

# Going over the precipice cliff

Okanagan's Silver Star resort has fall lines guaranteed to give skiers a rush

By Mark Sissons

**G**OWABUNGA! With a rebel yell, the Lemmings point their fat skiis downhill and plunge one by one like their namesake suicidal rodents, over the edge and into the void.

A vertiginous playground of super-steep fall lines, monster moguls, abrupt troughs and high-high, untracked pillowy white stuff, Gowabunga is Silver Star Mountain Resort's most infamous double black ski run. Along with other serious steepies like Headwall, Gong Show, Three Wise Men, Chute 5 and the ominously named Free Fall, it comprises the legendary "Dark Side" of this otherwise harmless B.C. hill.

"This is belt-skating for the price of a lift ticket," says Shane Gorrill, a paper-mill construction contractor from Chemainus, B.C., and charter member of this pack of middle-aged powder hounds who've been skiing some of Western Canada's gnarliest bumps together for nearly 30 winters.

Fellow Lemming Mike Sullivan, a dentist from Manitoba who counts Silver Star's wild backside among his favourite alpine vertical challenges, eagerly agrees: "It's so amazing and

soft, with consistently great fall lines and easy accessibility to double black diamond runs that are just the right length. In a word, amazing."

Located in the heart of the Okanagan Valley just a 20-minute drive from Vernon and protected by the Coast Mountains, Silver Star is famous for its champagne powder and varied terrain, which attracts every level of skier and boarder. A quaint and cosy car-free village, designed to resemble a turn-of-the-20th-century mining town, a relaxed family-friendly focus and world-class Nordic trails only add to its wintry wonderland charm.

But it's the "Dark Side" of Silver Star — the extensive backside Putnam Creek area — that draws more advanced skiers and boarders looking for serious downhill thrills. They come to carve fresh first tracks on wide-open yet challenging groomed black runs with names like Holy Snakes and Bon Diablo. Some escalate the adventure by daring to die headfirst into adrenalin-junkie-thrill rides like Gowabunga.

"People don't think of Silver Star in the same ranks as hills like Lake Louise, Ferris and Red Mountain," says resort services manager Robin Baycroft of fresh European-style pastries and Dutch hot chocolate at



Bugaboo Café. "The fact that we've long been seen as a family-friendly mountain overshadows our tremendous terrain," he says.

The resort has 1,240 hectares of skiable terrain, with 115 ski and snowboard trails, including 13 double black diamond runs — all blanketed by more than 700 centimetres annually of one of the finest champagne powder. Comfortable daytime temperatures average -5 C., cold enough to keep the snow light and fluffy, yet perfect for skiing.

A longtime Silver Star resident, Baycroft points to the combination of



The Silver Star Mountain Resort, a quaint and cosy car-free skiing village, is located in the heart of the Okanagan Valley

cross-country ski area. A favourite of Canadian Olympic champions Chandra Crawford and Becky Scott, this world-class Nordic nirvana regularly hosts national team athletes from around the world as they train and prepare for international competition.

"We're the largest groomed trail system in Western Canada and second-largest in the country," explains Nordic manager Guy Paulsen as we set out to ski Bridal Path, a 4.5-kilometre cross-country circuit. It's one of several loops easily accessible from Silver Star's ski-in, ski-out chalets and hotels.

Weaving through the 16 kilometres of snowshoe trails that run deep into the snow-clad forests of Silver Star's lower cross-country network is another tranquil alternative to hitting the slopes.

"People who've been coming here for years for downhill skiing will finally try a snowshoe tour and tell me they never dream this is what the forest looks like on the inside," says guide and resident naturalist Roseanne Van Ee as she leads me on my first-ever snowshoe safari.

community spirit and the uncrowded atmosphere here as another major draw.

"Silver Star has a nice village feel to it. And because there's so much open space on the mountain, there's never really a sense of animosity on the runs that you get at bigger, more crowded resorts. You're never cut off by a snowboarder," he says.

There's definitely little risk of running into an errant snowboarder on the more than 100 kilometres of meticulously groomed classic and skated trails that make up the recently combined Silver Star-Sovereign Lake