

Kimberley, B.C.

A local's hill at heart, this below-the-radar resort prepares to go big league.

by Christopher Solomon



Tyler Ricketts could ski anywhere. In fact, he has. As a former member of British Columbia's freestyle team, 29-year-old Ricketts has traveled all over, and even lived for a piece in Whistler, that freeskiing epicenter. So why has this accomplished skier settled at decidedly lower-wattage Kimberley Alpine Resort in southeast B.C.? "This is home," says the Kimberley native, who has a three-day beard and a pair of twin-tips that are very, very hard to keep pace with. "I love it here. I've got a great little quiet ski hill."

That's an understatement. Riding the chairlift, I look down to where the busiest run on the whole mountain - the Main - unspools below. Though it's 9:30 in the morning, the trail is so deserted I half-expect a tumbleweed to blow across. Ripe morning sunlight falls across pristine corduroy. Across the Columbia-Kootenay Valley, the Rockies seem to float on a mattress of low clouds. All in all, it's not a bad place to call home - or to have to yourself.

But it won't be this quiet for long. Six lodging projects, ranging from a condo-hotel to cottages, have either been completed in the last year or are under way, finally assembling the critical mass for a base village. Another major change 20 minutes down the road may have an even bigger impact: The airport in Cranbrook has finished an expansion that tripled the terminal's size and expanded its runway to accommodate larger planes. Efforts have now turned to attracting more frequent air service.

Taken together, these developments suggest Kimberley may be ready to rise. After all, the biggest reason for the resort's anonymity is simply that it's been tougher to reach than other big resorts - Banff, Lake Louise, Fernie - from Calgary, the nearest major airport.

At first blush Kimberley doesn't look like much. It isn't chock-full of high-speed lifts, or many lifts at all. (There are five.) But then, once the holidays are over, there are no people to fill the seats, Ricketts explains as we tour the mountain one late January day. We start on the frontside, striped with broad boulevards like Main and Buckhorn, aggressively groomed and well-suited for beginners.

The mountain's operators have recently added a twist to the frontside, though. Years of fire suppression left the mountain covered in what loggers call "doghair lodgepole" - trees so thick they resemble a hound's fur - that grow too close together to ski through. To keep both fire and a rabid pine beetle population at bay, crews thinned much of that doghair. The remaining trees, spaced about 25 feet apart, are primo terrain for novice treeskiers. Ricketts and I blast through these glades alongside runs like Dreadnaught and Boundary.

Later that day we make our way over to Kimberley's backside. "The front is more of the family side," Ricketts explains. The backside, by contrast, uses most of the black ink on the trail map. Skiing it well requires a little local knowledge.



Not the easiest B.C. resort to reach, Kimberley enjoys minimal crowds and liftlines. The new expansion at Cranbrook airport could put an end to that.



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E-MAIL



PRINT

The groomers don't often make it back to these narrower, steeper runs, which means plenty of nice, tight bumps on trails like Comet (a locals' favorite). But the tree-thinner's saws have shown up, opening more treed terrain in Midget Glades, where intermediates earn their chops. The resort has also loosed brushing crews in the forests to tame the alder shrubs, which can grow three feet a year. The upshot: Skiers don't have to wait until seven feet of snow falls in the lodgepole before they can treeski.

That's a good thing considering that Kimberley isn't known for the kind of legendary snowpack that other nearby resorts enjoy, though it does get consistent, smaller hits of snow, and, on a powder morning, friends shout the same question to each other in the liftline: "Which way you going, short or long?"

Everybody has a strategy, Ricketts explains. Some spin short laps in the soft bumps below the Easter triple chair. Others "go long," dropping some 2,000 feet down the unbroken fall lines of runs like Dorval, another of Ricketts's favorites.

First we go short, dropping into the woods off Easter. Instead of bashing alder, we find ourselves ripping through steep, tight trees beside Easter Face.

Next, we go long, skiing the ridge and dropping into Vortex, a natural halfpipe plunging through the woods. Every run is ski-onto-the-chair empty, and I can't help but wonder what this place would be like with some semblance of a crowd. Oh well. More for us to enjoy until the skiing masses figure this place out.

SIGNPOST: Kimberley

1,800 skiable acres; 2,465 vertical feet; base elevation 4,035 feet; summit elevation 6,500 feet; 183 inches annual snowfall; 80 trails; five lifts, including a high-speed quad. Lift tickets: adults \$56, seniors \$45, kids 13-17 \$40, kids 6-12 \$18.

Lodging: Trickle Creek Residence Inn by Marriott is the only full-service hotel. Suites with gas fireplaces and kitchens start at \$112; 877-282-1200.

Dining: The Old Bauernhaus Restaurant is housed in a 350-year-old Bavarian chalet that was shipped here and reassembled by its former German owner; 250-427-5133. Also try the Village Bistro, in downtown Kimberley; 250-427-2830.

Après-ski: The Stemwinder Bar & Grill is the spot to knock back a Kokanee beer, made in nearby Creston; 250-427-4881.

Getting There: Calgary Int'l Airport is a four-hour drive. Delta and Northwest fly to Kalispell, Mont., a two-plus-hour drive to the southeast. The airport in Cranbrook is 20 minutes away, and has service from Vancouver and Calgary.

Info: 877-754-5462, [skikimberley.com](http://www.skikimberley.com)



The missing piece of the puzzle at Kimberley, a base village, is finally in sight, with half a dozen new lodging projects either just completed or in the works.

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