

GIMME SHELTER

In Europe, the ski-hut system is a century-old tradition. But in the North American landscape, the idea is viewed as an ultra-progressive backcountry model. Will the Spearhead hut system keep climbing to reality or descend into irrelevance without local ski-resort support?

By Brigitte Mah

IT'S A COLD DAY IN MARCH when Jayson Faulkner hears the words that could potentially launch a skiing turf war and threaten his dream of building an Haute Route in western British Columbia. Across the table from him sit senior managers from Whistler Heli-Skiing and their parent company, Whistler Blackcomb. Minutes before, they'd advised him his proposed backcountry hut location on Mount Pattison, in the Spearhead Range, should be relocated because it will create conflict with their heliskiing operation. Faulkner, a long-time Whistler resident in his fifties and chair of the Spearhead Huts Committee, can hardly believe what he has heard. "I was very surprised," says Faulkner, "since we don't have any other options for Pattison's location."

The proposed Mount Pattison hut is part of a world-class three-hut system on the table for BC Parks' approval in early 2013. It has been Faulkner's dream for over a decade to bring a hut system to the West Coast that is reminiscent of Europe's famous and original Haute Route, a ski and hiking traverse that spans from the

Chamonix Valley in France to Zermatt, Switzerland. The world-famous backcountry ski tour winds through iconic ski resorts, like Verbier and Saas Fee, along its 180-kilometre route. "It will be unlike anything else in North America," says Faulkner. "The Spearhead connects the two mountains [Blackcomb and Whistler], which make up the best ski resort in North America, so you have all the amenities next to this stunning terrain."

Currently, hikers and skiers who lust after stunning alpine views and glacial crossings on a multi-day traverse with the comfort of a hut's shelter have to head to the Rockies to do the Wapta Icefields Traverse. But the huts can be crowded, because with Rockies peaks come Rockies avalanche conditions, and the window to ski the traverse safely—from February to April—is limited. The Spearhead Range lies in the heart of the Coast Mountains, renowned for its deep, stable snowpack. Skiers can crank through the 35-kilometre traverse anywhere between December and June. If built, it will radically change the landscape of backcountry skiing, not only in British Columbia, but across the entire industry. That is, if it's built.

SEEKING BEAUTY

Not only will the Spearhead hut system usher in a new age of North American backcountry travel, but if the designers have their way, it will be done in style. Illustration: Chad Manley/Aa-studio.ca

“WHEN YOU HAVE thousands of people heading into the [Spearhead] Range in a year, pooping and peeing everywhere, that is a few thousand pounds and kilos of poop being spread all over the Range,” says Faulkner. “It’s not a pretty sight.” In 2009, he combined forces with the presidents of the Whistler and Vancouver Alpine Club of Canada sections, the Kees and Claire Memorial Hut Society, the Brett Carlson Memorial Foundation, and the British Columbia Mountaineering Club to form the Spearhead Huts Committee. Building the huts will not only put the Spearhead Traverse on an international map and bring \$1.2 million per year

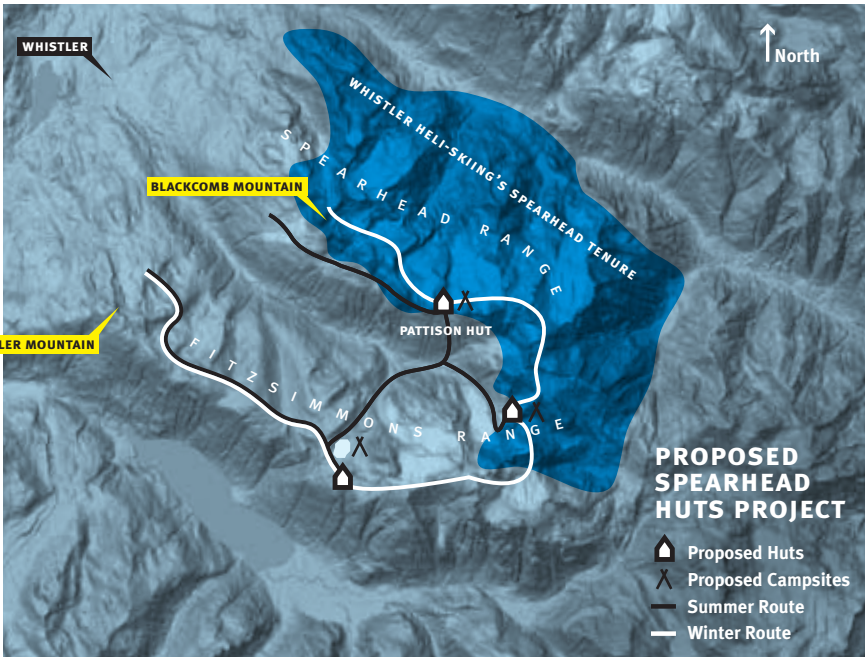
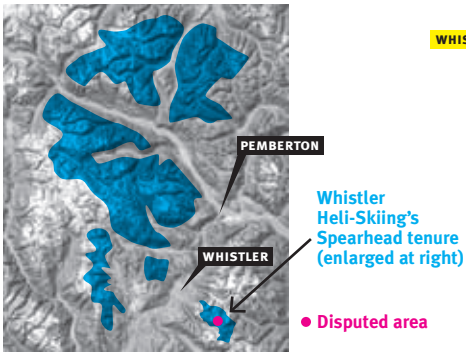
into the pristine wilderness. “What people don’t realize is that there already are hundreds of people going back there,” Faulkner says. “I’ve been on the Spearhead and seen up to 60 people just in the Pattison Tremor area, and ten camping sites.” And if battling the naysayers isn’t enough, the committee needs to come up with some hefty cash for the huts. The cost for all three is \$1.64 million dollars, \$580,000 of which is donated materials and volunteer labour. “We’re going to be doing a lot of fundraising,” says Faulkner. “A lot.” Despite the rumours the million-dollar price tag means the huts will have swanky flush toilets and a sauna, Faulkner says the

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NOT IN MY TENURE

Whistler Heli-Skiing’s tenure amounts to almost 494,000 acres and is largest in the world. The proposed Spearhead Huts Project affects a tiny fraction of this tenure, albeit the closest, easiest-to-reach territory.

WHISTLER HELI-SKIING TENURE



to Whistler, but it will also reduce the environmental and ecological impact of the area. “If the huts aren’t built, then impacts to the area will increase,” says Faulkner. “Without proper management of the traffic going in there, in 10 or 15 years, BC Parks will not be able to appropriately deal with management in the area.” It has taken three years of reconnaissance missions, environmental and ecological assessments, and archaeological studies, but the location of the huts has finally been chosen: high on the south ridge of Mount Pattison, halfway up the southwest ridge of Mount Macbeth, and in the sparse south-facing meadows near Russet Lake. “The whole premise of the hut system is that it works on a year-round system,” says Faulkner. “Changing the Pattison hut location will potentially compromise the whole system.” Relocating the Mount Pattison hut is just one of many potential monkey wrenches in the Spearhead Committee’s plan. Conservationists believe the Spearhead should be left hut-free, claiming the huts will draw a stampede of inexperienced visitors

huts will be relatively modest. “They aren’t going to be as deluxe as some other backcountry huts, with catering, but they will be comfortable.” Think a hybrid of Elfin Lakes Shelter, the 33-bed hut in Garibaldi Provincial Park, and Fairy Meadows, the 20-bed hut in the Selkirks. And because the committee is planning for future growth, the huts will sleep 35 to 40 and will cost roughly \$20 to \$30 a night. No other hut system in Canada caters to that capacity. As Faulkner listens to Whistler Blackcomb and Whistler Heli-Skiing management tell him he needs to find another location for the Mount Pattison hut, the uphill battle ahead of him is clear. Last year, the 30-year tenure for Whistler Heli-Skiing that allowed them to run tours in the Spearhead was up for renewal. The Spearhead Committee voiced concern to the government about having helicopters flying above ski tourers, so the tenure was renewed until 2016, one year before the hut system will be completed. “It was expected that [Whistler Heli-Skiing] would bow out gracefully,” says Faulkner. “But now that doesn’t seem to be what they want to do.”

HIGH ARCHITECTURE

The lead designer of the Spearhead Huts Project, Chad Manley, explores alpine architecture of the past, present and future. Through his studies and his travels he has witnessed the diverse world of alpine architecture. Here are the standouts.

1. TAKTSANG PALPHUG MONASTERY
Bhutan, 1692
Architect: Tibetan monks
Daring architecture has nothing to do with being modern. Just ask the Bhutanese monks whose ancestors built Taktsang Palphug in 1692, clinging their beautiful but uncanny monastery to a series of vertical granite cliffs 300 metres above the valley floor.

2. AIGUILLE DU MIDI
Chamonix, France, 1955
Architect: Unknown
A sublime and alchemical union between human-kind and alpine nature, this 1950s *téléphérique* lifts adventurers and alpinists up the steel and rock spire of the Aiguille du Midi. Mythological architecture + 3,842 metres + hubris = radical.

3. PORTALEGE
Architect: Mike Graham
The portaledge isn’t a typical building but a very narrow temporary home, one that serves to protect and give foundation to the precarious and skyward-bound body of the climber. The portaledge is alpine architecture at its most simple.

4. SAINT BENEDICT CHAPEL
Sumvitg, Switzerland, Date Unknown
Architect: Peter Zumthor
In 1984, the Saint Benedict Chapel was wiped out by an avalanche. In 1988, the chapel was rebuilt in the same path of the avalanche. Stupid? Maybe not if you design the building as one big avalanche deflector. Welcome to God’s alpine sanctuary.

5. MONTE ROSA HUT
Zermatt, Switzerland, 2009
Architect: Bearth & Deplazes w/ ETH Zurich
The Monte Rosa brings form and function together, autonomously serving the waste and energy needs of its inhabitants. With all the pleasures of domestic life, it is a rare, crystalline island of hyper-modernity emerging within the rugged and ancient landscape of alpine hut architecture.

6. SKI DUBAI
Dubai City, United Arab Emirates, 2005
Architect: F+A Architects
Ski Dubai is both a dream and a nightmare. Inside its air-conditioned ice walls, skiers experience an endless winter. Outside, the sad reality of our oil addiction is clear through the rising desert heat. Is this our radical alpine future?

Chad Manley is a North Vancouver-raised graduate of the UBC School of Architecture, and lead designer of the three proposed Spearhead huts in Garibaldi Provincial Park. Alongside his brother, photographer Jordan Manley, he produces the ski-exploration film series, *A Skier’s Journey*.



A few weeks after Faulkner’s meeting with Whistler Heli-Skiing, the Spearhead Committee was informed the heliskiing operation is seeking another 10-year renewal.

And then there are the trails. Like the Haute Route, the huts will be open year-round, allowing hikers to enjoy the alpine splendour. “It is breathtaking out there in the summer,” says Faulkner. Without trails, the huts can’t be reached in the summer. But at an extra cost of roughly half a million dollars, the trails are too expensive for the committee to build.

ARTHUR DEJONG IS almost giddy as he flips through the summer alpine trails report he made for Whistler Blackcomb and BC Parks earlier in the year. A tall, broad man in his fifties with a quiet voice, DeJong taps on a glossy photo of a hiker looking out at Overlord Glacier and says it is his favourite. He edges his chair closer and turns to a picture of Mount Trolley. His voice becomes wistful. “It’s surreal out there,” he says. “People don’t understand until they visit these places.”

There is little doubt DeJong, the mountain planning and environmental resource manager for Whistler Blackcomb, is passion-

fact is,” DeJong says, “Whistler is a resort and it relies on tourism.” With visitors paying roughly \$1,000 a day to heliski, it’s easy to see how the dollars add up. Although Whistler Heli-Skiing won’t release numbers on how many guests they fly into the Spearhead Range each year, one can guess by their reaction to the proposed hut system that the number is significant to their business.

Here is where the Spearhead Huts Committee struggles. The Spearhead Range is a small portion of Whistler Heli-Skiing’s 494,000-acre tenure. Flying into the Spearhead Range is a choice, not a necessity. There are 15 other zones within the tenure, all with varying terrain for skiers to get their stoke on, and vast areas of their tenure are rarely heliskied.

DeJong stresses compromise is the key to negotiating these potentially unruly waters. He acknowledges the current proposed location for the Pattison hut is one that creates conflict with Whistler Heli-Skiing. Right now, the proposed location is very close to a primary drop-off point, leaving the two groups battling for fresh lines. Mike Sadan, Whistler Heli-skiing’s general manager, assures that currently his guides try to avoid skiing near or immediately adjacent to any ski-touring groups, although he admits it is not always possible



AIR OF OPPOSITION The Spearhead Range mountains have been used by both heliskiing outfits and backcountry skiers for decades, but the issue of huts has pitted them against each other. Photo: Eric Berger

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ate about the environment and the mountains. He has worked for Whistler Blackcomb for over 30 years and is known for rising early and powering through a hike up one of the mountains before the rest of us have heard our morning alarms. He sees the Spearhead huts project as a tremendous benefit to the area. “I want it to happen,” he says. “I do.”

Rumours have swirled that Whistler Blackcomb has strongly suggested the Spearhead Huts Committee should support the renewal of Whistler Heli-Skiing’s tenure, and that if their tenure is turned down, Whistler Blackcomb will not build the hiking trail system. DeJong heaves a sigh when asked about the rumours. He pauses for a moment before answering. “Our goal is to have an average 90-day access to the trails,” he says in reference to the trail around Pattison Hut, which remains snow-covered long into the hiking season. “We will not build trails where we can’t have a guaranteed summer operating window.”

For Whistler Blackcomb, the choice is one of business. “The

because of weather conditions. If any backcountry skiers are spotted, pilots will try to maintain a buffer distance of 500 metres to minimize noise disturbance. “We want to compromise. We are reaching out. We want to find a way. We very much do,” says DeJong.

With the proposals of the hut system, the heliskiing tenure, and the hiking trails submitted to BC Parks in 2012, the groups can only wait until early 2013 to learn about their futures. “The worst-case scenario is that BC Parks becomes paralyzed and nothing gets done,” says DeJong. One thing is for certain: if the huts don’t make it past the drawing board, Whistler will miss out on an opportunity to prove North American ski resorts can encompass more than the packaged experience, a radical idea that’s been at the core of Europe’s ski scene since 1911.

Brigitte Mah is a Brackendale, BC-based writer. She sits on the board of the Alpine Club of Canada and teaches high school, where she sets bad examples by skipping class to play outside.



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