

VIRTUAL REALITY

OPENING
NEW LINES
WITH
GOOGLE EARTH
BY DAN KOSTRZELUSKI

Chris Ankerly, ready to drop in
sans mouse and wifi connection.
Ankerly photo

After many missions and hours of screen time, Dave and Joe prepare to open "The Booklets."
Ankeny/Photo

THE LINE

The spine in "The Booklets" was steep, but what made this finger so sketch was a mix of massive overhanging cornice and hair-trigger stability that had plagued the B.C. Coast Range for most of March. The big-line community was still on alert, so the fact that Pemberton local Joe Lax was roped into a backup anchor of a buried Jones splitboard, on belay from riding partner Dave Basterrechea and chopping an entrance with his avalanche shovel to nail this line at sunset was putting me on edge—even from a safe, side-angle vantage.

Four of us were halfway up the Hurlley at least two hours by sled from the trucks in a fresh new zone that this particular crew had been trying to crack into since photographer emeritus Chris Ankeny had discovered it on

Google Earth from his Pemberton coffee shop. Pioneering new zones far above this former farm town had become a bit of an obsession, not only for these three locals, but also for a growing circle of post-pro transplants and big-mountain addicts, who had relocated their lives and ladies to be in daily contact with some of Canada's sickest terrain and most secretive lines.

This particularly stacked zone, of north-facing, two-grand walls, was still a bit of a mystery. The fluted features may have been hit before by a Bralorne-based crew, but no one on either side was broadcasting their location. Either way, the spines were still fresh for us and this session was a personal triumph since it has been a three-year, on-and-off project to connect

the dots and find the entrance. Four days prior, the secret almost got snaked by a Matchstick film crew that cut loose one of the spines, then reloaded into their private hell for an airlift to more stable ground.

For us, finding the front door was a terrestrial mission involving logging-road logistics, setting a steep virgin sled track through tight timber and, in my case—with my limited side-hilling skills—a two-thousand-foot splitboard ascent up the long track to treeline, where I linked back up with Ankeny's Arctic Cat for a tandem shuttle to the back bowl of this Coast Range subsector. The entry was far from easy and far from obvious, but the real reason we were here, cracking this one open, was Google Earth.

Joe enjoying the fruits of his labor.
Ankeny/Photo



Pemberton and Mt. Currie as seen from Google Earth. © 2010 Google Imagery © 2010 DigitalGlobe/GeoEye/Spot Image, Province of British Columbia, GeoEye/Map data

DURING THAT ADVENTURESOCPE ERA, PRO SHREDS SUCH AS SHIN CAMPOS, MARC MORISSET, KEVIN YOUNG, SCOTT NEWSOME, MIKEY ORR AND PHOTOGRAPHER KURTIS CROY STARTED POKING AROUND PEMBERTON'S EXPANSIVE TERRAIN WITH HIGHER-HORSEPOWER SNOWMOBILES AND CHEAP HELI DROPS.

EXPEDITION EARTH

The Booklets may have been off the normal radar, but Google Earth is far from a secret. Since the software was launched in 2005, it has become the world's de facto atlas with more than 700 million downloads and three-dimensional renderings of the entire Earth's surface available from any location with Internet access. The free application seamlessly stitches together imagery from two independent satellite providers—Digital Globe and GeoEye—forming a geographic visual that creates the illusion of an omniscient digital perspective of any point, place or range on the face of the Earth.

Yet Earth is not static and the interface allows users to zoom, pan, angle and rotate

3D imagery for a better topographic look at any location or, in our case, any potential line. The web-based program also allows users to placemark specific points with a virtual pushpin that provides specific latitude/longitude or GPS coordinates. These individual points on a lat/long line then intersect with the vast mountains of terrain data to pinpoint exact elevations on the map.

From a shred perspective, Earth lets you mark out your all-time lines, save your secret zones without making them public knowledge and leave a trail of land-marked GPS coordinates to get back into to the same place when it snows again. The geo technology allows you to size up cliffs, find the connecting

pass and sniff out potential lines or just take a peek down the backside of a ridge you've always contemplated with a topographic eye.

We've all checked out our house or our hill with Google Earth, but as its capabilities have powered up with each new launch, some riders have taken Earth to another level. Ankeny is one. And since he emigrated to the Coast Range kingdom from Montana in 2005—and connected with a mix of skiers and riders keen to explore—he has logged serious screen time checking out his neighbourhood. The only difference is his backyard contains some of the most accessible, consequential and untapped big-line terrain in Canada. →

IN THE ZONE

Arriving from Whistler or Washington, it's tough to overstate how much terrain fans out from the single stoplight at Pemberton's junction on the Highway 99. Mt Currie's massive 8,501-foot face towers over town. Its Y chute a big-line prize first tagged by ski legends Eric Pehota and the late Trevor Peterson. To the dry east side, the Duffey Lake Road provides elevated access to broad drainages and steep peaks. Coastal icecaps run cold to the west and, to the north, rich farmland and vacation lakes rise into sled sectors that stack up for more than 60 clicks toward the grizzled, backwoods hamlet of Bralorne.

But these are only the known zones, and even as the Pemberton mystique has grown with visiting film crews, publicized trip reports and an in-migration, a nucleus of seasoned locals have started to get a bit farther back using the holy trinity of sled skills, splitboard legs and Google Earth.

Ankeny likes to say that with skins you can access five per cent of the local terrain, but a sled and a splitboard open up a lifetime of lines. In this game, a fast MacBook is one tool, but local knowledge and local proximity are still major advantages.

I had no Pemberton residency, but one day earlier, one day late, I'd arrived to a home-cooked meal and a look of shell shock at the townhouse Ankeny shares with his fiancée Lisa Komuro. The locals got out early but the shakedown day-breaking trail hadn't gone according to plan, with buried surface hoar resulting in spooky avalanche conditions. Dave Basterrechea and his wife Vanessa Stark set off a sympathetic class-three fracture from flat ground; Ankeny popped and dropped a section into a scary terrain trap and natural slides on multiple aspects

resulted in a full retreat from the backdoor of the Booklets.

This morning we changed plans at the Petro Canada, driving up and over the Duffey in Ankeny's diesel GMC, still marked with Montana plates. We unloaded the machines at a nondescript pullout and with splitboards ratcheted into CFR racks, as Lax, Basterrechea and Stark throttled out of sight around the bend. I stepped onto Ankeny's sideboard for a mechanized assist into the unknown of Valley X.

For this crew, the drainage was still shrouded in uncertainty. Back in December they tried the long route in, marking a sled track through the timbered valley with bright-orange trail tape. As other missions diverted their attention, this door had sat open for four months, just waiting for a window like today. But with more analysis on Earth, Ankeny felt we could crack the alpine faster with a two-grand skin straight up from the creek crossing.

So we park our sleds at the site of a bridge removal, and then split our decks and climb first through brushy overgrowth under hot sun, then up a steep gully and along a frozen lakeshore. Wall X and Wall Y rise another 2,000 feet skyward, but our gape is cut short when we pan right to see the red flag of a massive slide that had ripped bowl-to-bowl on a similar aspect. The pit we dig is just as ominous, with buried facets beneath a crusted surface. So with yesterday's fresh in everyone's mind, we let the walls stare us down and send us back to the pullout where Stark shares some sweet-shop chocolate and Basterrechea straps down his Ski-Doo to ride another day.

IN THIS MOMENT, THE FEELING OF PIONEERING A NEW LINE, IN A NEW PLACE, IS SO MUCH OF A RUSH THAT TIME SEEMS TO SLOW.

Dave maps another digital discovery close to his Pemberton base.
Ankeny photo



The amount of terrain that can be sized up before you step foot on snow is now endless thanks to the Google app. Ankeny photo

LOCAL ACCESS

Now a Pemberton local, Basterrechea first came to Pemby from Idaho to film in the Lone Goat area with the late, legendary, local guide Eric Smith in 1996. Back then, local ski mountaineers such as Eric Pehota and Johnny "Foon" Chilton had been putting down serious lines in the area, but only a handful of touring diehards and avalanche technicians were regularly tapping in the Pemberton backcountry.

During that Adventurescope era, pro shredders such as Shin Campos, Marc Morisset, Kevin Young, Scott Newsome, Mikey Orr and photographer Kurtis Croy started poking around Pemberton's expansive terrain with higher-horsepower snowmobiles and cheap heli drops. Soon freestyle pioneers such as Sean Kearns and Devon Walsh also started secretly pushing north to film while underground riders such as Mark Usher and John Greenglass began getting out after larger lines with big drops.

When Basterrechea and his wife relocated permanently in 2005, moving his snowmobile rack business to town, gritty Pemberton was in the process of incubating an underground scene with freeriders, ski and shred, such as Kevin Smith, JD Hare, Joe Lax, Chris Sanchez, the Huffman brothers and the Davies brothers riding big local lines far from the media limelight.

In the midst of this anonymity, Basterrechea and Lax started stalking bigger lines in the understated fashion. The list of accomplishment, between the two of them, grew to include descents on Currie, Meager and Pylon, the north chute on Samson, sketchy rides deep in the Tantalus and, last winter, Basterrechea's first descent of *The Fine Line* on Currie. Lax laid claim to the first-ever descent of Dragon Slayer and Basterrechea topped his own line list by following Jonaven Moore down the infamous Papa Jordan line up the Rutherford. And it was all for the rush.

"That feeling of riding new terrain is hard to beat," explains Basterrechea. "You can ride the same thing over and over and it's fun, but if you find something new, there is something about it that is always better—especially if you figured out how to get in there."

Before Google Earth, he remembers, it was a tedious process of trial and error that resulted in shut downs and dead ends more often than glorious lines. Google Earth was a godsend, making it possible to link together drainages, unlock whole new zones and visualize alpine-style missions—like the first snowboard descent on Plinth he rode four years back with two of his mentors, American expats Jon Johnson and the late Jack Hannan. But this exhaustive style is not for the faint of heart. →

THE HOMEFRONT

In Pemberton's tight-knit, big-line community word travels fast. Back at Ankeny House with pasta cooking on the stove, cold beers in the fridge and baby furniture in the living room, calls start coming in to confirm aggressive lines skied in zones out the Hurley and up the Duffey. Ankeny gets word that Travis Rice's posse has parked their sled trailers behind his coffee shop. Jonaven Moore's Deeper crew hell-dropped on a shoulder in the Tantalus and a Matchstick film crew may have beat us to the Booklets.

The night I arrived the telephone tree had a different message. The local's report was buzzing with daily summaries of touchy conditions and lucky escapes. Even the heli guides at T.L.H. had seen their lowest-angle slopes sliding big and longtime locals were claiming the worst stability in four seasons. But the coastal snowpack healed quickly and the energy in town was now pumping for the bluebird swell.

"Sometimes the hardest thing on a good day around here is just deciding where to go," Ankeny says as he clears the dishes. "You just want to clone yourself, there are so many good spots."

Then he settles in for a Google Earth session to show me the stashes. With his seven-month-old son Kai testing out his lungs upstairs, Ankeny spins the Google Earth globe with a single click and zooms into his coffee shop across the street. As he pans back for perspective, hundreds of placemarks pop into view—each one representing a line, a zone or a mission in the vicinity.

His first mission with Earth was two years earlier, on the backside of an area becoming

increasingly crowded with Vancouver-based "meekies" (fans of gear giant MEC). Yet with a feel for how logging roads intersected the local geography, Ankeny scouted a sector one ridge removed with easy access to a wall of black granite couloirs. With only two minutes setting trail, he and his ski partner rolled right in and named their first digital find "Google Earth."

Valley X was a bigger objective with steep faces, long chutes, gnarled spines and potential shuttle runs. Ankeny had been made aware of Valley X by Johnny "Foon" Chilton, who Earthed out its prime north-facing walls and logging-road access. But the B.C. government has been actively decommissioning roads and removing bridges after clear-cutting to keep the public out of crown land. So to gain entry, Ankeny sleuthed out the drainage then traced back an approach from point A to point B to point C, keenly eyeing thinned patches, potential creek crossings and road sections for a route that would connect back to a known sled approach.

In the early Earth days, most wild areas were only available in 1.5-metre resolution, making it easy to find cut blocks and summits but difficult to pinpoint creeks, lines and cols from space. But Google's linear push toward sub-metre clarity has made 80 per cent of the world, including populated areas, famous peaks and many provincial parks, now visible in what the Google Earth Team classifies as HD.

For a sense of local scale, we fly to the Lilooet Icefield, then we re-centre to Meager, Pylon and the Plynth line Basterchees rode four winters back. Then we rally up the Rutherford and hop over to the

Promised Land, a zone Ankeny discovered by cutting and pasting GPS coordinates of attractive faces from mountain photog John Scurlock's site into the search bar.

We fly full circle with a potential three-run drop on Mt Currie, which is so crystal clear I start to obsess over the potential down climb at the bottom in extreme detail. Google confirms no rhyme or reason to what areas get HD first, but a side benefit of the Olympics seems to be that much of the imagery around Pemberton—including Mt. Currie—was upgraded in preparation for the Games. The locals have benefited from the legacy with greater visual clarity but also a wider awareness of their stacked reserves.

We prepare for the weekend rush as Ankeny finishes up his chores. He grabs clean rags from the house dryer and runs them to his coffee shop at closing time. But he returns with bad news. "They were slammed at the shop today," he says with the defeated look of a responsible adult. "I think I need to work tomorrow."

Ankeny's day job is owner/operator at the Mt. Currie Coffee Company, which has become a morning hub for the local mountain scene due to its deep-roasted coffees and artisan-style ambiance. So, the next morning, while flirty counter girls serve breakfast wraps to reverse Whistler commuters and Ankeny pulls Canadians for visiting film crews, I take a tour of the Cayoosh Creek drainage with local pro skier Laura Ogden, who offers to loan me her Yamaha Mountain Max—nicknamed "Old Blue"—for the duration of the trip.

■ Work sucks when the snow is good, but a fresh deck is instant motivation to ride. And that night, after one of his busiest days of the season, Ankeny arrives home to a new Lib 167 TR5, with c2, still in the box. With both a pro-rider and pro-photogra-

pher past, Ankeny has been on the Lib program for more than a decade, and the deck is a fair trade with Lib founder Pete Saari for some magic beans. He mounts his new board at the tuning bench in a basement stacked not only with a UPS shipment for

the shop, but also the tools of his lifestyle such as downhill bikes, backcountry packs, ice axes, Lib skis, a new Nboard and a toddler chariot. Then he slaps on a Mt. Currie Coffee Shop sticker, which broadcasts a fitting Pemberton mantra: "I Love Pow."

Earning and then enjoying each turn on the Joffre Peak, Ankeny and Jonaven kick off another local landmark. Ankeny photos



BY NOW, I AM LOST IN MY OWN THOUGHT, REALIZING THAT WE NEVER WOULD HAVE SET EYES ON THIS LINE WITHOUT THE VISUAL INSTIGATOR OF GOOGLE EARTH.

DEEPLY ROOTED

In the a.m., we refuel with marked gas from the cardlock across from the sled shop then crawl through the 20-kilometre slow zone of the Mt. Currie Reservation, with its loose dogs and free-range horses, to pick up Old Blue on the far side of the First Nations boundary. Then we hook up the trailer and roll back to Valley X.

"I see it as the North Shore," says Ankeny as Bob Marley keeps it mellow on the iPod and the winding road gets us higher. "What surfers are doing with boots to tap into the outer reefs is like how we're using forest roads, sleds and Google Earth to find new zones."

"A lot of people think that sledding is so glorious," Ankeny continues as we pass the snow sheds, the highway snow-stake cam and trailheads that are virtually empty on a Monday. "But it's a mission, especially when it's deep. It's insane, getting into anywhere when it's deep. There are a lot of days when you are not even getting anywhere, you're just getting stuck and working to get the trail punched in for the next day."

Unlike hot spots like Brandywine, where the same crews go to the same places to film the same shots, the track we hope to punch in hasn't been touched in four months. And it's not just the terrain—with accessible logging roads, glacial superhighways and thick coatings of coastal snow on the steepest lines—but the different breed of athletes

who have been drawn here to explore.

"This area is unique because there are so many athletes calling it home that they are really pushing the envelope of what people are shredding," says Ankeny. "So in that regard they are really pushing to find the new lines and find the new zones where they can get freshies and not compete with other film crews."

"But then," he continues. "You've just got the bros that go out and find the goods."

As evidence of both, he points to Joffre Peak while I pit stop at one of the pullouts. He traces a thin couloir from the summit and then relays, with typical understatement, that he followed Jonaven Moore down that line earlier this winter. He plays it off as right place, right time, but there are not many postal codes where you get a last-minute call to shoot stills while following Moore down the gnar. Like many Pemberton self-ascents, the approach required split, crampons and ice axe—and the run was one of the steepest Ankeny has ridden—but he just chalks it up to another life line in Pemberton. It's a different rhythm with bigger objectives, I realize, but one place-marked by daily explorations where you still make it home for dinner.

"Is she going to crack for us today?" asks Ankeny as we roll onward toward the pullout. "Just maybe." >

Dave charging fir from the crowds and corners of the Whistler Backcountry. Slack photo

VALLEY X REDUX

We start round two on a deactivated logging road—bridges removed—following it to the timber flats where we let Old Blue rest. Ankeny puts in the sled trail through deep snow in tight trees, while I run sweep on a split until I find the Arctic Cat MB either augured in, tipped over or partially trenched. Each time, we dig 'er out, push 'er forward and then repeat the process again and again until, three hours later, we crack into an alpine with almost no visibility—exhausted, dehydrated and done.

But the trail is in. So we travel back on Tuesday, this time following Lax up the drainage. On this mellower mission I coax Old Blue further up the trail, across gullies and through timber—until I get stuck one too many times. Ankeny and Lax roost on, while I shuffle via split until I meet their return from the alpine. In low-vis light, we tandem in pairs, through misty alpine bowls to a windy ridgetop.

With a different sky, I barely make out the XY wall that stared us down four days ago. But we head for a different line, Joe breaking trail step-by-step up a half-hollow, half-wind-packed bootpack at mountain-man speed. Up top we snake through a slot in the cornice in whiteout conditions, and then ride three lines, one at a time through a virgin alpine bowl that connects to chutes Ankeny has sized up on Google Earth.

At the rollover, three entrances drop into the XXX chutes. While Lax billygoats sideways to the spiciest entry, then peers far out over rocks under his toeside, I point right and ask, "Does this go?"

"I think so," says Ankeny who has seen this line in high resolution but hasn't physically hit it yet.

I take the straight shot, cutting the entrance and then surfing high on the walls as the slough peels away beneath my feet. Even with all the technical assistance, it has taken four days to get this line. But deep in the pocket, the exhaustion fades into an awesome silence. In this moment, the feeling of pioneering a new line, in a new place, is so much of a rush that time seems to slow. An instant later, I hit the chundered flats to see Ankeny dropping one line left and negotiating some pepper to an exit in the fog, then I stare straight up and see Lax come steaming straight down from the burliest line.

I take my breather at the lake, while Lax and Ankeny go collect the Arctic Cat from the ridge. I know my legs are done, but not knowing when this window will be open again, I jump back on Lax's Ski-Doo for a sketchy, skillful tandem—three at a time on one sled through the alpine—to get a second dose of X.



VIRTUAL REALITY

With my virtual and my actual worlds both altered from this trip, it takes me a minute to realize I'm back in the Booklets on what is likely the final day of this experience. Some say technology like Google Earth is foreshadowing the end of exploration, making it too easy, but my perspective is different from this rocky perch far from cell range.

"That takes some big balls," Ankeny says, hands in the pockets of his AK puffy, waiting to shoot Lax who is hanging it out there, chopping an entrance to his chosen spine.

As Basterrechea feeds out rope, Lax leans out to its short limit and cuts the last chunks from a narrow slot that will allow him to slip onto the spine. It's calm but tense and I break my silence with a quiet, "Definitely."

By now, I am lost in my own thought, realizing that we never would have set eyes on this line without the visual instigator of Google Earth. Like maps that brought Euros across the oceans or surveys that punched through Canada's mountain passes, knowing nirvana exists is powerful motivation to explore the other side. New technology is the foundation for any age of discovery and in this case, a source of transformation in the way I see my lines.

Staring down at the no-fall zone six days deep into a foreign experience, I'm nervous about making it back before dark and buzzing about being someplace so vast, so remote and

so indelible. It was, of course, another epic day with a massive bowl sliding from the echoes of the two-strokes and my own virgin drop cautiously ridden right to left and exited through a rubbled choke. But we also cracked canned beer in the sun while appreciating first lines for all four of us on the pages of the Booklets.

Even without the drama or the sunset, I can feel this chapter is the crescendo—the big conclusion to a big week burning energy, adrenaline and marked gasoline to open whole new sectors. But this mission was about more than just another fresh line—it was about finding solitude and adventure in places no one has ever really looked. It's a discovery and a vision that will pull me back again.

I'm definitely spent from the experience and Ankeny pulls a snack from his pocket and offers me half for a refuel. "Espresso brownie from the shop," he says. "It's got powers."

I take the sugar rush, calm my nerves and



Another day and another epic for Joe in his backyard. Slack photo

Equally proficient with a chainsaw and a 3D Connexion mouse, Shandy and his company deliver the goods to many top-steeled crews. Gallop photo



GOOGLE EARTH 101 WITH SHANDY CAMPOS

Not that I needed an excuse for more immersion, but a down day in Pemberton allowed me a chance to stop poaching coffee shop Wi-Fi and head north to the Meadows to interview Shandy Campos, Pemberton's newest resident expert on Google Earth.

Born and bred in the Slokan Valley, Campos founded B.C. Action Adventures, a business that facilitates backcountry film shoots for professional snowboard media groups in very rural areas of the Kootenays. He is snowboarding's first to go pro at Google Earth, so he sat me down at his kitchen table and schooled me on the technology.

"Google Earth has been a necessity in developing my company in the matter that we are always looking for new terrain," Campos says. "We won't even go up a new valley that we haven't been to without doing a good Google Earth session first just to get familiar with what is out there."

Lesson one is to get a 3D Connexion mouse, which allows for slick heli-style navigation around the terrain, he says. Even though we're sitting idle, we soar to one of his zones south of Revelstoke, north of Nelson and nowhere near where you think it is, as he flies me over famous secret lines like the Spine of God, Fissure Bowl and Kale's Ladder.

Then Campos shuttles me to the top of a line and rotates the angle to show me the exact view I would see just before shredding it. It's the same perspective he gets paid good money to show pros shooting for big-name film projects from Brainfarm, Absinthe and Valcom to TGR, SBS and Poor Boyz, but I'm getting this first one free.

"The main part of our service is to give them local knowledge of the areas that best suit them," Campos says. "Where to go to find the slick pillows and the big cliffs and, as they go, we assist them with our safety crew who are ticketed professionals including an avalanche forecaster and a first aid person... but when it comes down to it, lots of people don't care about all this that we deal with. Lots of them are just paying us to show them our secret spots that we have explored

on Google Earth and the rest is all mumbo jumbo to them."

We re-centre above his off-camber floor, but then Campos shows me the tricky ins and outs, such as the sundial—a feature added in version 4.2—which allows filmers to check the light on a specific line at any time of day. Then he explains his secret formula for finding pillow lines, which includes heavy doses of previous experience and a keen eye for how features stack up in Earth. He's concerned about giving away too much, but even for most pros, Google Earth is merely a recreational pursuit.

But for Campos this shit is all business, as he shows me how he creates virtual tours for his clients with tracks, lines and overflight angles. Then he explains how he has been using Earth on his iPhone for backcountry mobility, leaving a key image onscreen when he exits a coverage area, and how he has harnessed the Motion X GPS app to triangulate exact coordinates of money spots even far from cell range. It's amazing how slick he is with technology that is only five years old, but even in snowboarding, even out in the sticks, technology moves fast.

"Before Google Earth and before snowmobiles, we used to just ski tour up these logging roads that would take us a half hour to snowmobile up now," he says. "It would take us a whole day to get there, and we didn't know where we were going because there was no Google Earth and you're just exploring blindly."

In the end, he laments a bit about the old-school days, calling the new tool cheating. "Once you start using Google Earth it takes the mystery out of the backcountry. And it makes it so any old Joe can see it—not just the truly core that have to work for it."

"But I'm not truly core and I've been getting everywhere with Google Earth," Campos adds. "It's changed my world, and who cares about my business, it's changed my world." ●

