



WHEN CANADA FINALLY OPENED ITS GATES

by Megan Michelson | Illustration by Alex Nabaum

They made it to the heli pad. It was March 15, 2020. The world was beginning to react to the onset of the Covid pandemic, and the group of skiers—hailing from Alaska, Tahoe and Salt Lake City—had traveled to the Valkyr Mountains of British Columbia, a subrange of the Selkirks, for a long-planned, seven-night backcountry ski trip into the Hilda Hut, known for its exceptionally deep snowpack and quality ski terrain. Some far-off virus wasn't about to cancel their plans.

Of course, the virus ended up canceling everyone's plans. The group arrived at the heli pad that morning amid news of the outbreak. "There were a lot of human factors at play in our decision-making," my friend Kate tells me. "We knew it was not a good idea to go into a hut with a dozen other people during a health crisis, but because everything was planned and in motion already, it felt hard to walk away."

Ultimately, they bailed, got a hotel room, drank what they could of their booze that night and promptly flew home. That week, the U.S.-Canada border closed to nonessential travel, staying that way for a year and a half while everyone hunkered down, masked up and learned to tolerate a new, virus-laden way of life. During that time, my ski tours mostly consisted of low-angle glades within 20 minutes of my house or towing my kids uphill into the woods.

Finally, in August 2021, the border reopened to vaccinated travelers, ending the longest border restriction in the countries' shared history. People who needed to travel back and forth to Canada for work or family reasons were beyond relieved. But among the giddiest groups of travelers when that border reopened were American skiers.

The group that backed out on the heli pad in 2020 rescheduled its Hilda Hut trip to January 2022, but a few of the original people couldn't make it. After Kate called and asked if I wanted to fill an empty spot, I immediately spat into a test tube and filled out quarantine emergency paperwork so I could cross the border.

That's how I ended up flying into the Hilda Hut for my 40th birthday at the tail end of a yearslong pandemic for the deepest powder day of my life. Early on the first morning at the hut, our guide, Evan Stevens, from Zenith Mountain Guides, gave us a brief weather update over coffee, the sky still dark. "It snowed 60 centimeters," he said nonchalantly. I didn't quite hear him. Sixteen centimeters? I was still foggy with sleep, and my brain wasn't registering the metric system.

It took stepping outside in ski boots after breakfast to realize 2 feet of cold, light, dry, Canadian powder awaited us—and it was still snowing hard. We climbed the hill behind the hut—a short, mellow pitch through old-growth forest. On the skintrack, the fresh snow felt deep, sure, but nothing could prepare us for the first few turns on the descent.

I dropped in up to my waist, snow billowing in sheets around me. In a floating snow globe of my own making, I was moving through a tunnel of fluff, trying to catch my breath between mouthfuls of snow and insuppressible, out-loud squeals of disbelief. It was the deepest, lightest snow I've ever skied.

At the bottom, I watched from the trees as my friends dropped in. One by one, they arrived with snow-splattered faces and gobsmacked expressions. In that moment, the stresses of the pandemic literally shed off our bodies. We were uncontrollably cheering and laughing in the woods, surrounded by friends. Life felt simple and beautiful again, like it used to be.

In our group, we had two emergency room doctors who'd battled Covid from the frontlines. We had business owners who'd struggled through supply-chain delays and employee shortages, and others who'd lost work and loved ones during the pandemic. Nearly everyone, myself included, was a parent of young children, stressed-out guardians of this strange Zoom-schooled generation. For months, anxiety had been ever-present, until, as we were engulfed in 60 centimeters of new snow, the angst was suddenly gone.

Plus, we were in Canada, this untouchable place for Americans for so many months. And we were in a hut in the alpine with no task other than to ski our faces off until dusk, then sweat it out in the sauna. We ate delicious food from Liz, a fairy-like woman who danced around the kitchen and sang like a songbird, then slept until it was time to ski again.

They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, and, in the case of Canada, that is certainly true. Would that trip have been fun if the first group of skiers had made it there in March 2020? Of course. But was it even more appreciated after nearly two years of waiting, wondering and stressing about the world while daydreaming about Canadian powder? You bet your sauna it was.

Megan Michelson is a freelance writer and Backcountry Magazine editor-at-large based in Tahoe City, California. For her 40th birthday, she wanted a powder day and a huge plate of nachos—she got both.