

## UP AND AWAY (Independent on Sunday, /11/02)

Alf Alderson finds that you don't need to be an expert skier or have a fat wallet to try heliskiing.

Two things prevent most skiers from heliskiing – lack of cash and lack of confidence in their skills on the white stuff. However, modern fat skis allow any good intermediate skier to enjoy a weekend blasting through pristine powder fields, and whilst no-one would claim that heliskiing is cheap it needn't cost an arm and a leg. And given the choice between grubbing around in lift queues to take on uncertain snow conditions and carving fresh tracks through two feet of powder, this has got to be an option any serious skier should consider at least once in their life.

First, though, let's dispose of the myth that you need to have been on skis since the age of two to deal with deep, untracked snow. If you're a good intermediate – say you can tackle black runs without too much trepidation and have dabbled off-piste once or twice - a pair of fat skis will take you into a new world.

Clipping into what feel and look like ski-jumping planks will feel strange at first, but as soon as you set off through the powder you'll discover that they really do work given a little adjustment in your technique. Basically, try to keep the weight on both skis even as you turn, and the fatties will float you through the powder with aplomb (ish).

I know this to be true because on my first heliskiing experience I was terrified that I was going to make a real mess of the whole thing and even worse, hold up everyone else in the group, all of whom were paying a lot of money to ski some of the best snow on the planet.

But within about 200 yards of my first run I'd forgotten all my worries as I floated effortlessly --more or less – through shin deep, talc dry powder beneath the dazzling blue skies above British Columbia's Chilcotin Mountains. Gliding to a halt half a mile lower down the mountain I realised I'd never really skied before – everything compared to this had been merely practising for this moment.

There were no lift queues, no crowds, no noise - nothing other than line after line of snow draped mountains stretching to the horizon in every direction. This was real mountain scenery and real skiing, and whilst the purists would argue that to really appreciate it I should have come up here under my own steam using ski mountaineering techniques, for now the purists were welcome to their uphill grunting and groaning. All I wanted to do was get in more turns.

That particular weekend based at TLH Heliskiing's beautiful timber lodge to the north of Whistler was not cheap at around £900, but it is possible to heliski and board more economically both in North America and Europe.

Take Red Mountain in south-eastern British Columbia, for instance. This rather hard core little resort has just started a heliski operation in conjunction with Snowwater Lodge in the nearby Bonnington Mountains, and unlike many operators they offer one day trips with five drop-offs – again, not cheap compared to a day on the pistes (around £350 per

person), but I've yet to meet anyone who has shelled out for a day's heliskiing in BC and regretted it, and the advantage of day trips such as this is you don't have to commit to spending quite such a large sum of money. In this instance you're picked up by the helicopter from Red Mountain Resort at 8.30am, whisked off to an isolated mountain range you've never even heard of where untracked wilderness skiing is guaranteed, and brought back knackered, grinning and happy at the end of the day.

In France and Italy things can get cheaper still. Optimum Ski in Les Arcs offer deals for around £130 per person (including guide) which involve three drop-offs across the French border in neighbouring Italy. 'Superfluous' use of helicopters in the French Alps is banned on environmental grounds, hence the border crossing - you're picked up 100 metres inside the French border at the Col de Petit St. Bernard and taken into Italy from where you have the option of skiing down into Italy or back into France. You'll have no more than six other skiers to share open, empty slopes with - a far cry from the often chaotic lift queues and heavily used slopes of the various local pistes.

And if money really is too tight to mention, in the Italian Dolomites it's possible to get a taste of the heliski experience for no more than the price of a decent night out. Last winter, for about £40, I had the chance to clamber into a helicopter for the hairiest, wildest aeronautical experience of my life before being dropped off for a superb 1,300 metre descent. Few mountain ranges in the world are as dramatic as the Dolomites (it's where Stallone's 'Cliffhanger' was shot) and with a madman for a pilot we got to see the very crystal formations in the cliff faces before hurtling up, down or around them and eventually emerging shaken and stirred atop 3,342-metre Marmolada Peak.

However, this isn't the purists version of heliskiing since you get dropped at the top of a lift accessed run, but it does give you a feel for what the real thing is all about as well as the fantastic buzz of flying through the mountains in a small helicopter. And on this sunny but blustery day the lift was closed due to the wind so six of us did actually get to ski much of the run on our own.

Whether you take the cheap or expensive option, heliskiing is a whole new ball game compared to resort skiing, and one day of quality heli action will stay with you for ever - so if you're a decent intermediate skier maybe you should start saving now for what could be the ski experience of your life.

## FACTBOX

### UP AND AWAY

Chilcotin Mountains. TLH Heliskiing, PO Box 1118, Vernon, BC V1T 6N4, Canada. (001 250 558 5379, [www.tlheliskiing.com](http://www.tlheliskiing.com)). A two-day package includes ski rental and you're guaranteed to ski 29,000 of vertical or you receive a refund. However, additional 'vert' will cost you around £9.50 per thousand feet. When I skied there I did over 40,000 ft in two days so it can get a bit costly if you get carried away.

Bonnington Range. Red Mountain/Snowwater Creek Lodge, PO Box 670, Rossland, BC V0G 1YD, Canada (001 250 362 7384 ext. 211, [www.ski-red.com](http://www.ski-red.com)). Rates given above include ski rental and lunch.

Les Arcs/Italy. Optimum Ski, Chalet Tarentaise, Le Pre, 73640, Villaroger, France (08702 406198, [www.optimumski.com](http://www.optimumski.com)).

Dolomites. Inghams (0208 780 4433, [www.inghams.co.uk](http://www.inghams.co.uk)) offer various packages to the Dolomites which have the option of helicopter trips to the

top of the Marmolada.

copyright © Alf Alderson 2002

