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## Family-friendly Fernie

By Anne Bokma on January, 30 2014

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You'd be forgiven if you've always thought of Fernie as just a place to ski. While Fernie Alpine Resort has a world class reputation for legendary powder (the average annual snowfall is 37 feet) and the highest number of runs in the Canadian Rockies, this mining town of 5,000 in the East Kootenay region of southeastern British Columbia is also famous for its down-to-earth mountain culture. *Rolling Stone* has called it the "Coolest Town in North America," *Ski Canada* named it "The Best Ski Town in Canada" and *National Geographic* gave it the nod for being one of the "Best Winter Trips." Families looking for more than perfect ski conditions on their winter vacation will find it all in Fernie – snowshoeing, nature tours, dog sledding, a plethora of parks, a quaint downtown that has the distinction of being the only town completely encircled by the Rockies, unique boutiques and a range of restaurants to appease the fussiest of foodies – as well as a rich local history steeped in legend and lore.

But first, the skiing.

### Fernie Alpine Resort

You'll find endless adventure on this mountain (located 5 km from town) which features more than 140 runs (including the delightfully named Giggly Gully and the long and winding 5 km Falling Star) and five alpine bowls serviced by 10 lifts (the Polar Peak lift soars to 7,000 ft, offering panoramic views of the Rocky Mountain ranges). Fernie has a "steep and deep" reputation that might give pause to less expert skiers, but 30 percent of the hills are marked green, there's an exceptional beginners' area and on many runs it often feels like you have the place to yourself. For a midday break, sip some hot chocolate on the wraparound deck of the Lost Boys Café at the top of the Timber Bowl express quad lift and take in the stunning view of the Elk River Valley.

The resort's TELUS winter sports school offers lessons starting at age three. The Griz Kidz activity program offers free activities for kids ages 6 to 12 throughout the week and there's also a half- and full-day daycare program for kids 18 months to six years.

### X-country skiing

The Fernie Nordic Society has doubled its terrain with the recent addition of a dedicated groomed trail system adjacent to the Mount Fernie Provincial Park, complementing the 12 km of groomed tracks at the Fernie Golf Course, the two skiing loops at Fernie Alpine Resort and 25 kms of trails at the Island Lake Lodge. Cross-country ski rentals are available at a number of locations in town.

### Snowshoe tours

Book a three-hour snowshoe excursion through Mount Fernie Provincial Park or an all-day adventure exploring the rare old growth forest at Island Lake Lodge with Wild Nature Tours, a non-profit venture that supports local conservation projects. A knowledgeable naturalist will be your guide in exploring everything from wildlife habits in winter to the wonders of the simple snowflake. Hot cider and yummy homemade cookies provided.

### Dog sledding

Several tour companies offer the chance to go mushing with a pack of huskies – book a one-hour excursion or go for a full day of touring. Professional guides will teach you about the history and skills of this great northern sport while you thrill to the pace of dog power.

### Ice skating

Lace up your blades and practise your figure eights at Fernie Memorial Arena (rentals available) or the outdoor maintained surfaces at Fernie Aquatic Centre, Maiden Lake or the Annex Park Pond.

### Parks and trails

The Ancient Cottonwood Interpretive Trail protects some of the biggest and oldest black cottonwood trees in the world. Mount Fernie Provincial Park is home to black bear, deer and elk and Dogwood Park features the Leroux Pond (home to ducks, turtles, frogs and more). The massive Height of the Rockies Provincial Park, about an hour north of Fernie, protects lush forests and permanent icefields. On the outskirts of town, the Fernie Nature Centre gives kids a chance to identify wildlife tracks, inspect specimens up close with magnifiers and learn how to become bear aware.

### Downtown destinations

Trade the snow for water at the *Fernie Aquatic Centre*, which has a waterslide, rope swing and a graded children's pool. At the *Fernie Museum* kids will learn about the legendary tale of the Ghost Rider, which involves a curse placed on the town by an angry Indian chief (the town's great fire of 1908 reduced Fernie to rubble and ash within the space of 90 minutes and is attributed by many to the Ghost Rider's vengeance) as well as the story of the Griz, a massive mountain man who is said to live high above the ski village.

### Fun shops

There's no shortage of stores that appeal to pint-sized customers. A must-stop is the Willy-Wonka-inspired *Beanpod Chocolate*, where you can perch on blazing purple couches to view the chocolate-making action taking place behind a floor to ceiling window and marvel at the faucet that gushes liquid milk chocolate. *Side Street Sweet Shop* is an old-fashioned candy store with treats from around the world and includes an impressive display of glass jars with 72 flavours of salt water taffy. *Polar Peek Books & Treasures* has books for all ages and a wide selection of award-winning toys. The store also serves as an information destination with local hiking maps and guidebooks as well as history books. *Grow* has a unique range of toys, gifts and clothes for tiny tots.

### Good eats

It's easy to find a family spot to dine in downtown Fernie. *Big Bang Bagels* prides itself on fresh baked bagels made from scratch. The bright and sunny *Loaf Bakery & Restaurant* sells artisan breads and pastries and features a \$5 breakfast for kids. The *Lunchbox Fresh Market & Smoothie Bar* has plenty of healthy selections on the menu, including homemade soups, salads, curries, wraps and chili. For dinner, Yamagoya Sushi is the most popular spot in town – there are usually lineups, but it's worth the wait.

### Where to stay

Accommodations on the mountain feature ski-in/ski-out condos, townhomes, chalets and lodges, resort lodges, hotels and private homes. In town selections range from boutique hotels such as the Park Place Lodge to the affordable Super 8 Fernie and the Raging Elk Backpackers hostel accommodations. Contact [tourismfernie.com](http://tourismfernie.com) for the accommodation that suits your budget.

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