farming powder turns in the Purcell Mountains.

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Hans looks out the door, says ‘yes,’ then throws his pack out only to watch it tumble down the mountain face. We weren’t even close.”

We debark with the energetic 73-year-old on a stunning run called Top of the World only to find that the alpine zone is wind-hammered, with plates of crust and raised sastrugi making the going anything but smooth. No worries, advises Rudi, who has many other options in a tenure that spans 2,000 square-kilometres. A couple of quick turns down the ridge and Jeff has us on a different aspect, with soft, boot-top powder underfoot. When we pull up to a stop, the effect of the mountain panorama before us is hard to put into words, but Rudi offers the perfect explanatory anecdote.

“My father began guiding heli-skiing in Switzerland around the same time I started here. Then one year, Hans

Gmoser had me invite him over for ‘exploration week,’ something we did at the start of every season. Standing on a peak like this with my father, he finally understood what the attraction was for me here. He said ‘If I were 20 years younger, I’d stay here, too.’ That was good, because it let me off the hook of any expectation to return to Switzerland.”

Farther down the ridge we duck into the trees, where shaded chutes and a huge pillow feature provide for endless lines to which we return again and again. The pick-up, where the pilot meets us after each circuit, features a grizzly bear rub—a tree marked by claws with fur stuck to the bark—suggesting that it’s still as wild out here as the day Rudi arrived.

Scattered throughout the tenure are three hand-built cabins used for lunch stops or emergency shelters. The one we

enjoy soup and sandwiches at faces the pillow line we just skied, with a distant overlook to the Selkirks. Both Rudi and Jeff settle down with their sandwiches, and stare out over their domain.

JEFF FIRST HELI-SKIED when he was three years-old, on a run called Rudi’s Ridge, which is now adjacent to the Kicking Horse Mountain Resort. Having a father-and-son guiding duo is unique, but it’s only two-thirds of the three generations of guiding in Rudi’s family. It makes you wonder whether, despite choosing to leave his homeland for a bigger life in B.C., Rudi didn’t miss Switzerland somewhat.

In many ways, he was able to maintain those national ties with Gmoser and other Swiss expats working in the mountains of Canada’s West. Rudi, in fact, also

Decades of memories are on display at the Purcell Lodge.



had a great working relationship and friendship with the celebrated photographer Bruno Engler, another Swiss guide. Two of Engler’s most recognizable shots involve Rudi: in one he does a spread-eagle off the Mount Norquay Tea House (pictured page 58); in another, also on Mount Norquay, he is a silhouetted in a large powder cloud as he descends. “It’s ironic those two photos are so famous considering I got kicked off Mount Norquay the next year,” chuckles Rudi. “I was coaching kids and they called me in and said ‘You’re skiing too fast.’ I said ‘Kids need to go fast and get some mileage on their skis.’ They let it go for a bit, then called me in again and said ‘You just don’t get it, you ski too fast. Get your gear and get out.’ Years later, after Bruno died, I went back to Norquay for the Bruno Engler Memorial Race, dressed in an old costume and riding 135-year-old, steam-shaped skis 240 centimetres long. One of them had a split repaired with a flattened-out coffee tin fastened to the wood with bailing wire. But I won first prize—a season’s pass to Norquay. The old-timers who remembered me being kicked off had a good laugh.”

Another favourite anecdote recounts Rudi being hired to ski for the 1968 movie *Downhill Racer*, starring Robert Redford, who was reportedly scared even standing in the start gates. The producers received permission from FIS for their cameramen to ski the famous race-courses like Lauterbrunnen and Hahnenkamm—but *only* if they’d skied the courses in the past, which Rudi had. “So, I carried an enormous camera for many of the establishing race shots,” recalls Rudi. “There’s an archive of incredible footage somewhere that never got used. You can get the same today with a GoPro and you wouldn’t even know you were wearing it. Can you imagine?”

If there’s one thing Rudi does better than ski, it’s tell stories. Each run has brought a new tale—heavenly skiing served up with an Earthly libretto—and now, at the cabin, the stories become more contemplative, more introspective, as if the land before him has slowly seeped into his consciousness.

In wan January light, the mountains stampede toward the porch under a harlequin sky, the kind of beauty that has captured more than one pilgrim’s heart. Rudi Gertsch looks out over the peaks, leans back and starts talking again. Jeff smiles; he’s sure he won’t hear anything new. ❧