

films in the theatre's maroon velvet seats. Through December 30, catch Foothill's last show of the season, *The Gift of The Maji*.

The contemporary Julie Baker Fine Art gallery, found on Commercial Row, showcases an intriguing mix of media and styles that break the mold of Tahoe's more traditional art scene. The gallery regularly competes on the international level at various art fairs and currently features local talent at its fifth anniversary show, Homegrown. The gallery's front features the unique JBFA Design Store, which offers a mix of gifts and jewelry with a "curated feel," says Baker, who added the store component this past April.

Just up the street, visitors will find exquisite cuisine at the new Sopa Thai restaurant. Finish off the day with some entertaining live theater at Off Broadstreet. This quaint venue on Commercial Street hosts the home-produced musical comedies of owners Jan Kopp and John Driscoll. Dessert, coffee and wine complete the experience, as do red glass candles, a star-studded ceiling and pre-play entertainment from local guitarists. Winter productions include *Home for the Holidays*, showing through December 30, and *Forever Plaid*, showing January 12 through March 3.

The town-wide Victorian Christmas celebration (December 6, 13, 17 and 20) is certainly a highlight of the season, with its living nativity scene, strolling minstrels and hay wagon rides. A key January event is the annual Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival, January 12 through 14. The largest of its kind on the West Coast, and possibly in the nation, the festival showcases over 110 films with approximately 70 filmmakers and activists in attendance. Presented by the South Yuba River Citizens League and Patagonia, the films reflect pressing environmental issues with a focus this year on heroes of the environment. Workshops, wine walks, filmmaker chat sessions and Saturday morning cartoons for kids round out the weekend festival. ■■

For information, contact the Nevada City Chamber of Commerce at 1-800-655-NJOY or [www.nevadacitychamber.com](http://www.nevadacitychamber.com).

Images this page courtesy Selkirk Wilderness Skiing Limited

## Powder All Day, Every Day

**S**itting in a rumbling snowcat in the Canadian Rockies, I found myself knee-to-knee with Andy Sills, one of snowcat skiing's biggest fan. For almost two decades, Sills has spent multiple weeks, and occasionally months every winter pursuing this form of "adventure skiing" (or in his case snowboarding).

"I used to go heli-skiing," he told me, "but one trip I did both heli- and 'cat skiing and the differences were so stark that I'll never heli-ski again."

I was sitting with Sills in a Great Northern snowcat, wearing my hat at the time of writer/photographer for *Skiing* magazine. And in one of the luckiest strokes of that lucky career, I was assigned the snowcat beat, spending a month that winter touring the continent's top snowcat skiing operations.

Heli-skiing is a glamorous, James Bond-like experience, the "bird" soaring over mountain ranges and depositing its fortunate few occupants atop untouched peaks — unless it's snowing with low visibility, in which case you heli-wait at the lodge. Snowcats, on the other hand, run in almost any weather, pounding powder storm to sunny bluebird.

"There's only been a very few days of snowcatting when I didn't have good riding," said Sills of his 350-plus days, "and I still had a good time." Outside the 'cat, the snow was falling at 2 inches

an hour. While all the heli-skiers in the surrounding Selkirk Range were perfecting their backgammon and poker, we stepped out of the warmth into 3 feet of wispy powder and dropped our boards into a speed thrill bounce through 1,200 vertical feet of widely spaced trees.

Sills and the 14 other skiers/riders inside that Great Northern 'cat would teach me another important aspect of this activity: It's a rolling party. The pace at the best snowcat operations is more relaxed, with less hurry up and wait. Unlike a noisy helicopter, conversation is easy in the relatively quiet and warm cab of a snowcat. Uninterrupted, the jokes roll nonstop from dawn to well





past dusk. Another plus of 'catting for less-experienced skiers and riders: The economics of heli-skiing limit groups to one guide while snowcat groups have both a lead and a tail-guide, the latter able to help and coach (although with the extra, super-wide powder skis the 'cat carries, even intermediates can enjoy the deep).

Great Northern is one of the pioneers of the industry. Brent McCorquodale, founder

Great Northern snowcats head straight up a tall mountain flank almost directly above its spartan but comfortable lodge. At the top of the flank is a huge valley with steep to moderate slopes in a variety of sun exposures. At the end of the day, you can ski that huge flank straight down the 3,000-foot vertical to just above the lodge. Altogether, Great Northern has over 30 square miles of ski terrain.

Equally impressive is the ski terrain accessed by another stellar Canadian operation, Selkirk Wilderness Skiing, owned by Allan Drury. Drury is the godfather of North American snowcat skiing, having started Selkirk Wilderness with his wife, Brenda, in 1975. "I taught

in Lake Louise and Aspen," he says. "Snowmass, Colorado was just opening with the use of snowcats, but no one had tried it on a destination basis. I went looking for the best place to do it, and here I am."

Selkirk's spacious lodge is placed halfway up a mountain overlooking a deep valley. The skiing here consists of marvelous, low-angle flanks that are perfect for a warm-up or for lower abilities (Selkirk runs two snowcats). Higher up is the advanced and expert menu: a six-mile-long chain of peaks and ridges, and to either side steep bowls, long chutes and wide forests.

My second run at Selkirk was Oxygen Debt, a 2,000-foot vertical, 40-degree

couloir that was brimming with 2 feet-and-counting of the softly falling powder. I dove into the cushy white and floated toward the small trees at its bottom, carried in the palm of the snow god's hand.

On the 'cat ride back up, I sat next to Debbie, a mother of three whose husband pays for her snowcat skiing while he watches the kids back home (talk about making the rest of us look bad).

"I didn't want to come here the first time," Debbie said. "I didn't know anyone and it seemed like such a guy thing. But it turned out to be great. There's no rush, and everyone's so supportive. It's a shame more women don't try it." In fact, snowcat skiing has gained many women converts over the years. Sills brought his whole family 'cat skiing as his kids were growing up. An added family bonus: A snowcat week is around half the price of a heli-week.

Evenings at the Selkirk Wilderness lodge are an ideal complement to the quality of the day. The operation has a maximum of 24 clients with 12 staff to serve them.

After a large and very delicious dinner, and drinks in the bar with groups of friends who return year after year, I walked outside into a night of a trillion-and-counting stars. The chill of the air, the beauty of the mountain, the utter relaxation of body and soul — that moment was a true peak experience. In more ways than one, snowcatting the Selkirks is an ultimate journey into deep powder skiing. ☐

*Great Northern Snow-Cat Skiing: 16 skiers maximum, average 12,000 to 15,000 vertical feet every day, \$2,235 to \$2,615 Canadian for 3 days, \$4,265 to \$4,970 for 6 days, including lodging and meals; 1-800-889-0765 or [www.greatnorthernsnowcat.com](http://www.greatnorthernsnowcat.com)*

*Selkirk Wilderness Skiing Limited: 24 skiers maximum, average 15,000 vertical feet every day, \$3,660 to \$4,140 Canadian for 5 days, including lodging and meals; 1-800-799-3499 or [www.selkirkwilderness.com](http://www.selkirkwilderness.com)*

*Chaco Mohler is founding editor of TQ. Although a big fan of snowcat skiing, highlights of his journalistic travels include heli-ski and ski-plane drops on five continents.*

## Snowcatting is for skiers whose best powder days are measured in quality and camaraderie rather than vertical feet.

and owner, first fired up his 'cats in 1979. McCorquodale is a typical, strong silent backcountry ski guide, "a man of the '90s," said Sills. "The 1890s."

During the time that I toured the major snowcat resorts, I discovered that, as is the case with their heli-cousins, the best snowcat operations are in the Canadian Rockies, where the mountains go straight up and down and the snow falls deep. The essential mantra that separates the cream of the snowcat resorts from the rest is: The 'Cat Must Always Climb. If a snowcat operation relies on a long entry road to reach the ski terrain, or traverses ridges rather than riding straight up roads that maximize its climbing ability, then the pace or the day can literally slow to a crawl.