



# Fernie

*Lots of snow and lots of steeps – best with a guide*

## COSTS



## RATINGS

### The slopes

Snow	*****
Extent	***
Expert	*****
Intermediate	**
Beginner	*****
Convenience	*****
Queues	*****
Mountain restaurants	*
<b>The rest</b>	
Scenery	***
Resort charm	**
Off-slope	**

## NEWS

For 2004/05 more glading to thin out the trees will be done in three areas. And better access is planned from Currie Bowl to the fast Great Bear chair, cutting out the need to ski all the way back to the slow Elk chair to change areas. An extra grooming machine may result in more and better grooming. Improvements to make the Day Lodge food area brighter are also promised.

For 2003/04 more snowmaking was installed. Downtown, a Japanese sushi restaurant, Yama Goya, opened.

- + Good snow record, with less chance of rain than at Whistler (and less chance of Arctic temperatures than at resorts up in the Rockies)
- + Great terrain for those who like it steep and deep, with lots for confident intermediates too
- + Snowcat operations nearby
- + Some good on-slope accommodation available, but ...

- Mountain resort is very limited
- Lift system still a weakness, especially for experts
- After a dump it can take time to make the bowls safe
- Little groomed cruising for timid or average intermediates
- Poor trail map and signposts
- No decent mountain restaurants

**Fernie has long had cult status among Alberta and BC skiers for its steep gladed slopes and superb natural snow. In the last six years there has been a lot of investment in the development of the village at the foot of the slopes – though it remains small, without many facilities. Some visitors would rather see more investment in the mountain, to cut down the amount of hiking and traversing to the best steep terrain, and to hasten reopening after a serious snowfall. We see their point, but most reports we get are dominated by excitement at Fernie's combination of snow and terrain – 'just like Jackson Hole' and 'the hiking and traversing isn't that bad; Fernie's not for expert wimps', to quote two reporters. You'll enjoy Fernie most if you are a good skier or rider wanting adventure.**

## THE RESORT

Fernie Alpine Resort is set at the lift base a little way up the mountainside from the flat Elk Valley floor and a couple of miles from the little town of Fernie. It has grown considerably from very little in the past few years, but there's still not much there other than convenient accommodation, a few bars and restaurants and a few small shops. It is quiet at night.

The town of Fernie is named after William Fernie – a prospector who discovered coal here and triggered a boom in the early 1900s. Much of the town was destroyed by fire in 1908 but some downtown stone and brick buildings survived and are still there. It is primarily a town for locals not tourists. There are some lively bars, decent places to eat and good outdoor shops. It is down to earth rather than charming and reporters' reactions to it vary: 'Like staying in an industrial estate,' said one; 'I liked the way it felt like real Canada and enjoyed staying in a town with some history,' said another. All reporters this year stress how they loved the friendliness of the locals.

There are buses between the town and the mountain, which run at half-

hourly intervals at peak times and cost C\$3 one way (you can buy books of tickets for about C\$10 for four).

Outings to Kimberley are possible; a coach does the trip every Thursday – the drive takes about 90 minutes. (there's also a helicopter option).

## THE MOUNTAINS

Fernie's 2,500 acres pack in a lot of variety, from superb green terrain at the bottom to ungroomed chutes (that will be satisfyingly steep to anyone but the extreme specialist) and huge numbers of steep runs in the trees. A lot of the runs have the rare quality of consistently steep pure fall lines.

## THE SLOPES

### **Bowl after bowl**

What you see when you arrive at the lift base is a trio of impressive mogul slopes towering above you. The slow Deer chair approaches the foot of these slopes, but goes no further. You get to them by traversing and hiking from the main Lizard Bowl, on the right, or you can take a high traverse from Currie Bowl, skirting the boundary. Lizard Bowl is a broad snowfield reached by a series of lifts:



↑ There's still not much at Fernie Alpine Resort; this is the new building that sells lift tickets and houses the rental shop

SNOWPIX.COM / CHRIS GILL

### KEY FACTS

<b>Resort</b>	1065m 3,490ft
<b>Slopes</b>	1065-1925m 3,490-6,320ft
<b>Lifts</b>	10
<b>Pistes</b>	2,500 acres
<b>Green</b>	30%
<b>Blue</b>	40%
<b>Black</b>	30%
<b>Snowmaking</b>	125 acres

the slow Elk quad (which reporters continue to complain about stopping frequently, as they do the Deer chair); the fast Great Bear quad; and finally the short Face Lift, a dreadful rope tow. It often doesn't run, because of either too little or too much snow, and when it does is well known for shredding gloves. This is also the main way into Cedar Bowl and to Snake Ridge beyond it. The only lift here is the Haul Back T-bar, which brings you out. You can still traverse into the lower parts of both Lizard and Cedar Bowls when the Face Lift isn't working – or if you just can't deal with it. There is a mini-bowl between them, served by the Boomerang chair.

The Timber Bowl fast quad chair gives access to Siberia Bowl and the lower part of Timber. But for access to the higher slopes and to Currie Bowl you must take the White Pass quad. A long traverse from the top gets you to the steeper slopes on the flanks of Currie (our favourite area), which are otherwise reached by hiking from the main Lizard Bowl. From there you have to go right to the bottom, and it takes quite a while to get back for another go.

There are free tours of the area in groups of different abilities for two hours twice a day, but the hosts can only take you on blue and green runs. For the steeper, deeper stuff you need

to hire a guide or join the Steep and Deep tours. Using these services to get your bearings is a good idea. Going with someone who knows the area makes it hugely more enjoyable. We found both signs and trail map dangerously inadequate – see feature panel later in this chapter.

### TERRAIN-PARKS

#### *Two to choose from*

There's a good half-pipe at the bottom of the mountain, served by the Deer chair, and a terrain-park on the Falling Star trail near the top of the Timber Chair in Siberia Bowl, with berms jumps, rollers, table top, large hip and box and curved rails and boarder-cross features. There are also two kids' rails.

### SNOW RELIABILITY

#### *A key part of the appeal*

Fernie has an excellent snow record – with an average of 350 inches per year, better than practically all of Colorado. But the altitude is modest – rain is not unknown, and in warmer weather the lower slopes can suffer. Snowmaking has increased in recent years, and now covers most of the base area. Reporters found piste maintenance poor in the snow drought season and others said that, while some runs were well groomed after a snowfall, some blue runs were just



## LIFT PASSES

### Fernie

#### Main pass

1 day C\$62  
6 days C\$360

#### Senior citizens

Over 65: 6 days  
C\$282

#### Children

Under 18: 6 days  
C\$250  
Under 13: 6 days  
C\$122  
Under 6: free pass

#### Notes

Prices include taxes.  
Half-day pass  
available from noon.  
Mighty Moose lift  
pass available for  
beginners.

## boarding

*Fernie is a fine place for good boarders (and there are a lot of local experts here). Lots of natural gullies, hits and endless off-piste opportunities – including some adrenalin-pumping tree-runs and knee-deep powder bowls – will keep free-riders of all abilities grinning from ear to ear. And, as one reader commented, 'The only flat sections are at the base and coming out of Falling Star.' The main board shops, Board Stiff and Edge of the World, are in downtown Fernie, the latter with an Internet connection and an indoor skate park to use while your board gets tuned. But beginners and faint-hearted intermediates should stay away.*

never groomed at all. A reader this year found 'a lot less grooming than expected'.

### FOR EXPERTS

#### **Wonderful – deep and steep**

The combination of heavy snowfalls and abundant steep terrain with the shelter of trees makes this a superb mountain for good skiers. There are about a dozen identifiable faces offering genuine black or double-black slopes, each of them with several alternative ways down. Currie and Timber Bowls both have some serious double-diamonds but mainly have single-diamonds. However, as one of our regular reporters says, 'The majority of the single blacks are tough. Some of them are so steep that I can't work out how you could get anything harder without falling off the mountain ... just like Jackson Hole but without the cliffs.' Another reporter this year also likened it to Jackson Hole. Even where the trail map shows trees to be sparse, expect them to be close enough together, and where there aren't any, expect alder bushes unless there's lots of snow. And see our

warning in the feature panel below about the trail map and signposting.

There are backcountry routes you can take with guidance (some include an overnight camp) and snowcat operations in other nearby mountains – see feature panel opposite.

### FOR INTERMEDIATES

#### **Far from ideal**

Although there are intermediate runs both low down and high up, they don't add up to a lot of mileage. Most high runs are not groomed, and one reporter said, 'The blues in all bowls except Timber would be black in most resorts.' Adventurous, strong intermediates willing to give the ungroomed terrain a try will enjoy the area. But if you want miles of groomed cruising, go elsewhere.

### FOR BEGINNERS

#### **Excellent**

There's a good nursery area served by two lifts (a moving carpet and a drag) and the lower mountain served by the Deer and Elk chairs has lots of wide, smooth trails to gain confidence on. But the green runs from the top of the

## THE TRAIL MAP

*We have complained about many trail maps over the years. But we have rarely come across one as useless as Fernie's. Couple that with completely inadequate signposting on the mountain and you get a dangerous combination, especially if you are heading off on a tree run. When we tried to find the long black Diamond Back run from the top of the White Pass quad, we failed and ended up in tight trees on a slope of triple-diamond steepness – scary. Comments from 2004 reporters include: 'you can often find yourself on unexpected terrain, which is fine if you are a competent skier and can handle most things, otherwise it could lead to some unpleasant situations', 'this is an issue the resort needs to address, especially for timid intermediates, who are going to have a hard time there anyway', and 'I don't think the map is that bad unless you are heading along the ridges for the long blacks'. As one past reporter said, 'It's great to go out with someone who knows where they're going' and 'to make the most of the area you've almost got to stop worrying about following what's on the map'.*

*Fine, as long as you know where you are going and how steep the terrain will be. Others would prefer a more helpful map and on-mountain directions.*

## RIDE THE SNOWCATS – HELI-SKIING AT AN AFFORDABLE PRICE

Good skiers who relish off-piste should consider treating themselves to some cat skiing; there are several operations in this area. The best-known is Island Lake Lodge (423 3700), which does three- or four-day all-inclusive packages. The Lodge is a cosy chalet 10km/6 miles from Fernie, amid 7,000 acres of spectacular bowls and ridges. It has 36 beds, and four snowcats to act as lifts. In a day you might do eight powder runs averaging 500m/1,640ft vertical, taking in all kinds of terrain from gentle open slopes to some very Alpine adventures. We've heard they can be booked solid up to three years in advance. You can do single days without accommodation, but only on a standby basis; we managed this once and loved it, but our second attempt failed. A reader tells us that Fernie Wilderness Adventures (423 6704) offers 'an excellent alternative' to Island Lake Lodge. Others have been less convinced. 'It's billed as intermediate level,' said one, 'but it's not – there's a lot of tree skiing, some steep and tight, and we were always skiing in a big crowd.'

mountain are usually just cat-tracks, which nonetheless have tough parts to them, plus more experienced skiers and boarders travelling fast.

### FOR CROSS-COUNTRY

#### **Some possibilities**

There are 14km/9 miles of trails marked out in the forest adjacent to the resort, and the Fernie golf and country club allows enthusiasts on to their white fairways.

### QUEUES

#### **Not usually a problem**

Unless there are weekend crowds from Calgary, or heavy snow keeps part of the mountain closed, queues are rare. The slopes are delightfully quiet too.

### MOUNTAIN RESTAURANTS

#### **What mountain restaurants?**

Bear's Den at the top of the Elk chair is an open-air fast-food kiosk. A

welcome stop for coffee and hot chocolate say some readers, but it's not a mountain restaurant, so it's back to base for lunch – the ancient Day Lodge is grim, busy but cheap and serves good soups and sandwiches to order, and Lizard Creek is good for Sunday brunch ('It's a must,' says a reporter this year). Look at the places recommended in 'Eating out', too.

### SCHOOLS AND GUIDES

#### **Highly praised**

Reporters have praised the Winter Sports school and its small classes. One tried telemarking and described the lessons as 'outstanding' and 'best ever', with only two people in the class. Others loved the beer, snacks and video session that is part of the deal if you book a ski week. A reader this year had snowboard lessons and 'was amazed to be the only student on the first day and that there were three

### SCHOOLS

#### **Fernie**

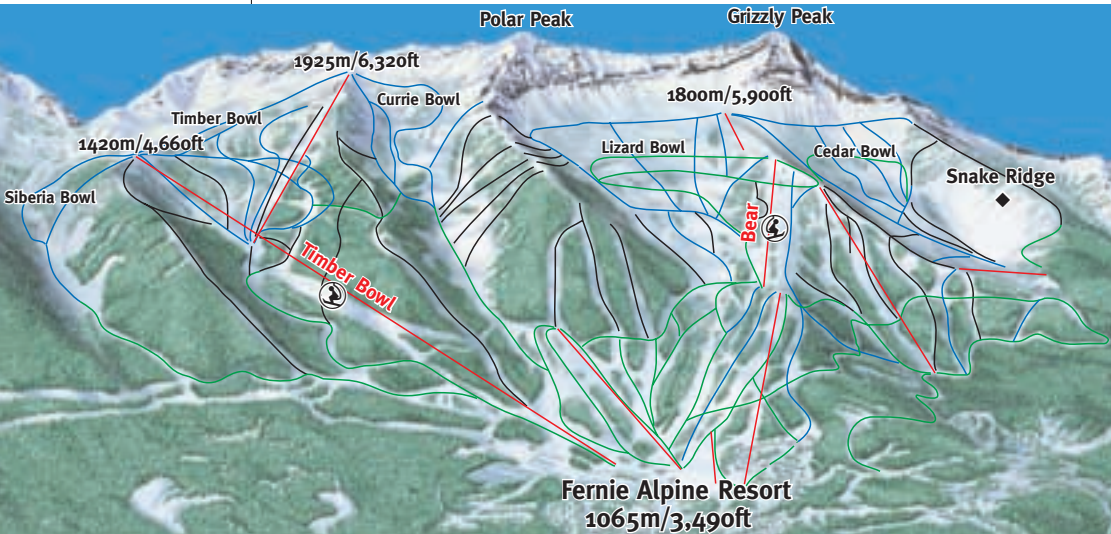
t 423 4655

#### **Classes**

Half day C\$45 (incl. taxes)

#### **Private lessons**

C\$125 (incl. taxes) for 1hr for up to 5 people



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## CHILDREN

### Day care centre

t 423 2430  
Newborn to age 6;  
8.30 to 4.30; ski  
lessons available for  
ages 3 and 4

### Ski school

For ages 5 to 12  
(C\$68, incl. taxes, per  
day)

## GETTING THERE

Air Calgary  
322km/200 miles  
(3½hr).

## ACTIVITIES

**Indoor** Museum,  
galleries, aquatic  
centre, saunas,  
bowling, fitness  
centre, ice skating,  
cinema, curling

**Outdoor** Sleigh rides,  
snowmobiling, dog-  
sledding, snow-shoe  
excursions, ice fishing

### Central reservations phone number

For all resort  
accommodation call  
1 800 258 7669  
(toll-free from within  
Canada).

### Phone numbers

From distant parts of  
Canada, add the  
prefix 1 250.  
From abroad, add the  
prefix +1 250.

## TOURIST OFFICE

t 423 4655  
info@skifernie.com  
www.skifernie.com

of us with two instructors on the second'. We've also had good reports of the Steep and Deep camps and private lessons. 'First Tracks' gets you up the mountain at 7.45am for two hours, but when we tried it the instructor didn't know which lifts were open and there was a lot of wasted time.

## FACILITIES FOR CHILDREN

### Good day care centre

There's a day care centre in the Cornerstone Lodge, which a reporter found 'very well run'. There are also 'Kids' Activity Nights' for children age six to twelve.

## STAYING THERE

### HOW TO GO

#### More packages

Fernie is increasingly easy to find in tour operator brochures. Unless stated, accommodation listed is at the resort.

**Chalets** Some UK tour operators run chalets. Beavertail Lodge ([www.beavertailodge.com](http://www.beavertailodge.com)) is run along chalet lines and received rave reviews from a 2004 reporter: 'The best chalet I have ever stayed in and the food is equal to any Michelin starred restaurant I have ever eaten in'. Canadian Powder Tours has a chalet and includes in the price guiding by locals who know the mountain well. 'Food was excellent. I am a novice off-piste skier but had a brilliant time,' says a reporter this year.

**Hotels and condos** As the resort develops, the choice is widening and shifting upmarket.

④④ **Lizard Creek Lodge** Luxury ski-in, ski-out condo hotel. Spa, outdoor pool and hot-tub. We stayed there and highly recommend it.

③③ **Cornerstone Lodge** Condo hotel in the village core.

③③ **Best Western Fernie Mountain Lodge** Next to golf course near town. Recommended by reporters. Pool, hot-tub, fitness room.

③③ **Griz Inn Sport Hotel** Condo-hotel with good facilities. Pool.

② **Wolf's Den Mountain Lodge** 'Simple but comfortable,' say reporters. Indoor hot-tub, games room and small gym. At base of slope.

② **Timberline Lodges** Very comfortable condos a shuttle-ride from the lifts.

② **Cedar Lodge** Motel on road to town. 'Comfortable and clean, but not

very welcoming,' said reporters.

② **Alpine Lodge** B&B recommended by a reporter, with a Japanese-inspired restaurant.

## EATING OUT

### Not a highlight

At the base, the Lizard Creek Lodge is expensive but serves gourmet food (in small portions). A reporter this year says the food in Beavertail Lodge (which takes outsiders if it's not full) is worth a Michelin star. Kelsey's (part of a chain) is casual and offers Asian dishes as well as standard burgers, steaks and pasta, but we've had very mixed reports on it. The Wood in the Hill opened last season and should be good (it's under the same ownership as Wood in town – see below). Gabriella's does cheap and cheerful Italian, and lots of readers have enjoyed it. The Mean Bean coffee shop in the Cornerstone Lodge has been recommended.

In Fernie, there are quite a few options. A reporter enjoyed the grills and pasta in the Old Elevator, a converted grain store. Jamochas is a coffee house that does meals. Other reader recommendations include the Curry Bowl (various Asian styles), the Royal hotel, Rip'n Richard's Eatery (south-western food and a lively atmosphere). The current favourite is the Wood bistro and tapas bar – 'Good but expensive. You need to book.' The new Japanese restaurant, Yama Goya does 'good sushi' says a reader.

## APRES-SKI

### Have a beer

The Grizzly bar in the Day Lodge is quite lively when the lifts close – with live bands sometimes. During the week, the bars are pretty quiet later on. In town, the bars of the Royal hotel are popular with locals. Other recommendations are the Park Place Lodge Pub, the bar in the Grand Central hotel and the Eldorado Lounge for later on (it's under the Wood). The resort offers barbecue at the Bear's Den two days a week, with a torchlit descent.

## OFF THE SLOPES

### Get out and about

There is a heritage walking tour of historic Fernie and the old railroad station is now the Art Station. You could take in an ice-hockey game. But the main diversion is the great outdoors.