

Ain't no mountain high enough

With vertical drops of up to 5,500 feet, B.C.'s Chilcotin Mountains are a heli-skiers paradise.

By Kim McHugh

Lillooet, B.C. – The storm clouds made themselves home in the mountainous valley like sports fanatics in their La-Z-Boy chairs, dropping snowflakes the size of quarters.

Normally this would be good news because of the foot of fresh powder, but I am at a Heliskiing lodge in British Columbia and the inclement weather is preventing the helicopter from taking off.

I sit in the lodge with 40 anxious powder skiers and snowboarders and wait. After an hour the storm shows no signs of letting up and the mood is sullen.

This was the last day of a three-day trip to Tyax Mountain Lake Resort, home to TLH Heliskiing. The two previous days were postcard perfect with deep powder, sunshine and untracked snow, so to be trapped inside spending the day playing ping-pong wasn't anyone's idea of a good time.

About the time moods hit bottom, the storm quit, the clouds parted like curtains at a Broadway show and the sun beamed. Fifteen minutes later we were airborne.

In another fifteen minutes the 12-passenger Bell 212 Helicopter deposited 11 powder hounds on a ridge about 7,500 feet above sea level somewhere within the boundaries of the Southern Chilcotin Mountains. In front of us stood 830,000 acres of untracked powder.

Graham, our guide, refreshed our memories about backcountry hazards and then slipped over the edge linking 20 turns in the newly fallen snow. Floating through 20 more turns he reached the bottom and waved for us to follow.

One by one, our group eased into the snow, floating effortlessly on "fat" skis and snowboards, whopping and hollering as we turned.

For me, the allure of Heliskiing was a combination of practicality and emotion. At a resort where access from high-speed lifts and intensive grooming can quickly eliminate powder, in the backcountry it can remain untouched for days and even weeks.

On a purely visual level, few ski areas can compare with the Chilcotin Mountains in terms of vastness and sheer beauty.

Even with the cost for this three-day package starting at \$2,200 for Heliskiing, meals and lodging the experience is worth every Loonie.

After adjusting my goggles, I pointed my Volant PowerKarve skis downhill and took off. Designed to float through powder and crud the skis negotiated the slopes with ease.

Throughout the day the group made it's way down runs with names like Playoff, Gun Josie, The Swiss Peaks, Moon Doggie and Cinnabar Ridge, convening at the chopper for the five-minute ride back to the summit.

At lunch, over a thick soup and hearty deli sandwiches, we talked about powder as an aphrodisiac; agreeing that we would go to great lengths to find it.

If the weather is cooperative, a Heliskiing adventure will earn you bragging rights when it comes to vertical feet, which could add up to 25,000 feet in one day. While most operators won't guarantee you a number, it is not uncommon to rack up 43,000 vertical feet in three days.

With more than 280 "runs" from its current terrain and 50 new runs added this season, finding what best suits you is fairly easy.

"We explored a large part of this newly accessible terrain last winter and found vertical drops of up to 5,500 feet, immense glaciers and inspiring peaks," boasts George Rosset TLH Heliskiing President and General Manager.

Prior to heading out every morning we were apprised of backcountry hazards, including avalanches. Each of us was given a radio transceiver, which is an electronic device that sends a signal that can be easily detected.

If I was swept away in a slide, my chances of being found quickly – and alive – improved considerably by wearing the unit. Although the avalanche danger was moderate, it gave me comfort having it on.

Moving into the last few runs of the day, I began to get "sewing machine legs", a condition where my muscles were so tired, my legs trembled wildly in an up and down motion.

These last runs add 200 turns to my day and, like everyone else, I am spent. Boarding the

helicopter for the one-hour flight to Vancouver, the extraordinary adventure is indeniably tattooed in my mind forever.

-Kim McHugh of Parker, Colorado, would rather be Heliskiing.



BOTTOM LINE

IF YOU GO: To book a trip to Tyax Mountain Lake Resort and TLH Heliskiing call 1-800-667-4854 or surf www.tlheliskiing.com.

SEASON: Late December through April. Typically, the most powder falls in January and March – the busiest months. Make reservations in advance, as trips book quickly.

COST: Two-day packages start at \$1,440 per person and include meals, Heliskiing and lodging. Seven-day packages start at \$5,500. Packages are available from two to seven days. Early January and April represent the best values. If you cancel your trip, be prepared to forfeit your entire fee. Early pre-payment discounts are available.

TRANSPORTATION: Fly into Vancouver on Air Canada (416-925-2311). Book in advance fares start at approximately \$400 return. Round trip bus service to the lodge is included.

HEALTH: You should be in good cardiovascular and muscle shape. Also, altitude sickness is a very real condition. Symptoms include shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness and a raging headache. Doctors recommend drinking plenty of water a few days before arriving at a higher altitude and while you are visiting.

GEAR: New "fat" and shaped skis make staying on top of the snow easier, especially for intermediate level people. Guides are also excellent at giving pointers. TLH Heliskiing rent skis but not snowboards. Dress in layers, bring goggles and, if you love the trees, wear a helmet!