

Die Happy

by Alf Alderson

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For someone who's only previously cruised the red and black runs of Europe and North America, the pre-ski briefing the evening before you head out for your first heliskiing adventure doesn't do a lot to put you at your ease.

Frequent and detailed reference to avalanches, transceivers, rescues and knee deep powder soon had me wondering whether I was literally getting out of my depth. And rising before daybreak at 6.30 am the next morning to practise avalanche rescues and how to keep your head whilst getting in and out of a helicopter also makes you realise that having fun can be a serious business.

But fun it is, and it all starts before you're anywhere near the slopes (and by that I'm not referring to the sumptuous accommodation and fine food and wine we enjoyed before and after our days on the mountain). One of the great thrills of heliskiing is the actual helicopter travel. They may be noisy and bouncy, but a 12-seater Bell 212 is a fine and exhilarating way of seeing the awe-inspiring magnificence of a high mountain range.

The journey, lasting around 15 minutes (the same as some chairlifts) takes you way, way out into the backcountry. We were guests of TLH Heliskiing in the Chilcotin Mountains of British Columbia, who have surveyed and mapped 3,500 square kms of terrain to put together more than 300 runs, making up a ski area about 200 times larger than Vail.

As the helicopter comes in to land there's a flurry of activity from the by now adrenalin-charged skiers within, pulling on gloves, adjusting goggles, and fastening powder skirts (at last, a chance to really use them!), and after the door is opened everyone piles out to crouch low at a preordained spot whilst skis are unloaded and the helicopter lifts off again in a blizzard of stinging powder snow.

Once the helicopter has clattered off to await you in the valley below you can at last get a chance to take in your surroundings. Rugged peaks broke the skyline to the north and west, and snow shrouded glaciers flowed down off their summits like soft white blankets, whilst below lay dark green tracts of virgin forest tumbling down into

valleys that rarely see the footprint of man. Somewhere to the east, two days hike away, was the lodge we'd left behind only 15 minutes ago.

The sun shone in a clear blue sky, and powder snow sparkled below us. But the question still remained, could I, a 'good intermediate' skier, cope with true off-piste conditions? TLH had provided everyone with fat powder skis, and after pointing out the line we'd be taking our guide Cliff was off with an enthusiastic whoop.

As for me - well, who'd have believed it but those fat skis really do work when you combine them with a little bit of technique. By simply remembering to place my weight evenly on both skis, exaggerate the 'lift' out of each turn and getting into a rhythm it all fell into place on pretty much the first run. The total joy of skiing through shin-deep powder - and later deeper and steeper stuff - was revealed to me on that first morning, when I finally realised just why experienced skiers will sell their children for a day in world-class powder.

Featherlight snow cascading over your knees, an entire mountainside waiting for you to write your signature on it, and the satisfaction of looking back up your run and seeing that yes, you too are capable of leaving deep, clean carves in the snow is worth a few hundred quid of my money, that's for sure. And if I had a child you could probably have that too.

For the rest of the day we enjoyed run after run, all of which were so good and so much fun they've now blended into one memory as the finest day's skiing I've ever had. The snow whispered through our skis and over our knees as we skied down wide, open slopes, through the trees and gladed bowls to the waiting helicopter, then effortlessly ascended for more of the same; I fell several times but didn't give a damn as the landing was soft and pretty much everyone else fell too; and every skier amongst us had a fixed grin on their face from the first run until they went to bed that night.

On our first day we skied over 24,000 feet of downhill, but perhaps more importantly than clocking up 'the vertical', once you've skied true backcountry it's amazing what it does for your confidence when you get back to a ski resort. I went on from TLH to ski at Red Mountain, a resort which has a reputation for being 'hard', and without realising it found myself looking for double black diamond runs and all the off piste I could find - a week before I'd have stuck to the groomed stuff.

One more thing - as one of the guys in our group said after the first day "At least I can die happy knowing that I heliskied". And who doesn't want to die happy, however much it costs?