



CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN/WASHINGTON

Alex Schenkar. PHOTO: CHAD COLEMAN

THE REASON YOU HAVEN'T SKIED **CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN** YET IS the same reason that you should go there: because it's not in Utah, Colorado, or California. Despite being home to "America's Alps," the state of Washington is but a blip on the ski-resort radar screen. But truth be told, terrain-wise Crystal stacks up handsomely to Snowbird, Crested Butte, and Squaw. It's really that good. And it even gets dreamy-perfect snow once in a while.

Crystal remains a secret outside the Pacific Northwest, but that soon may change. In the next few years the Boyne USA-owned resort plans to construct a new summit tram, a large base hotel, new lodges and restaurants. Plus, it will expand its lift-served terrain into some of the most coveted backcountry slopes this side of Telluride. In other words, this somewhat backwoods destination may soon be on par with the industry's biggest draws, not just in terms of challenging skiing, but on-hill services as well. As the saying goes, Crystal hopes that if they build it, skiers will come.

The Rainier Express was the state's first high-speed chair and is still the fastest way to access steep runs like Iceberg Ridge and Sunnyside. Or drop into Green Valley and test the steeps of Snorting Elk Bowl or Northway Peak. On powder days, locals line up at Chair 6—a creaky old double, the kind you hope never gets replaced (which, thankfully, isn't called for in the current plan)—to cut up Powder Bowl, High Campbell Basin, and Bear Pits. Chair 6 also is the gateway to Crystal's south backcountry, an expert's playground.

Some will tell you that now is the time to experience Washington's showpiece ski area before it loses some of its homespun funk. Here in the shadow of massive Mount Rainier loom plenty of rocky steeps, powder-filled bowls, funneled couloirs, ancient forests, and rewarding OB tours. During the week you can still have them—and the woolly, Bavarian comfort of a drink at the Snorting Elk—all to yourself. At least for now. —*Kristopher Kaiyala*

DETAILS, DETAILS:

Contact info: skicrystal.com; 360.663.2265; **Base elevation:** 4,400 feet; **Summit:** 7,012 feet; **Vertical:** 3,100 feet; **Lifts:** 9; **Ticket price:** \$50; **Skiable acres:** 1,300; **Annual snowfall:** 380 inches; **Known for:** Expansive terrain and relatively dry snow in a region infamous for its Cascade crud. **Things to do:** Enroll in a three-day Steep Skiing Camp. East Peak Massage & Fitness has a game room, massage, and exercise machines (360.663.2505). **Closest beer:** The Snorting Elk located in the Alpine Inn near the base area. **Getting there:** A two-hour drive from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport via Highway 410. Head toward the big volcano. Last stop for gas is in Greenwater.

MT. BAKER/WASHINGTON



Never half-baked.
Skier: James Heim.
PHOTO: GRANT GUNDERSON

CHASING SNOW IS A MADDENING GAME, BUT AT **MT. BAKER** THE odds are overwhelming that you will find what you seek. With a 647-inch annual average and a world record of 95 feet in 1998-99, the reputation of this storm-churning vortex is backed by hard data. Even last year, when the Northwest was hit by its worst winter in decades, Baker ended the season with 465 inches, more than most resorts could wish for in a good year. When other Cascadian resorts are simply being dusted, a three-foot pounding on Pan Dome is no rarity. But Baker is home to more than just great snow depths. Steep terrain, diesel-powered chairs, and an atmosphere that takes you in as family all align to make this mountain a rare and captivating place.

Perched between the peaks of Baker and Shuksan, the ski area is brimming with aggressive lines. After a storm, start by lining up for Chair 1—a 52-year-old, workhorse double. From the top, lap up Pan Face, drop down the Chute or shimmy through Pea Garden. Echoing through the imposing walls of the Canyon or pausing for a quick safety meeting in the Sticky Trees will spit you out into the valley. From here catch a return trip up 6 or load up on Chair 5 for an overhead perspective on the huckable lines down Gabl's and a lift to the top of the famous Natural Halfpipe. On park days, lap Chair 8 to link lines through the sculpted features on Daytona and have a Kodak moment on the most photogenic C-box in the Lower 48.

When the runs are tracked and the visibility good, Baker's cover-shot backcountry beckons. True to its family-style ethic of personal responsibility, the mountain management enforces a strict policy requiring proper gear, knowledge, and a partner before tapping the terrain beyond the ropes. And unlike the hands-off lawyer-driven norm, Baker helps the hungry seek truth with affordable avalanche courses through their Mountain Safety Education Program. In good stability, Shuksan Arm, Hemispheres, and Willows all offer steep, sustained and smile-inducing lines. The doorway to these big-mountain zones, which are peppered with con-sequential terrain, is through the Chair 8 gate. Rumble Gully, the potentially closed

canyon, and the must-hit traverse to Gabl's serve as the wormholes that will shoot you back into controlled terrain. The Blueberry gate, located on the west boundary, opens into the prime touring terrain of Table Mountain, which reserves untracked long after the storm snow settles.

Inevitably, soaked Gore-Tex, fogged goggles, or worked thighs will finally force you indoors. The best refuge is found on the third floor of the upper lodge in the Tap Room, which sees its share of pint swilling and storytelling. During high season for corn and bluebird, the beer-and-barbeque garden at the White Salmon Lodge heats up as the ideal outdoor venue for soaking in the sun while basking in the spectacular glow of Mount Shuksan.

The closest place to find lodging is 17 miles away in Glacier, an unfiltered town where the under-funded can still live to ski. Don't pass through without stopping at Milano's—an exceptional skier-owned Italian restaurant—and the gear-intensive Glacier Ski Shop, which shuts from noon to three on weekdays so its owner can ski. To tap a lively college-town scene, retreat to Bellingham for great live music at the Nightlight Lounge. —*Dan Kostrzewski*

DETAILS, DETAILS:

Contact info: 360.734.6771; mtbaker.us; **Base elevation:** 3,500 feet; **Summit:** 5,050 feet; **Vertical:** 1,550 feet; **Lifts:** 7; **Ticket price:** \$31 mid-week, \$40 weekends; **Skiable acres:** 1,000; **Annual snowfall:** 647 inches; **Known for:** Highest average annual snowfall of any ski area in North America; steep, rugged terrain; and progressive backcountry and ropeline policies. **Things to do:** Take advantage of the extremely accessible and seemingly endless backcountry terrain surrounding the resort. **Closest beer:** The Crow Bar in the White Salmon day lodge. **Getting there:** Same distance from Vancouver or Seattle on I-5. Take exit 255 in Bellingham, Washington, and head east on Highway 542 for about 56 miles.

RESORT RANT/BY DAN KOSTRZEWSKI

MT. BAKER: DEEPER THAN JUST SNOWFALL

I ARRIVED AT BAKER BLINDLY AND WITH LOW EXPECTATIONS. Spoiled and smug from living in Jackson Hole, I was convinced nothing could compare to laps off the tram. After all, this was Washington, land of 32-degree cement. A quick study of the posted trail map—with only 1,500 feet of fall line and a network of slow-speed chairs—left me unimpressed. New pass in hand, I loaded Chair One in the driving rain with hope fading fast. But secrets here are slowly revealed, and now, three seasons later, I find it difficult to ever leave.

What I discovered is that nothing about Baker is average. Snowfall and terrain rank it among the best, but something deeper is at work here. The cumulative effect of the whole is harder to quantify. An organic process formed the soul of this ski hill and the nature of it can't be replicated or improved with a corporate formula. And that's fine with the locals who covet this place, because its spell has already been cast on them.

For the uninitiated, explanations always start with the subject of snow. The lucky who skied here during the winter of 1998-99—when 1,140 inches fell from the sky—speak of the record year with religious reverence. Invoking the holy trinity of wet Pacific moisture, the sweet spot of the storm track, and the ideal topography for orographic lift, they explain with fervor why miraculous 200-inch-plus base depths are the norm on this mountain. A 647-inch annual average backs up their claim with tangible proof. Even when neighboring Crystal and Whistler are celebrating a few new inches, Baker regularly measures its storms in feet.

Steep and stellar define the lines at Baker. Narrow shots, huckable drops, and towering tree runs are tucked into every nook and feature. A natural flow—free of long flats, tracks, or traverses—keeps the fun coming at a rapid clip. The backcountry opens things up on an even larger scale with sustained pitch on Shuksan Arm and a touring utopia out on Table Mountain. Knowledge, gear, and partners are prerequisite, but if you bring all three, the gates are left open for your enjoyment.

And on this stage, the locals quietly excel. But unlike the star status possible at marquee mountains like Whistler and Mammoth, visibility is predictably low in this corner of the North Cascades. A-level masters like Dean Collins, Tory Bland, Rene Crawshaw, Matt Niederhauser, Cooper Engst, and Eva Gonzales are more likely to be seen laying down impressive lines than waiting for the right light. Track them down in the Tap Room and you'll get a weather report or a local history lesson, but you'll rarely hear even a whisper of their aptitude. And in Glacier—a disappearing breed of ski town where winter-long unemployment is still fiscally possible—you will find an anonymous reserve of new talent simply living for the next turn.

Viewed through a longer lens, Baker is an antidote to the industry trend of exclusivity. By the luck of isolation, Baker has no high-speed chairs, no slopeside condos and no three-phase expansion plans. Real estate has nothing to do with the bottom line here, yet a consistent profit is made without a big base village or direct flights from Dallas. People of all ages, abilities, and incomes have a place here—and the long-term success of this model proves valid an approach that remains the exception.

The Howat clan and its patriarch Duncan—who has kept the chairs running on time since 1969—have nurtured this atmosphere with a management style that is the antithesis of corporate. Personal responsibility is the mantra and a local-friendly atmosphere is ingrained in every detail. From the handsomely crafted White Salmon day lodge to the annual lift-assisted Egg Hunt and the inclusive dog policy, all the on-hill ingredients cater to the skiers who form the community, which returns the favor with family-like loyalty.

Like any powerful force, Mt. Baker's magnetism defies rational explanation. But for the slacking students, ski-town refugees, and small-town heroes who find themselves held here, it is undeniably real. Standing firm on the edge of the North Cascades, this mountain remains stubbornly unclouded by hype, sheen, or corporate-ness. Season after season the chairs will run slow, the snow will pile up, and the lines will lay in wait. When the prodigal find their way here, they will be welcomed into the fold. And to them—even if they arrive confident in their doubt—Baker will soon feel strangely like home. —*Dan Kostrzewski*