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LAIRD HAMILTON BY SPENCER MURPHY

WHISTLER HIDDEN RIDERS

PRO RIDE SNOWBOARD CAMP REVEALS ANOTHER WHISTLER.

"It's every snowboarder's rite of passage to hike for their powder." Dylan's proverb hits a collective nerve, and we propel our flailing asses up a gear. Further ahead, his day-glo pants bounce off the snow in neon streams – a holy beacon promising virgin lines in exchange for shattered legs and breathless lungs. Anthony hits the peak and claims the honour of first glance over the crest. Screw it. I dig in my toes, take an icy breath and jog the final stretch – calf-burn and all.

Whistler, BC, is in its element. Blackcomb, the radical twin of this mountainous pair, lies freshly blanketed before us. This isn't my first time. Steadfast conditions, endless terrain and a burning urge to flick city life the finger had pulled me here once before. Yet, standing on this pillowed apex it suddenly hits me: I have never actually been here before.

The crew brims with anticipation – three girls, six guys, all eager to claim their line. The early morning rise and knee-high trudge are about to pay off, big time. Yet for two of the pack, the buzz is different. Dylan and Anthony know this spot well. They've eased over its crest, savoured its untracked belly and whispered of its secrets to a privileged few.

Pro Ride snowboard camp is Anthony's baby. With a troop of professional snowboarders like Crispin Lipscomb as guides, it attracts an international crowd of riders trapped by the intermediate plateau. Some stay for a week, others for the season. All come to progress their park and mountain skills, often notching up another instructor level along the way. I, for one, never fancied myself as much of a camper. But, with a long string of superficial one-week stands behind me, I was now open to anything.

Yes, I'd fallen in love with countless mountains before. But my holiday romances left me unsatisfied. Bound by the trail map, I'd sample their wares but never consummate the match. Tracked out, crowded in – I craved the locals' ride. Sometimes, when the urge got too much, the stalker in me would take hold and I'd fall natives chasing territories untouched.

Finally, here I stood: at the pinnacle of untouched. One by one my crew of campers drop in and away. Anthony leads, Dylan tailgates and I relish every second of my maiden line. With this backstage pass, Whistler's epic season was ours for the taking.

That week we ride the sacred lines locals whisper of, but visitors never find. I return to the city heartbroken yet satisfied. I'd seen the light and converted to the church of the hidden ride. Secret stashes and pristine lines one very happy camper doth make. **Andrea Kurland**

www.pro-ride.com