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## Winter Sport Tourism: An Overview

### Spotlight: Charlie Locke, Multi-tasking ski entrepreneur



Charlie Locke

In 2014 Lake Louise was named Canada's Best Ski Resort at The World Ski Awards in Kitzbühel, Austria for the second year running. At the same time, owner Charlie Locke was honoured with the trophy for Outstanding Contribution to Ski Tourism for the Americas, the winter sports' Oscar. "This is the high point of my career," says Locke, "I was thrilled we won Best Ski Resort in Canada again, but this personal recognition in front of esteemed peers in an industry so dear to me – just an amazing surprise. I am feeling extremely grateful and honoured."

Known worldwide through the Winterstart World Cup, which kicks off the professional downhill ski racing season, Lake Louise is a first-class resort with one of the longest ski seasons – stretching from early November into May. The natural beauty of the UNESCO world heritage site is matched by the alpine architectural perfection of its sumptuously rustic lodges.

Unlike many other world-class resorts which are part of corporations or conglomerates, Lake Louise is family-run by Charlie Locke, his wife Louise and daughters Robin and Kimberley. Each has a pivotal executive role and they also muck in at peak periods helping with frontline customer service to ensure the perfect experience for their international clientele. "On very busy days, I have been known to do everything from parking cars to helping in guest relations, to checking lift tickets and assisting with line control and minimization," says Locke.

In winter, he spends four days a week at Lake Louise Ski Resort and three days in the accounting/marketing office in Calgary. "My daily job is to oversee all things to do with the resort, including, but not limited to, personnel issues, costs, pricing, revenues, marketing arrangements, insurance, finance, capital, banking, maintenance, cost control, customer service, grooming and snowmaking, legal, miscellaneous corporate requirements in terms of dealing with the governments (including Parks Canada) and long term planning," Locke explains. His multi-tasking background in cattle farming has been pivotal to his success, he adds, as well as years spent as a mountain guide. He also runs several producing oil wells.

With snow being crucial to the success of a ski resort, Locke's typical day starts with a review of the snow report, the grooming report and the run-open report. "It ends with reviewing the skier count for the day and comparing it, and the year to date numbers, with budgets," Locke adds. He also takes time to compare the Lake Louise reports with those disseminated by Ski Banff Lake Louise and occasionally suggests amendments: "For example, this morning I noted that the report said 20 cm of snow in the last 48 hours, when in reality, there was 20 cm in the last 36 hours. This minor change could make the difference of 100 skiers or so and all of the incremental revenue flows to the bottom line."

Throughout the winter season Locke tours the base as well as the ski area of the 4200 acre resort on the lookout for elements of the grooming, snow control and customer experience which could be improved. "I walk through the lodge, including all the men's washrooms, on a regular basis, talk to managers, supervisors, front-liners and customers, and consistently pick up paper and tidy public spaces and washrooms," he adds. Locke passes suggestions on to area managers who refer his ideas down the command chain to relevant managers and supervisors. "I do this so there is no confusion as to who their day-to-day supervisors/bosses are," Locke explains. Other tasks include fielding around 60 emails per day, signing checks and reviewing the daily bank report. For Locke, this is all a labor of love: "My hobby is my job, and my job is my hobby. I cannot really retire as I have never had a job."

Locke's connection to the ski industry stretches back to the 1970s when he first helped fund the ski lifts at Lake Louise. In the 1990s he founded Resorts of the Canadian Rockies (RCR), encompassing eight ski resorts across Alberta and British Columbia. "Lake Louise was only 15 per cent of the work and, because of its size and ability to hire and retain good managers, created 50 per cent of the profit. Big resorts have the critical mass to do things right," Locke says. He sold RCR in 2003, retaining ownership of Lake Louise.

Over 35 years, Locke has seen dramatic changes in the winter sports world. "These range from IT, to grooming, to snow-making, to lifts, to food service, to difficulties with the environmental lobby, to the way we do our marketing, to the way we distribute our food, rent skis, and teach lessons," he says. Lake Louise has led the way in Canada in many of these respects, anticipat-

ing and responding to trends. One particular innovation was the provision of a volunteer ski guiding team, which is available to guide and to orientate customers on hill and at resort base all season. "We initiated the 'ski friend' idea, and copyrighted the name," Locke explains. "Many resorts tried to use that name, including Whistler, but we had to remind them that they had to use another name hence 'snowhosts' at most resorts."

Another front-running initiative was the provision of discount cards for lift tickets. "Originally, at Lake Louise, we called these 'Blue Cards' as a brewery provided us with a sizable contribution to our marketing costs in exchange for naming it after one of their brews. The card later became the Louise Card which I believe is one of the most successful skier incentive cards in North America," Locke says.

The daycare at Lake Louise is the only one in Canada – and one of only a handful in North America – to take babies from 18 *days* old. Despite the permitting and running difficulties and costs, this is pivotal to Locke's commitment to keep families skiing. Most resorts stipulate 18 *months* as the youngest age for childcare. Lake Louise daycare also has its own carpark, an added convenience for parents bearing babies and bags.

The biggest boost to the ski industry, according to Locke, has come from snowboarding, closely followed by the invention of shaped skis. High-speed lifts have also transformed ski hills, resulting in shorter lineups and increased density of skiers on the slopes. "Grooming has resulted in making it easier, and faster, for most to get down the hill and to turn and stop," Locke says. "In the early to late 50s it was unusual to see anyone who could make a parallel turn. Now, of course, even beginners, with the new ski technology, are turning parallel, from their first few days on skis." Easier equipment is one of the factors leading to a general reduction in the amount of ski school lessons required and the gradual demise of the traditional 'ski week'. Destination skiers used to take a whole week of lessons but this has now been reduced, typically, to three or four days of instruction.

Other trends Locke has witnessed include a demand for complementary activities as well as a higher quality of food. Lake Louise now encompasses snowshoeing and a torchlight descent plus dinner dance après ski event as well as a two-lane tube park, a beginner fun zone, a snowcross course, first tracks program, cross country skiing, backcountry ski tours, Podium Club race centre and a substantial terrain park.

Lake Louise has also expanded its restaurants and bar facilities including the renovated Whitehorn Lodge with mountain modern décor, first-rate cuisine, a panoramic patio, and ice bar when conditions permit. Nestled at the base of Larch Mountain, Temple Lodge features an outdoor BBQ, a renovated self-service eatery, a Starbucks coffee, cookies and cake café and, Sawyer's Nook, a cozy, table-service restaurant. Back at base, the Northface Bistro serves bountiful breakfast and lunch buffets and Powderkeg Lounge is famous for its massive nacho platters and succulent pizzas.

Over the past decade all of these culinary facilities – and adjoining restrooms – have been renovated and expanded with customer comfort and changing needs in mind. Another outcome of technological improvements in skiing, according to Locke, is an increased emphasis on ski lodge facilities. "In today's ski world, because of high-speed lifts and shorter lineups, people

tend to spend more time in the lodges. In my youth, we never went in for lunch as that was the time when the lineups were shorter,” Locke recalls. The expense of constantly updating amenities can be the death knell for smaller resorts, he maintains. “The smaller community-run and single proprietor resorts which do less than, say, 120,000 annual skier visits, have a great deal of difficulty generating sufficient capital to maintain their lodges or replace their aging equipment. So, a number of these smaller resorts have closed which is going to impact the number of skiers in the future,” Locke explains. “Generally, our sustaining capital budget allows us to maintain our lodges, staff housing, and other buildings and equipment fairly well, upgrading washrooms and food and beverage distribution systems regularly, always looking for ways to improve the customer experience.”

Other modern day requirements include technology, good access roads, good grooming, snowmaking and avalanche control, all of which have been addressed at Lake Louise in recent years. The twinning of the TransCanada highway between Banff and Lake Louise has made a considerable difference to traffic flow, travel time and also safety. Over the past two seasons the resort has added improved water lines for snowmaking and six new snow cats for enhanced grooming.

IT-wise, there are cellphone-recharging stations, computer terminals, ATMs and Wi-Fi in the main lodge. Lake Louise has its own blog and is active on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Google+ and Instagram. And, in 2014, Lake Louise became the first Canadian ski resort on Snapchat (with daily posts download-able to smartphones), employing a social media maven to keep the resort’s social media presence ahead of the game. The Internet, though, has created another rival for the ski industry, luring youth away from outdoor recreation. “The percentage of the population who ski has dropped in recent years as the youth can now get free entertainment on the Internet, and are more digitally, as opposed to experientially, driven in general, and there have been fewer opportunities to learn skiing through the school system,” Locke explains. “The key thing the industry has to learn is how to generate more skiers and keep ‘first timers’ in the sport. The retention rate for people learning to ski is reportedly only about 15 per cent.”

Sources: Interview with Charlie Locke, January 2015

## **An introduction to winter sport tourism**

Winter sport tourism falls under the umbrella of sport tourism, one of the fastest growth sectors of the tourism industry. Although sport tourism is a relatively new concept in contemporary vernacular, its scope of activity is far from a recent phenomenon. The notion of people traveling to participate in and watch sport dates back to the ancient Olympic Games, and the practice of stimulating tourism through sport has existed for over a century. Within the last few decades however, destinations have begun to recognize the significant potential of sport tourism, and they are now aggressively pursuing this attractive market niche.