

SUCCESSION

TAKING OVER THE FAMILY TRADE AT B.C. BACKCOUNTRY LODGES LACKS THE DYSFUNCTION OF TV BUT IS NO LESS DRAMATIC. WHEN THE BUSINESS IS ALSO HOME, PASSING ON THE PASSION GETS MORE COMPLICATED.

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Any time on snow with dad Ruedi is a chance to improve her own guiding skills, so Florina Beglinger takes good notes.



Florina drops into a run called Snow Maiden, her favorite in the Selkirk Mountain Experience (SME) tenure, a distinction that holds a bit of weight.

TOP CENTRALE PEAK, FLORINA BEGLINGER CAN SEE ALMOST HER ENTIRE BACKYARD: BROKEN GLACIERS, SPRAWLING ICEFIELDS, SNOWY SUMMITS, PRECARIOUS COULOIRS, STEEP, TREED VALLEYS AND SO MANY AMAZING RUNS. IT'S A SKI TOURING PARADISE THAT MIGHT ONE DAY ALL BELONG TO HER.

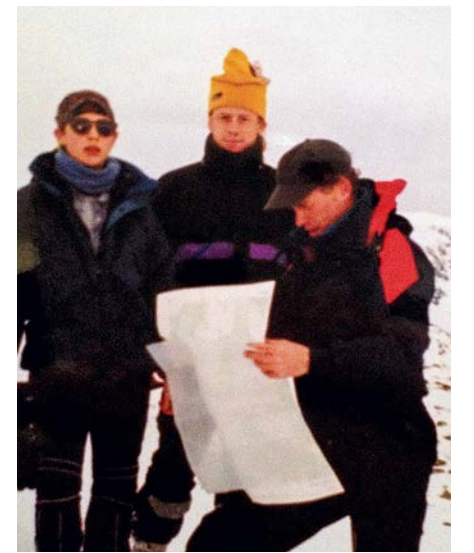
Right now, she's too cold to admire her kingdom. The calendar says April, but the north wind whipping across the Selkirk Mountains north of Revelstoke feels like winter. Following Florina's lead, our small group quickly transitions to ski. She heads onto a run called Snow Maiden, plunging down the 40-degree slope, fresh flakes blowing over her shoulders. I follow, arcing a hard carve to force snow into my face and then embracing the blind freefall before emerging and repeating.

We follow Florina like ducklings: into a bowl, around a corner, through a natural halfpipe, over lips and rolls, down a ramp, along a shoulder and, as the powder turns to snot, onto a perch overhanging a deep valley. It's one of the most fun, varied backcountry runs I've ever enjoyed. Florina says it's one of her favorites, which means something.

Her parents built Selkirk Mountain Experience (SME) from raw land into a thriving commercial backcountry skiing operation. They raised Florina and her sister, Charlotte, in the middle of it, at Durrand Glacier Chalet. Now Florina is training to become a fully certified mountain guide, like her dad, hoping to take over the family business. Most days, that goal is fraught with emotion, expectation, obligation and pride.

"It's definitely overwhelming," Florina says. "But I love this place so much. It's my home. I can't really imagine being anywhere else."

She shares the dream of taking over from her parents with several other second-generation, British Columbia lodge kids. Most of the parents



[Clockwise from top left] Ruedi, Charlotte, Florina and Nicoline Beglinger; Marty Schaffer, of Blanket Glacier Chalet, holds a picture of his parents, Marion and Al; Kate and Grania Devine, of Selkirk Lodge; Megan, Lars and Ron Andrews, of Whitecap Alpine; Jasmin, Lynda and Dale Caton, of Valhalla Mountain Touring. [] Courtesy Florina Beglinger; Bruno Long; Kip Wiley Courtesy Kate Devine; Courtesy Lars Andrews; Courtesy Jasmin Caton

got into the business in the early 1990s. Now, well into retirement age, they're watching their offspring, in their 30s and 40s, take over. Five years ago, Al and Marion Schaffer handed Blanket Glacier Chalet, also near Revelstoke, to their son, Marty. Dale Caton did the same with his daughter, Jasmin, at Valhalla Mountain Touring (VMT) north of Nelson. She's raising her own kids with the twinkling idea they might one day continue the succession. Lars Andrews at Whitecap Alpine, north of Whistler, and Kate Devine at Selkirk Lodge, east of Revelstoke, are part of the same generation of new owners. In the Monashees east of Kelowna, Aaron and Sabine Cooperman may be 15 years from retiring from Sol Mountain Lodge, which they started in the early 2000s, but already their kids, Josee, 20, and Seth, 18, are considering picking up the baton.

"It makes me happy to see these businesses carry on a family tradition," Al Schaffer says. "These kids have all grown up at these incredible places watching their parents build these businesses. They bring a different atmosphere, a different attitude than when they are sold to someone outside the family."

But as the HBO show *Succession* has taught us, passing on a family business can be precarious. That's especially true when it is also the family home. The lodge kids must respect what the parents built while making it their own. The parents must let go of their other "child" while offering the support their kids will inevitably need. Each family must break their

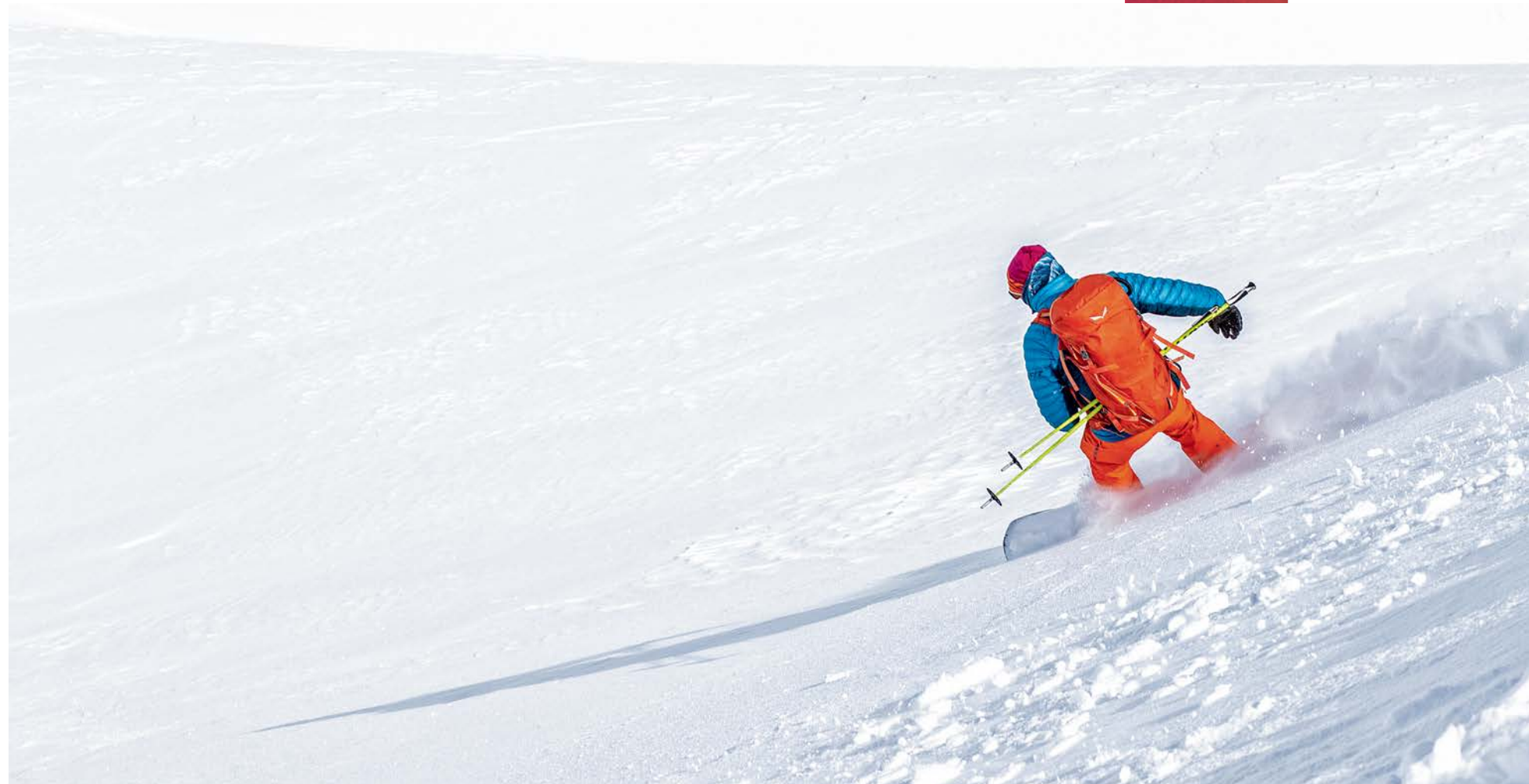
own trail to navigate the emotional transition. For the Beglingers, whether a life's work and thousands of miles in the skintrack has prepared them for the hardest run yet remains to be seen.

SME WAS BORN IN A LIBRARY. Young ski guide Ruedi Beglinger spent weeks going cross-eyed studying aerial photos and topo maps, hunting the rugged peaks and valleys of the northern Selkirks for the perfect alpine playground.

It was the early 1980s. A few years earlier, Ruedi had left his home in the Swiss Alps to heli-ski guide in British Columbia. Living in Revelstoke, he realized he never wanted to leave. On days off, he holed up in that library, searching for the perfect tenure. He found it 30 miles north of Revelstoke near the Durrand Glacier. In 1985 he built Durrand Glacier Chalet, making it one of only a handful of commercial lodges in B.C. and the only one modeled after European lodges with guiding and gourmet food.

The original chalet was a single-story building with two communal sleeping bunks in the loft, wood heat and oil lamps. Never one to sit still, Ruedi steadily added comforts and conveniences. A second story. Semi-private rooms. Another addition. Private rooms. Power from microhydro. His own cabin. Separate staff accommodations. Outlier huts. A new sauna. Running water. Hot water. Internet. And, most recently, interior showers and flush toilets.

THERE'S A METHOD TO THE RULES, RUEDI TELLS ME. CONTROLLING MINOR VARIABLES MAKES IT EASIER TO FOCUS ON MANAGING THE LIFE-THREATENING ONES.



[Left] To mitigate risk, Ruedi runs a tight ship, with exacting standards for everything, including the optimal angle of a skintrack. [Middle] A rare sight, Nicoline standing still. Don't be fooled, as the glue that holds the operation together, she's still working, checking in with guests to make sure everyone grabbed a lunch. [Right] Listen up, class. Florina starts off a week at SME with "avalanche school," a lesson Ryan Stuart says she has down to a smooth, informative process.

The first couple of years Ruedi did everything: cook, shovel snow, clean rooms and guide. In 1988, a farm girl from the Vancouver area named Nicoline came up on a telemark course. She helped Ruedi shovel snow for hours. Whether Ruedi saw love or a hardworking woman remains a family joke. Regardless, Nicoline never really left. In 1990, the couple married. Nicoline managed the lodge, Ruedi guided the guests.

In the mid-1990s the couple had two kids, Charlotte and, two years later, Florina. The chalet became their home during the winter and summer. Nannies kept the girls busy, and Nicoline ran gym class: an hourlong ski tour to a nearby knoll.

"I got a Smartie every time I stepped on mom's ski tail," Florina remembers, laughing. "It meant I was keeping up. I hated it most of the time."

Nicoline saw value in the unique upbringing.

"It was the greatest place to raise kids," she says.

Neither girl indicated they wanted to take on the chalet. Charlotte made it clear from a young age it wasn't for her. Florina liked climbing and skiing but never expressed any interest. Still like most parent/owners of a family business, Ruedi and Nicoline held out hope.

"When you have a business that is your passion and you have kids, it creates the dream that one day they will take over for you," Ruedi says. "You can't anchor yourself on it but be optimistic and build the business up with it in mind. I think that's what we did."

"WHEN IT'S SLIPPERY LIKE THIS, really stomp your skis into the snow," Florina calls over her shoulder, her blond ponytail bobbing in the wind.

Day three of my trip in Beglinger Land, and we're on our way to the Empire Lake Chalet, one of two outlier huts. The cozy, little box far beyond the toe of the Forbidden Glacier beckons. First we must climb the steep ridge to Forbidden Peak. Fresh snow atop a firm crust makes the skintrack crumbly and unstable. Skiers are slipping. Splitboarders are sliding off the track. Only Florina looks like she belongs here. Yet she makes us all feel like champs.

"Nice work!" she says, flashing her big, white grin as I tag the summit. When everyone arrives, she showers more positive reinforcement. "You guys are doing great."

Skiing with Ruedi is different. I followed him on the first afternoon up to Moon Hill, a small summit near the main lodge. When another guide's uptrack wanders from rail-grade consistent, Ruedi cuts his own, even if just for 20 feet. There's no cheer-leading or encouragement. He doesn't talk much. When he does, it comes off as gruff. On our descent, one of the kitchen staff struggles in the wind-affected snow. Ruedi offers unsolicited advice in front of the whole group. It's obvious he means well, but her cheeks burn.

Life at the chalet feels similar. Everything is regimented. The daily schedule runs like a Swiss train station, and Ruedi likes everything just so. When we leave one of the outlier huts, Florina

worries she might have left a chair out of place. There's a method to the rules, Ruedi tells me. Controlling minor variables makes it easier to focus on managing the life-threatening ones.

Despite his rough exterior, Ruedi's charisma contrasts Florina's feel-good energy. His charm is knowledge and skill. Along with the hope of improving through osmosis, if you ask the right questions, wisdom pours forth. Plus, he knows the snow and terrain better than anyone. You know good things will happen when you're with him.

Given all that, I imagine him being a tough dad. With Ruedi away guiding so much, Florina was closer to her mom, she tells me. But he was a loving, supportive father, and they shared many fun climbing and skiing adventures. Yet, a deep scar kept her from following him into guiding at first.

On January 20, 2003, when Florina was eight, a group Ruedi was leading kicked off an avalanche onto another SME group. Seven people died, including Florina and Charlotte's nanny.

"The avalanche scared the shit out of the girls," Nicoline says. "It had a huge impact on their lives. After that, Florina always made a point of saying goodbye to Ruedi before he left for the day."

Ruedi thinks everything that came after the accident traumatized Florina more than the avalanche itself. He received a lot of criticism about the incident, and the memory of those who died haunts him every day.



[Above] Guide, skier, lodge builder ... splitboarder? Ruedi dabbles in all roles at SME. [Left] Sven, a duck tolling retriever, spends most of his days lounging around the lodge and making sure everyone gets back safely.



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Florina liked university but never felt like she fit in. Friends struggled to relate to a childhood that included regular helicopter flights, chef-made meals and grizzly bear neighbors. Plus, she increasingly felt conflicted. She missed Durrand and wanted to give guiding a try, but the trauma of the avalanche lingered. She knew if she didn't step up, one day they would lose Durrand and SME. Yet, she didn't want to do it for the wrong reasons.

"I'm a people pleaser," she says. "I worried I was thinking about taking over because I thought it was what everyone else wanted me to do."

The inner turmoil tomahawked during her final year at university. Upset and uncertain, she called the lodge to talk to her mom.

Ruedi answered. "I didn't want to talk to him, but he was great," she says. He told her she could do a gentle apprenticeship and tail guide for as long as she needed to. She could just give it a try.

And that's what she did. She tail guided for Ruedi and other lead guides at SME for a lot longer than most would. She worked stints heli-skiing for the same operation Ruedi did when he first came to Canada. She built skills on personal trips and guiding courses. Competence, and Ruedi's mentorship, created the confidence to lead groups on her own. Still the impacts of the avalanche from her childhood remain. She radios Ruedi almost every day to check in on run and terrain choices.

For Florina, leaving home helped her realize that it was exactly where she needed to be, and that's a reality all the lodge kids share. The Schaffers' succession plan didn't include Marty until he was well into his guiding career. And Dale Caton never expected his kids to take on his dream. One became a nurse, and Jasmin was more interested in school than the mountains. She never thought about a career in guiding and definitely not running the family business. That changed after she took an operations-level avalanche course. An instructor planted the guiding seed. While she earned a masters in geohydrology, she became a

full guide and worked around the world before returning to VMT.

"If I hadn't had those experiences, I wouldn't know how good I have it," Jasmin says. "I did enough things to know the life and lifestyle of running this business is pretty awesome."

ON OUR SECOND TO LAST DAY AT SME, we're skiing back to the main lodge down the Durrand Glacier. Clouds are dropping, depth perception is disappearing, and snow quality is somewhere between schmoo and breakable crust. Luckily, Florina is leading the way. In the ping-pong ball visibility, she finds the right traverse line to keep us sliding across the flats and then weaves the only route through icefalls and crevasses, all while laying perfectly symmetrical turns. She makes it look easy, effortless. Sure, it's her backyard, but I'm still impressed.

At 28 years old, Florina has earned her ski guide certification through the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides and is working on the ice and rock portions of her full guide accreditation. The vertical world scares her, but she knows that as a certified mountain



[Above] As a group leaves SME in the morning, they hope the name of the peak behind them, Tumbledown Mountain, isn't inspiration for any of their descents that day.

[Far left] Ruedi, pictured with his daughters atop a peak in the SME tenure, says a parent can only dream of their kids taking over the family business one day. Whether that idea comes to fruition depends solely on the kids. [C] Courtesy Florina Beglinger

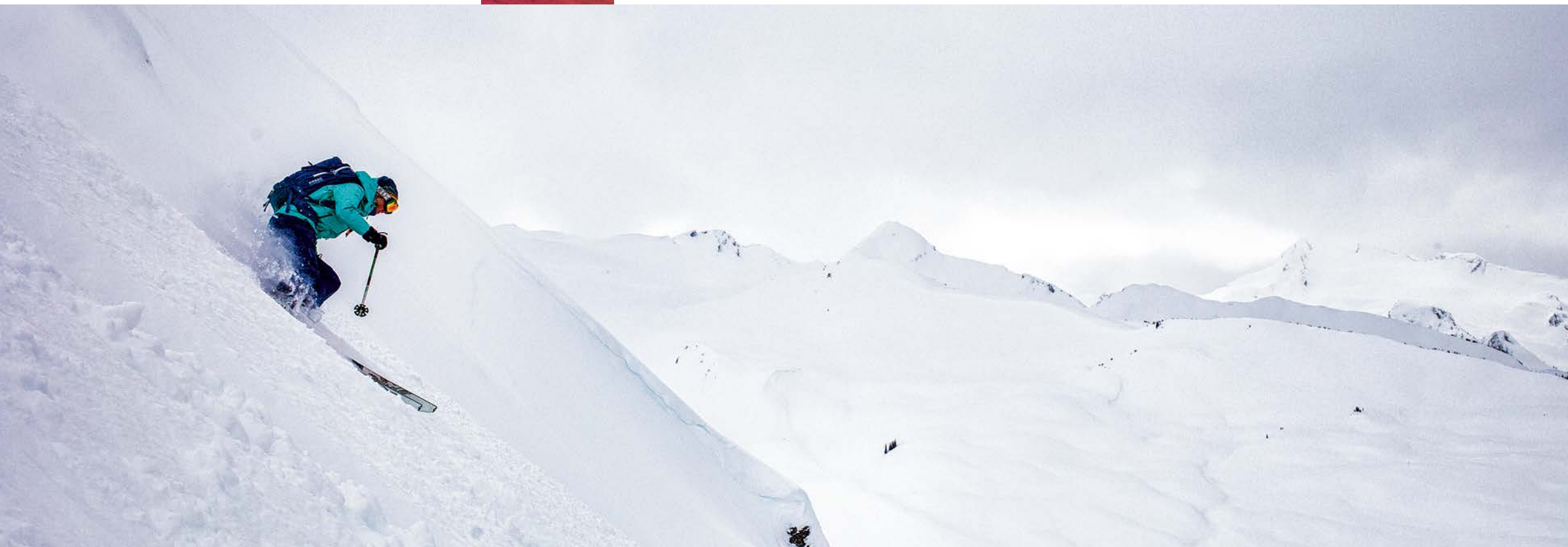
[Left] Durrand Glacier Lodge, like many of Canada's family-run chalets, started as a bare-bones structure, but Ruedi has spent the past four decades adding to it bit by bit.

"I think it was the people that kept pushing the negative narrative that really affected her," he says. "Florina saw how much it bothered Nicoline and myself. She saw a strong negative side to the job."

Florina says they're both right.

"I never wanted that stress and pressure," she says. "I resisted becoming a guide because I wasn't confident I could handle the responsibility. Going out there every day knowing there was a chance people could die, it was too much."

After high school, Florina followed Charlotte to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver—Charlotte became a professional opera singer—and studied film and creative writing.



guide she can work internationally and lead the kind of extreme skiing lines that excite her. Plus, there's an element of making her dad proud. "He really values the guiding culture," she says.

But, "I'm not even close to ready for them to retire," Florina insists.

Watching her parents work, her intimidation is understandable. Her mom never stops moving, cleaning, organizing, planning. "I'm still learning about some of the things she does," Florina says. And it doesn't stop when the guests go home. In the offseason Nicoline picks enough blackberries to make the jam to feed guests all winter. That's a lot of berries.

At 68, Ruedi breaks at least 5,000 vertical feet of trail every day he works, which is most of the winter and spring. He self-publishes guidebooks, is building a house in Revelstoke and runs the guiding program at SME. Then there's the whole infrastructure aspect of the operation. Every convenience adds comfort but also complexity, and it's all in Ruedi's head.

"It was small when we started," Nicoline says. "It has evolved into this big thing. It would be hard to step in and take over."

That shouldn't be a reason to hesitate, Marty Schaffer says. The infrastructure piece was never his interest at Blanket. By gradually taking over from his parents, it didn't have to be a problem. His dad continued to help for several years, giving him time to build a maintenance team.

What should give her pause is the weight of responsibility. Jasmin and Marty bought out their parents gradually, which was the only way that they could afford the increasingly valuable businesses. That meant they were responsible for their parents' retirement, along with their legacy. That's a heavy weight, Jasmin says: "I didn't want to let my dad

down. I didn't want to be the one who lost everything he built."

As it is, her dad couldn't be prouder. "She's done a stellar job with the business and taken it to another dimension," Dale Caton says. "I wouldn't put one nail in anything different."

Al is similarly impressed with the changes Marty brought to Blanket. "The long glacier tours that telemark skiers loved are nice to look at but not what the young people want to ski these days," he says.

Marty recognized that shift and adapted the Blanket Glacier business model to shorter stays, longer days and more couloirs, steeps and pillow lines.

"Our parents did it one way, but the industry changes," Marty says. "We have to find our own style. It's how the next generation will find success and passion for the business."

"PEOPLE ASK ME WHAT I'LL CHANGE," Florina tells me as we skin up the final slope to the Durrand Chalet on my last day. Tomorrow I'll fly down to the valley and real life. For now, my mind focuses on the present—a shower, flush toilets, après snacks.

"When I first came back," she continues, "I thought I'd change a bunch of things. But the more I work up here, the more I realize we have all these policies and rules for a reason. If we want to ski extreme stuff, it has to be this way."

It's easy to tease SME's clockwork timing and strict organization, but as I reflect on the week of skiing between crevasses and down steep faces, it's part of what made it feel comfortable and safe. And I think continuity will make it easier for Ruedi and Nicoline to let go when the time is right.

After talking with the Beglingers, it's obvious the transition plan exists in concept, not detail. Ruedi is 68. He takes more time off from the lodge than he used to, but he wants to work full time for another two years, making it a round 50 years of guiding, and then part time until he's 90. And, if anything, Florina's return has reinvigorated Nicoline. After the girls went to university, she started to feel like a cleaning lady. "I wasn't sure I wanted to keep doing it," she says. "When Florina came back it gave me so much more energy to keep going. I'm committed to helping Florina for as long as she needs me."

None of the Beglingers know how long that will be or how the transition will unfold. In that sense they're a lot like the Roy family of HBO's *Succession*. But that's where the similarities end. The Roys squabble, manipulate and deceive. Florina is pleasantly surprised how well the three Beglingers work together. When it comes to power and prestige, a backcountry lodge is obviously a different beast than the Roys' multibillion-dollar Waystar RoyCo, but Florina is still happy to let her dad remain the face of the operation for as long as he wants. And Ruedi and Nicoline just want what's best for their kids.

No one knows how that will settle out over the coming years. That uncertainty could easily be a source of stress, but the Beglingers seem to be tackling it the same way they approach every challenge and variable at SME: one step at a time.

"If it doesn't work out for Florina to take over, that's okay," Nicoline says. "At least we know we tried." ❄️



[Left] When you've grown up at a backcountry lodge like Florina has, skiing is like walking and powder skiing is as easy as dancing to your favorite song.

[Right] At the Moloch Hut, an outlying chalet at SME, guides like Florina play every role, from cleaner to cook to maintenance technician. Still, she sneaks in a few moments of rest when she can.