

They came from all over to ski with us, Steamboat Powder Cats Jupiter and Barbara Jones

By: Michelle Ohrling



For those of us who love the sport of skiing, powder is a purified form of ecstasy! Where else can one's dream of champagne powder come true but at Steamboat Springs? All types of people come from all over the world to Steamboat Springs just to ski in our champagne powder. When you ski in powder here, it's like floating through the air; it's definitely a natural high. Steamboat Powder Cats is a powder skiing service owned and operated by Jupiter and Barbara Jones. It allows you to go and ski untracked powder all day, as Jupiter and Barbara Jones explains.

"This is the beginning of our fourth year. The year we started was the year it snowed straight for 40 days. It was a good year to start a

business. We got the idea of starting this business from Ron Dahlquist, a **Powder Magazine** photographer. He took a bunch of pictures, came back, showed us the pictures, and we knew the terrain was up there. We flew over it in an airplane, looked at it, talked to the U.S. Forest Service, talked to the bank, and then decided we'd buy a snowcat. Having skied up in Canada, we decided we could do a better job than they do. Our snow is just as good. We had the deepest snow in the state last year on Buffalo Pass. Steamboat was going to bring the skiers here anyway, so all we had to do was offer a way to get to all the untracked snow. We had problems getting started that year because it snowed a lot and the snow was real deep, so we

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learned a lot. We learned where to put roads, where not to put roads. It was hard to get the permit to do it. You can't go without a permit, you know, to use Forest Service land for something that is exceptional, not the average ordinary use of land. Especially if you're going to do something commercial, a permit is required. The Forest Service permit is not easy to get, so we worked for months on that.

"The only permit or license we had to have was the one that we needed to ski the land. We have to have liability insurance in case someone is injured. We've never had any accidents, though. We also enforce safety precautions. We're very safety-oriented; we have a safety meeting daily in the morning at breakfast. When we are skiing we all wear our avalanche beepers; it's just a little transmitting device.

"We teach people how to use these devices, and we bury one in the snow so that they can find it. It sends off a signal; it sends that signal all day long, while you are skiing, and if you should get buried or caught, everybody else turns theirs in. Instead of sending signals, we plug it in and make it receive. Then we receive the signal. You wear it around your neck. If you're trying to find somebody, you put the earplug in your ear, listen to them, and the closer you get the louder it gets. You know right when you're standing on top of them. We avoid the avalanche area because we realize that, ironically, the avalanche experts are the ones who get killed. We don't want to put anyone at risk.

"We have certain areas that we ski in. There are twelve different areas on Buffalo Pass that we ski. We have names for all of our slopes. The reason we have to name all of the slopes is so we



Jupiter enjoying his day on our interview with him.



This is the Powder Cat that Jupiter uses on a daily basis.

can talk to the driver, so he will know where we're going and what we're doing. We don't cut any trees, we just ski around them. It's not tracked up, and there are no moguls.

"Last year our skiing season went from December eighth to April sixteenth. Some weeks we are only up there four to five days a week. They call it Buffalo Pass because it was the original pass to Steamboat that the Indians used. When the Indians would go over into Walden and hunt buffalo, they would come back dragging the buffalo on travois. I think it was quarters of buffalo, because they would stop at the Crawford's cabin and give them buffalo meat when they came through.

"On an average, we take about twelve people in one cat; sometimes we run both cats. We try not to run both cats, though. An average day is twelve skiers, a guide and the driver. If there's a ski club on a holiday, we may use two cats.

"We tell people they should be at least athletic intermediates. It takes somebody who is able to fall down a few times and get back up to learn how to ski powder. After you've fallen a few times, with the proper instructions, you figure out what is going on; it's easy to learn. We don't really take a lot of children up with us. Sometimes we get a parent who wants to bring a twelve-year-old, and as long as they don't hold up the group that's great. We always tell the children ahead of time, that if they're having a hard time, to ride the cat. Usually they learn faster than their parents.

"We also have a lot of people ski regularly with us. We have some season pass holders, people who buy a season pass. We have groups from Denver and Colorado Springs who come back all



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the time, whole groups of twelve people and locals. There are some local restaurant workers who book the whole cat for the group, and it’s like a party. On the way back up they’re partying, on the way down they’re hooting and hollering. We’ve had a group from Illinois that has come back every year; these are people on their fourth season. There is a group from Canada every year. We feel like we must be doing something right. We’re getting repeat business from these people; it is really nice. Our price is really low for back country skiing. We try real hard to keep it low and still have a real quality trip. Our rate is \$110, and helicopter skiing would be \$250-\$300. Helicopter skiing is different from powder cat skiing because Powder Cats can go every day. With helicopter skiing, if it is snowing hard, they can’t go.

“We also get people from all over the world to come and ski with us. In fact, I just talked to someone from Australia today; they’re bringing four people for a week. We’ve had a lot of Canadians, which kind of surprises me, with the exchange rate being so bad. We also get Europeans. Barbara writes a column for *Skier Magazine* in Great Britain, and we have met some really nice people from all over. In fact, we met a fellow with a boat in Florida and arranged to sail his boat home from the Bahamas for him last summer. We are going to do it again next summer! And there is a pilot in Hawaii who



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wants us to come out to see him. So we’ve met some wonderful people. We expect to take 1,000 skiers this year.

“Governor Lamm and his wife Dottie, Phil and Steve Mahre, Billy Kidd, Kent Myers, Pete Wither and Charlie Mayfield are some of our celebrities. We took the United States Ski Jumping Team up on Howelsen Hill in November. They were jumping, and they couldn’t run the Palma lift at Howelsen because it hadn’t been certified by the state yet. It is fun to be able to do stuff like that.

“We’re trying to introduce ourselves to celebrities. You can imagine if Robert Redford were to go skiing, everybody would bug him in the lift lines, asking for autographs and stuff. We could take him up in the snowcat, he and his buddies, and show him a perfect day where nobody would bug him, no lift lines. So if you see any celebrities, let them know.

“I think every good skier that comes to Steamboat is hoping to find powder because they have heard so much about champagne powder.

We get a lot of kids with snowboards too, because they don't let them snowboard on the mountain. We can show them untracked snow all day long.

"We have had a lot of memorable trips, but one that really stands out is, once there was one guy who told us he was a good skier, but he was just a beginner. He really just wanted to watch his daughter ski. He was up there with her, and we were teaching her to ski powder. He went down, and we taught him how to kick turn and got him down, and he rode in the cat the rest of the way. He paid his money, and he had fun.

"I think the special families stand out, like the Mahre brothers. It's so fun to see those guys ski. They jump everything that there is to jump. If there's nothing to jump, they make something. I think they are just great and beautiful skiers, just perfect together. There are a lot of days that are just so fun! The people you meet are out to have a good time. Some days you get a group that, when lunch time comes around, they want to sit in the sun and eat their lunch and they are not in any rush. They sit around for an hour or an hour-and-a-half just having a great time taking pictures, group shots. Everybody gets into it. And then you have a group that says, 'don't stop for lunch; let's keep going. Hand me my sandwich on the way back up.' You never know what you're going to get. Our lunch period usually depends on the people. We let it be however long they want it, and however they want to do it. If somebody is getting tired, or just struggling a lot, we encourage them to sit out a run, ride in the cat, and keep the driver company. We don't want that to be any kind of a stigma on anyone. If you want to sit out a run, that's great, good decision on your part. Just enjoy yourself, do whatever you want to do. We don't want pressure put on people, so that they can't sit out a run or do whatever they want. We run ladies days too, two or three days a year.



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"We have found that the best advertisement is an editorial story, so we try to host ski writers and anyone in the media. We take them up there and show them a good day of skiing, or we take them to the Hot Springs, and if they write a story about us we get more business from that than from all the advertising we do. I know there are people in the advertising world who wouldn't want to hear that, but it's true. National magazines: **Powder**, **Ski**, and **Skiing**, they talk about us, and some local television, as well as national television. It was great, they paid us to go skiing. A **Powder Magazine** photographer came along with us and took pictures, and **Ski T.V.** did a segment on Ladies Day last year. They showed it on national T.V. So that was fun.

"**Ski T.V.** used us quite a bit last year, and we've done fashion shoots for Roffe and Obermeyer. They sent the clothes, and we got the models and put it together. We were on the "Good Morning America Show" and the "Today Show" last year. The best publicity, I think, was "Good Morning America Show" and "The Today Show." It was on national television.

"We are not the only powder skiing service in Colorado, we're just the only ones who advertise effectively. However, there are people who are trying to start businesses like ours, to imitate us. In fact, there have been people who have wanted to imitate us, but really, as far as terrain goes, our permit area is just about the only place worth going. **Powder Cat Skiing** needs a lot of terrain because it doesn't snow every night, and you need fresh snow to entertain the people.

"For one day of powder skiing it's \$110 per person. For that you get breakfast, lunch, and skis to use if you need powder skis (special soft powder skis), and lessons, if you need lessons. It lasts all day from 7:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. We can teach an athletic intermediate to ski powder, and



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we can wear out an expert! We also make group rates available. If you bring six people, one person goes free, and if you bring twelve, two go free.

“We can never have too much snow. Sometimes it’s slow going after a giant storm, but once we get the roads packed it’s fast. We do night tours too. We take people to the Hot Springs. We go skiing all day. We pick up a whole second group of people and take them up to the Hot Springs. Sometimes we do two trips. Last spring we were taking college kids during spring break; it was fun!

“One day a week we take a snowcat up to Lake Catamount and show property out there for the new ski area. We used to measure the powder, but we stopped it last year when it got to be fourteen feet deep.

“Toward spring, we have a tendency of getting tired of dealing with people. We try to take more days off. It is still hard to imagine a better job than going skiing every day. We’re still dealing with the public to the extent where you don’t really know what you’re getting. You talk to somebody on the phone and book their trip. Then you’ll ask them what their background is in skiing and their ability level and all that. Lots of times they aren’t sure about their ability level. Many times it isn’t what they say it is. When someone who is a real good ice skier in the East, who skis really hot, gets out here, they enter a whole different world. So, we might think we’ve got this expert group up, and we arrange everything. We get out there and they really aren’t. We slow everything down. What we have learned over the years is to start everybody on a real nice even-pitched slope. No surprises, no whoop-de-doo in it, and it’s easy to get a feel for the group that way. That way we know if they have some problems with the skiing, or the group, but everybody gets butterflies; even I do.

They don’t know where they’re going, and they don’t know what to expect. To most people it’s a whole different thing. Even if they’ve been back-country skiing before, this is a new area with new terrain. They don’t know what’s going on, so it takes a couple of runs for people to relax. Lots of times, their first run, they’ll fall some and have some problems. It’s just from being nervous about getting those butterflies out. So we kind of cruise them a little bit at first, and see how the group shakes that out, and see if there is anybody that has a personality conflict. We tell them to buddy up. Ski with your buddy; if you fall down, you can help each other. The guide could be ahead of you or behind you, and your buddy is right there to help. In this business you establish nice relationships. If you find out that it’s a husband and wife, where he’s a lot better skier and he’s irritated with her because she keeps falling, you may want to make different buddies. Get her together with another gal, who is more her speed. Sometimes the woman is better than the guy.

On one overcast day, Tracy DelliQuadri and I went to Buffalo Pass to ski and take pictures with Steamboat Powder Cats. Before we began to ski, I had expected the snow to be crusty, and to my surprise the snow was soft and fluffy; the powder was past my waist. I was so amazed because it hadn’t snowed for at least two weeks.

Our whole day was filled with fun and surprises. I saw places on Buffalo Pass that I probably never would have seen if I hadn’t gone: beautiful ridges, mountains, and hidden hideaways.

During our adventurous trip with Powder Cats, we started up the mountain about 8:00 or 8:30 A.M. We then proceeded to get aboard the Powder Cat and start up the pass. The pass was very pretty at this time of the morning; it was very quiet and peaceful. It was about 40 minutes before we reached the top of the mountain. When we took our first run of the day, I was really surprised at the amount of powder. As I started my descent down the mountain and tried to make my first turn of the day, I seemed to have caught an edge, and I flipped over onto my head and face. Our day was full of laughs and things to remember.

When we stopped for lunch, we were at the bottom of this beautiful rocky cliff. We sat around taking our time eating lunch, talking, and laughing. After lunch we went back up the mountain to do some more skiing. We started to cool off, so everyone skied down the ridge to where our cars were parked. We said goodbye to everyone.

Tracy and I enjoyed our day with Steamboat Powder Cats very much, and if we had the chance, we’d do it again.



Pat Gill