

# TRAVEL

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A guest sets out for a day of cross-country skiing, which, along with snowshoeing and alpine touring, offer a unique wilderness adventure. MARK SISSONS/FOR THE PROVINCE

# Conquering Canada's Matterhorn

**MOUNT ASSINIBOINE:** Grand Old Lady of Rocky Mountain lodges reopens after facelift

MARK SISSONS  
FOR THE PROVINCE

**S**kiing uphill can be fun. All it took for my lift-leaning mind to reach this revolutionary conclusion were a few strenuous days of earning my turns on the pristine and powdery slopes of one of Canada's most photogenic Rocky Mountain Parks. Turns out, I'm far from alone.

Alpine ski touring is rapidly growing in popularity throughout North America.

And there's no more picturesque place to strap on those fat touring skis and skis than Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park, adjacent to

Banff National Park on the B.C.-Alberta border.

Part of our Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks UNESCO World Heritage Site, Assiniboine is a geographically blessed ecosystem of soaring glacier-draped peaks, gentle powder-filled bowls and alpine meadows bordered by larch and pine forests, frozen lakes — and a profound sense of remote wilderness.

Presiding over this classic winter wonderland is the park's 3,618-metre high eponymous peak, nicknamed Canada's Matterhorn for its resemblance to Switzerland's iconic pyramid.

It all adds up to one of the continent's premier backcountry touring and skiing areas. And one of its first.

## Pioneers on skis

In 1928, two European adventurers set off from Banff and into the wild on skis, eventually reaching the foot of Mount Assiniboine, where they established a base of ski-touring operations.

Marquis Nicholas degli Albizzi was a flamboyant Russian-born Italian nobleman who had fought on skis in the Alps with the Italian Alpini brigade during the First World War. He later immigrated to America and found post-armistice employment as winter sports director at Lake Placid, N.Y., before wanderlust led him north. Albizzi's companion, Erling Strom, was a Norwegian ski jumper and one-time Wyoming ranch hand who later found fame as co-leader of

the first ski ascent of Alaska's Mount McKinley in 1932.

Together, Albizzi and Strom made history by convincing the Canadian Pacific Railway to finance the construction of a wilderness lodge near the shore of Lake Magog, beneath Mount Assiniboine. Strom then secured the concession to operate what became Assiniboine Lodge, the first wilderness ski lodge in the Canadian Rockies, which he ran for the next 50 years.

## A rustic gem

"Strom's vision of ski touring was completely foreign to North Americans in the '20s," says Andre Renner, my host for a long weekend of snowy, sweaty outdoor fun.

"Back then, most people thought that anyone who skied was crazy and would die in the woods, mostly from avalanches," he adds.

Renner's parents, Sepp and Barb, managed Assiniboine Lodge for another 30 years after Erling Strom retired. Renner and his sister Sara, who won silver in cross-country skiing at the 2006 Turin Olympics, virtually grew up here.

When the opportunity to take over the family business came along in 2010, Renner partnered with Claude Duchesne, an old family friend and former CMH heli-skiing guide whose wife, Annick, had long cooked for the Renners.

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Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park is a paradise for skiing and snowshoeing.

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# Parks pours \$1.5m into renos

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Then B.C. Parks decided to pour \$1.5 million into extensive renovations of the decaying structure, ferrying in men and materials via heavy-duty helicopter and adding a micro-hydro power system. What hasn't changed, according to Renner and Duchesne, is the classic alpine rustic ambience of Assiniboine Lodge.

I'm welcomed as their first guest of the six-week winter season and settle into the comfortable Swiss-style main log building that sleeps 12 in five cosy second-storey bedrooms. Downstairs, the well-stocked kitchen and spacious dining room are the main hubs of activity. Six additional log cabins can accommodate up to 16 people.

### Spindling isolation

No roads reach Assiniboine Lodge, which is located about 45 kilometres southwest of Canmore. In winter, you can either ski in 28 kilometres over several mountain passes or hop a chopper from Canmore. Opting to conserve precious energy, I take the 20-minute thrill ride over massive, jagged granite peaks to the lodge — and the beginning of a beautiful friendship with alpine ski touring.

Out here, the snowpack can reach three metres and the mercury regularly drops well below zero.

A wilderness skier can switchback up and cruise down untracked mountainsides and gladed slopes within shouting distance of avalanche chutes and cliffs. Or glide across alpine meadows blanketed in bottomless powder — its fluffy dry consistency more Colombian cocaine than sparkling champagne.

### Earning my turns

Despite this serene setting, alpine touring is definitely not for the faint of heart — or thigh. Skiing with

## If you go

Full-service Assiniboine Lodge welcomes winter guests from mid-February until the end of March. Its summer season runs from the end of June until mid-October. Reservations are mandatory.

### Getting there

Situated at an elevation of 2,180 metres in B.C.'s Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park, the lodge is accessible only by helicopter, skiing or hiking. Only wilderness experienced, well-equipped skiers should attempt the nearly 30-kilometre ski-in route.

### Staying

Assiniboine Lodge has space for up to 30 guests in five lodge rooms and seven private cabins.

Winter 2013 lodge room rates are \$230 per person per night and private cabins are \$290 per person per night, based on double occupancy. All meals and guiding services are included.

### To book

The Assiniboine Lodge reservation office is open Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. — 2:30 p.m. Mountain standard time. Phone (403) 678 2883 Fax (403) 678-4877 info@assiniboinelodge.com

### More info

Mount Assiniboine Provincial Park (env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/mt\_assiniboine/) Assiniboine Lodge (assiniboinelodge.com)

skins uphill for long periods, I can feel my quads labouring to provide enough power during my first day-long excursion with Duchesne. We mostly ascend steep slopes and descend gladed gullies in areas with names like the Niblet, Cutley Meadows and O'Brien Leap.

By the time we break for lunch, deep in a wooded ravine and surrounded by soaring, snow-caked pines that resemble giant ice-cream cones, I've learned to pace myself and conserve energy.

"In heli-skiing, people always want you to provide more; more runs, more steep and deep, more everything. Out here, we don't have to provide more. This is it," says Duchesne, as we munch on sandwiches and sip tea amid the frosty forest's tranquilizing silence.

### A powerful payoff

That evening, after a well-earned meal of butternut-squash soup, wild salmon, beets and broccoli, orzo pasta and dark chocolate cake, my fellow skiers and I linger around the lodge dining table beneath a photo of the mountain

master himself, the late Erling Strom.

"How can you not love winter when you're in a setting like this?" muses Darcie Tomyn, a 49-year-old engineer from Calgary.

"Assiniboine is the birthplace of wilderness skiing in Canada"

"It's such a special place, with this wonderful combination of isolation and accessibility," adds Laurie Strapp, a 54-year-old lawyer.

She has returned with her husband, Graham, for their third winter tour of plenty.

"The guides here take you to incredible places you would otherwise never find," she adds.

Incredible places like the Nublet, a powder-caked platform Renner leads us out to scale the next morning through woods lovely, dark and deep.

Reaching its summit after switchbacking our way up (and up) rewards us with lofty views of Mount Assiniboine and the Lake Magog basin — not to mention the opportunity to carve graceful S-turns down pillows of fresh untracked snow.



Assiniboine Lodge guests can either ski 28 kilometres to the lodge or hop a helicopter for a 20-minute ride from Canmore. PHOTOS: MARK Sissons/FOR THE PROVINCE