



Heaven and Heli

As ski season winds down, helicopter skiing takes flight in the Kootenays. **BY KEVIN BROOKER**

ONE RUN IN AND THE HELI-SKIING butterflies are gone and the video cameras are out. It has snowed non-stop for days, but suddenly shafts of sunlight split the clouds high up on this ridge in the Bonnington Range in the heart of the southern Selkirk Mountains, about 30 kilometres from Nelson. Now is a perfect moment to shoot the gleaming red helicopter as it thumps back down to the pick-up zone, and, of course, each other as we giddily high-five and just generally bask in the living of the dream.

But alas, reverie must wait. “Quick, skis on,” commands our guide, Maria Grant. “See that cloud?” She swings her pole to the northwest, toward the towering Valhalla Mountains, where an angry black wall is boiling up. “That thing will be here in about six minutes,” she says casually. “We gotta get out of here.”

Just what we need: the A-OK to charge. Seconds later all four of us are bounding behind Grant in the thigh-deep powder, through the widely spaced trees of the subalpine zone, down a steep creek bed and then merrily popping off the deeply buried stumps in a logging cutblock. But Grant’s call is dead-on. As we pile back into

There’s good skiing and great skiing—and then there’s heli-skiing. Expect zero line-ups and nightly gourmet dinners, but above all expect the sweetest, deepest powder you will ever have the good fortune to sink into.

the chopper, the super-squall detonates. By the time the pilot expertly settles her back down on the compound that is Snowwater Heli Skiing, visibility is approaching zero.

And here’s where it gets problematic, even tragic, for would-be heli-skiers. No-fly means no-ski. When you take all that pent-up energy and lock it down in the lodge, it doesn’t matter how delicious the five-course gourmet dinner or magnificently sited the hot tub. Colonel Mustard might just murder somebody with a candelabra.

Ah-ha, but not here. Not with the greatest Plan B ever devised, and the only one at any heli operation in Canada: a 12-passenger, biodiesel-fuelled snowcat and a nearby series of handsome glades reserved for precisely this emergency. One mug of tea, and 10 minutes later we’re deliriously back in the rapidly deepening powder game.



Endless vistas and untouched snow. Lots and lots of untouched snow.

Welcome to boutique heli-skiing. And with all due respect to the pioneering giants of the industry, I think small scale is the key: instead of the traditional 14-passenger Bell 212 helicopter, with all of that teeming crowd's *Gong Show* susceptibility, Snowwater employs the nimble five-passenger A-Star B2 Eurocopter to service just 12 clients in three fast-moving groups. Not only do you get to know everybody, there's also an immediate esprit de corps. And, without sacrificing safety or a methodical approach, clients come to expect somewhat less regimentation. "I'm not a big fan of the Austrian Inquisition," is how one of our veteran compadres describes the old-school approach employed by some other outfits.

Indeed, the mellow but luxurious B.C. mood is pervasive. Mellow describes our second guide, Shawn West, a local guide who lives just down the valley, and effortlessly switches between snowboard and skis, depending on his clients. In the exquisite central timber-frame lodge, a shiny fleet of 20-something hipster Nelsonites perform their cooking, cleaning and massage duties with preternatural cheer. Meanwhile, the chalets feature in-floor heating and enough room to bowl.

And then there's Snowwater's founder (and Maria Grant's husband), Patric Maloney, a longtime Kootenay forester who scored big in B.C.'s mid-1990s recreational land rush. He is obsessive about dialling every detail to perfection, including his role as social ringleader. Maloney (think Alec Baldwin as Jack Donaghy) is the sort of guy who is not afraid to put on a



When the bird lifts off, it's time to strap on the boards and drop into some deep powder.

Viking helmet and dare his guests to join him in a ski-boot- sized Caesar with a bacon stir-stick.

But nothing here deters the central mission: Ski. Your. Behind. Off. On day two the storm weakens so we're back in the bird, slamming lap after lap of belly-deep white gold. And when it dawns bluebird on our final day we fly over the Kootenay River to the mythic Valhallas, where the reward is more of the same, plus an extra 500 vertical metres of prime above-treeline heaven. If we've had better skiing, none of us remembers when. *wl*

For information visit snowwater.com or hellobc.com.

ONE DAY HELI

Here's the thing—as much as you fantasize about experiencing the legendary Selkirk, Monashee and Cariboo ranges for epic heli-skiing excursions, you don't have a spare week to devote to this dream. You have one day—that's it. Thankfully a few operations feel your pain and can get you in the backcountry for a taste of the deep stuff, and get you back that night. No questions asked.

Banff

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