

PERFECT PLACES

peak energy

A BRITISH COLUMBIA HELI-SKI
OPERATOR TAKES GREEN TO
EXTREMES | BY LESLIE ANTHONY

COURTESY SNOWWATER HELI-SKIING

> BRITISH COLUMBIA'S SLOCAN VALLEY IS A BASTION OF POST-Woodstock hippiedom, a classic backroads center of the kind of homegrown agribusiness inspired by an old Cheech and Chong movie, cleverly disguised as an enormous junkyard. The entropic parade features quasi-pastoral triple-wides, wooden cabins succumbing to long, bitter fights with gravity, and myriad rusted reminders of a century of broken dreams. Phone booth-size espresso stands punctuate the bizarre bucolic scene, suggesting that folks around these parts appreciate a good cup of joe on their way to tend the "crops."

If you laid every dreadlock in the valley end to end, you'd likely end up with a highway of hair running from Nelson — the Kootenays' economic and cultural hub — to Valhalla, the staging area for Snowwater Heli-Skiing.* It's a delicious irony given the latter's upscale digs, activities, and epicurean offerings, but Snowwater knows from hippie too: It aims to be British Columbia's greenest heli/cat operation.

From the steep and deep virgin snow to the inviting cabins, Snowwater is a powderhound's vision of heaven.



Snowwater may be upscale, but it knows from hippie: It aims to be B.C.'s greenest heli/cat operation.



The view from the large picture window that fronts Snowwater Lodge is the kind you can have only in British Columbia. In fact, it's the kind you can have only by hovering over this fairy-tale section of the Kootenays. Tilted spires of snow-clad spruce, discernible only by their shape, form the edge of a frosty vanguard that sweeps away to the northwest, to the geological bricolage of mitres and glaciers known as the Valhalla Range, the heart of Patric Maloney's expanding cat- and heli-skiing empire.

Maloney is a get-it-done kind of guy, possessed of an energy driven by ideas, action, and optimism. His mission — trying to reform the carbon-spewing mechanized backcountry clan he proudly belongs to — begins at home. Besides using biodiesel fuel in the generator and snowcats, the operation has an 18-kilowatt micro-hydroplant running six months of the year, and is heated by wood-burning boilers fueled by the scrub trees that, per government requirements, must be removed from the edges of snowcat roads. Snowwater also has an on-site recycling facility, encourages staff members to car pool, and employs an environmental purchasing policy. But though it thinks globally, management acts locally, buying and hiring from within the area whenever possible.

Then there's the carbon-barfing helicopter squatting invitingly amid a cluster of tony hand-built cabins. Although biofuels like hempanol (fitting for the weed-addled Kootenays) may someday be the norm, nothing viable has emerged yet. So Snowwater does what it can by flying an AStar with a more fuel-efficient aftermarket engine, and also does its part to offset the emissions — for 20

ERIC BERGER (2)

With its specially modified AStar and cutting-edge cuisine, Snowwater marries a green conscience with guilty pleasures.



years it has gathered pine cones by hand to produce seedlings for reforestation. “Other companies buy carbon credits,” says Maloney, “but we collect them — over 800 million seedlings’ worth.”

Snowwater’s environmental conscience doesn’t come at the expense of a good time, though: The fabled Valhallas are prime heliskiing country. After setting down in the high alpine, skiers can mine deep, deep snow on long, long runs. There are the trademark Valhalla pencil couloirs, chutes, and spines, and open bowls rolling downward into rising forests that are so roomy they seem almost cultivated. Then there’s the Cat’s Meow* — a section of super-deep tree chutes weaving in and out of glades straddling a shallow natural half pipe. It’s 3,000 vertical feet of serious disbelief.

Even on down days when the weather prevents flying, guests aren’t limited to soaking in the hot tub or a bottle of whiskey (though the ready availability of Wi-Fi in the common room sometimes makes it look like a suburban Starbucks). Instead they can pile into a rumbling cat and lap runs off the gladed ridges immediately above the lodge, tackling steep, open bowling alleys and plunging open glades, with turns that start at waist deep and then leap overhead, sending huge curling contrails arcing heavenward in a lightly stirring breeze.

And the trees, which hoard foot after foot of powder for the skier lucky enough to visit them, serve up face shot after face shot, sheltering walls of white below a roof of branches.

Which is the kind of green skiing that really counts. ❶

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