

TOUCHSCREEN TRAVELS

In this issue Touchscreen Travels catches up with Christian Williams, author of the smartphone app Banff and Canadian Rockies, for some ski destination tips.

If you know anything at all about the Canadian Rockies you'll probably have heard of the town and national park of Banff. It's the tourist hub for this part of the world and, in skiing terms, a springboard to three superb resorts: Mount Norquay, Sunshine Village and Lake Louise. With majestic mountain views, crisp air and reliable feather-light powder all around it's easy to see why these are the most popular winter resorts in the Canadian Rockies. But what many don't realise is that the rest of the mountain range is studded with other ski resorts which are at least as good. Here's a summary of all the region's resorts so you don't miss the one that's right for you.



Photo: Mike McPhee

Mount Norquay


Mount Norquay lies just beyond the outskirts of Banff, and has some of the first slopes in the region to be criss-crossed by ski tracks. Experts started carving its steep eastern face twenty years before its first lift was installed in 1948. The ski area has kept its reputation as an advanced mountain ever since, despite the addition of lots of groomed intermediate cruising terrain and marketing as "Banff's family mountain". Challenging moguls and off-icy conditions are much more the order of the day, but at least Norquay's many trees help break up the kind of harsh winds that close lifts elsewhere. There's also night skiing and snow tubing, while Banff is a great spot for dining and has a respectable après scene.

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Sunshine Village

Sunshine Village is a bit of a misnomer: it's really a rag-tag collection of basic resort buildings on a mountain pass where poor weather regularly reigns supreme. But the skiing's awesome. Acres of wide-open bowls; pockets of thrilling trees; some extreme inbounds backcountry-style terrain and abundance of light snow make the resort one of the region's best places to ski or ride no matter what your ability. There's one slope-side hotel and shuttle buses link it to the town of Banff; but even so the resort is pretty cut off with little going on once the lifts close.


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Lake Louise

If you've seen shots of skiing and snowboarding in the Canadian Rockies that feature incredible scenery, then the chances are they were taken at Lake Louise. The backdrop for over two decades of World Cup skiing, the resort encompasses forty square kilometres of varied terrain. This includes everything from tricky mogul fields, challenging chutes and vast open bowls to abundant gentle beginner runs and pleasant intermediate cruisers. But for many, the resort's best assets are its tiny lift lines and the stunning high-alpine scenery. The only real drawback can be extremely low January and February temperatures: the average lies at -7°C , but with wind -70°C at the summit is not unheard of. The nearest settlement, also called Lake Louise, is pretty thin as a base: the dining scene is limited and there are only a handful of bars. Banff lies 45mins away by car.

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Marmot Basin

Marmot Basin is one of the more modest and basic Canadian Rockies resorts, but also the only ski area in the scenically superb Jasper National Park. The snow's usually excellent, but terrain's pretty mellow, and the difficulty of almost all expert runs exaggerated. But if that doesn't sound like it's a problem, and you're looking to combine the trip with other winter activities, like snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, you'll find no better destination. Plus, if you can afford it, there's also spectacular heliskiing in the region, such as with Robson Helimagic (robsonhelimagic.com). The town of Jasper – connected by shuttle bus to the resort – is fairly rugged and far less happening than Banff but still has a reasonable range of restaurants and bars.

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Kicking Horse

From the top of the Golden Eagle Gondola – the main lift at Kicking Horse – it’s hard not to stop and gape at the remarkable pristine slopes and lofty wonderland of clouds and peaks that stretch out in all directions. But then point your skis or board downhill and you’ll find something as equally seductive since the ski area encompasses a huge amount of lightly used backcountry-style terrain: open bowls, steep chutes, glades and gullies galore. But even beginners will find their scenic 10km cruise from summit-to-base worth the price of entry. The snow may not be as abundant as elsewhere in the Rockies, but Kicking Horse’s northeastern aspect helps preserve its quality, and the relatively warmer temperatures here tend to make skiing more pleasant. The resort village is a fairly bland condo-collection, but there’s a more attractive and lively scene in the likeable town of Golden a 25 min drive away.

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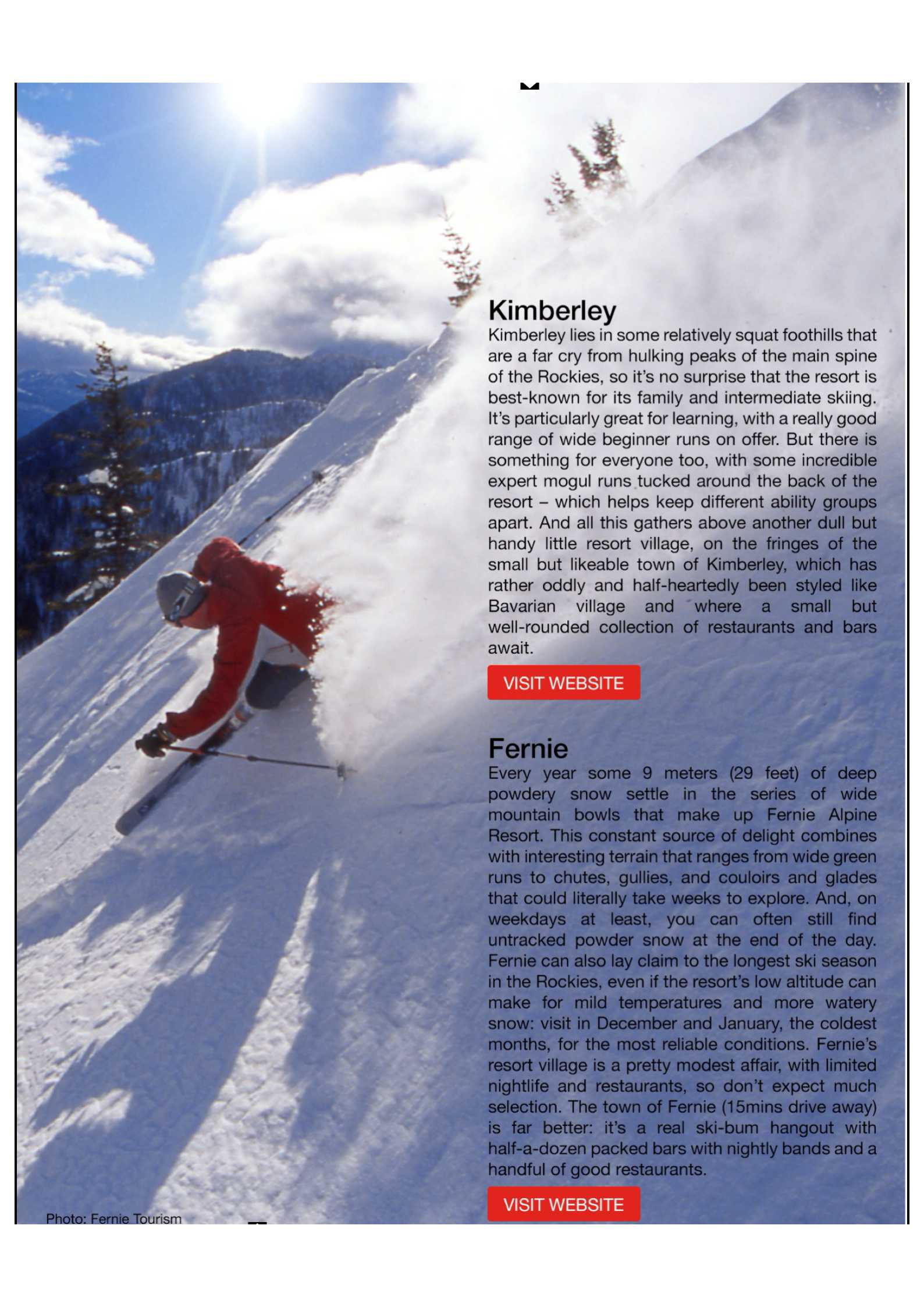
Photo: Mike McPhee



Panorama

Cradled in a deep mountain valley, the lifts of the Panorama ski resort climb some 4000ft to magnificent views of the main spine of the Rockies – hence the resort’s name. But it’s certainly not all about gazing into the distance here, as below its windswept summit lies a real paradise for cruisers and carvers, with some of the region’s best-maintained runs. There’s also a wealth of underrated and underused expert terrain in lightly wooded bowls and even the chance to go heliskiing with the resort-based RK Heliskiing (rkheliskiing.com), if your pockets are deep enough. Panorama’s resort village, on the other hand, is pretty deadly boring though not without a selection of restaurants and bars. A better bet is the town of Invermere, a half-hour drive away – shuttle buses are available.

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Kimberley

Kimberley lies in some relatively squat foothills that are a far cry from hulking peaks of the main spine of the Rockies, so it's no surprise that the resort is best-known for its family and intermediate skiing. It's particularly great for learning, with a really good range of wide beginner runs on offer. But there is something for everyone too, with some incredible expert mogul runs tucked around the back of the resort – which helps keep different ability groups apart. And all this gathers above another dull but handy little resort village, on the fringes of the small but likeable town of Kimberley, which has rather oddly and half-heartedly been styled like Bavarian village and where a small but well-rounded collection of restaurants and bars await.

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Fernie

Every year some 9 meters (29 feet) of deep powdery snow settle in the series of wide mountain bowls that make up Fernie Alpine Resort. This constant source of delight combines with interesting terrain that ranges from wide green runs to chutes, gullies, and couloirs and glades that could literally take weeks to explore. And, on weekdays at least, you can often still find untracked powder snow at the end of the day. Fernie can also lay claim to the longest ski season in the Rockies, even if the resort's low altitude can make for mild temperatures and more watery snow: visit in December and January, the coldest months, for the most reliable conditions. Fernie's resort village is a pretty modest affair, with limited nightlife and restaurants, so don't expect much selection. The town of Fernie (15mins drive away) is far better: it's a real ski-bum hangout with half-a-dozen packed bars with nightly bands and a handful of good restaurants.

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Castle Mountain

Without question the real dark horse in the region, Castle Mountain is easily the most low-key Rockies resort but still has enough great terrain and snow to compete with some of the big names, particularly as relatively few people head here. The only real snags are its remoteness and its oft-fierce winds which can make life pretty unpleasant and sometimes even shut lifts down. Pick a good day though, and it's skiing paradise. And there's the chance to go catskiing too, for a relatively inexpensive \$300/day. Resort facilities are bare-bones, the nearest happening place is Fernie a two-hour drive away.

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Passes and Practicalities

Each resort offers pass and accommodation packages via their websites, which means you only need to organise transport to the resort. UK-based readers should look at ski holiday packages with companies such as Ski Independence (ski-independence.co.uk) and Crystal Ski (crystalski.co.uk). If you like to explore several different resorts, it's worth knowing that Norquay, Sunshine and Lake Louise do a combined ski pass as do Kicking Horse, Fernie and Kimberly. All the resorts but Marmot are also so neatly spaced around the region that its easy to drive from one to the next after a day's skiing in a highly recommended 7-14 day loop. UK-based skiers who don't fancy organising this themselves can get Ski Safari (skisafari.com) to help.

App download

For more detailed information on all the above resorts, download the Banff and the Canadian Rockies app published by Touchscreen Travels (touchscreentravels.com) in association with Sutro Media (sutromedia.com). It is available for the iPhone, iPad.

