

# THE HIGH PISTE

Forget crowded slopes and grey snow – there is a way to find the ultimate ski experience. Catch some air, suggests GLYN BROWN

So you're the sort of skier who laughs at black ones. All right, my friend, then how about this: a roof-of-the-world experience, something higher, steeper, with snow like icing sugar. It's the fabled 'white gold', a powder more addictive than the rock-star kind and almost as expensive. And you, with a privileged handful of others, are making completely fresh tracks in it. How? Simple. You've been brought to paradise by helicopter.

Heli-skiing, the process of being flown, with skis, to snowy peaks of unparalleled beauty, first took off in the 1960s, when Hans Gmoser, an Austrian mountain guide resident in Canada, used a helicopter to lift skiers from an old logging camp near Radium, British Columbia, into the spectacular and otherwise inaccessible Bugaboo mountains. Gmoser launched Rocky Mountain Guides Ltd in 1959 and in 1968 he opened Bugaboo Lodge, the world's first heli-served, five-star back-country cabin.

Today heliskiing operations are opening around the world, from Iceland to the Himalayas, but it still remains something of a niche adventure.

That's partly because you need to be a good, though not exceptional, skier; and because it is costly. The skybirds you're hiring don't come cheap, nor do the guides you need for exploring untouched, semi-mountainous terrain. The result is a select experience, with luxury lodge accommodation complete with masseuses, top chefs and wine libraries, few other souls and a basic average cost of some £6,000 for a six-day break. What you get, however, is an experience of almost religious dimensions, a rip-roaring, life-affirming epiphany about which few can speak rationally.

'Believe me, once you do this, you're going to want to do it again, in as many places as possible,' says Hayley Melidonis. As head of Total Heliski, an agent for operators across the globe, she knows her white stuff. 'What the helicopter gives you is perfect, Champagne snow – dry powder,

sometimes thigh deep. And the reason the skiing is so good is the sensation, which is floating, flying. Gravity's pulling you down the hill, but the snow suspends you.' Be warned, it's addictive: she has seen, she claims, grown business entrepreneurs behave like 'little kids on Christmas day'.

It's the total package that works the spell. 'In most locations, you walk outside your bedroom, put on your boots and hop in a chopper 20m away. The chopper comes to you. Now, that's celebrity stuff,' says Melidonis. 'When the helicopter leaves it's the most peaceful feeling in the world. There's not a sound, not a ski track. You're at an elevation of maybe 3,000m. You look around, in the piercing sunlight, down to snowy bowls and wooded valleys where no one has set foot.'

The lodge you left five minutes ago is now two days' hike away. Meanwhile, your guide (who has a minimum four-year certificated qualification) is double-checking the terrain. Effectively you're ski mountaineering and one wilderness hazard you want to avoid, along with the more regular ski accidents, is an avalanche. When he's happy, he sets off, and you follow, left or right of his skis as he dictates.

James Morland, managing director of Elemental Adventure Heliskiing, which has bases in London, Chamonix and Colorado, notes that 95% of heli-skiing happens in Canada because of the quality of snow, 'but there is also mind-blowing skiing in some incredibly exotic, culturally intriguing locations.' The Rockies, Greenland, France, Switzerland, Russia, Chile, India and the Himalayas are all options.

Safety, of course, is paramount. Morland knows more about safety than most holiday organisers. When he first heli-skied 18 years ago, he was already working as a ski patroller in Alaska, proficient in avalanche control and mountain rescue; he's now a member of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides. Morland guides many trips and for each operation, his requirements are stringent. 'There are risks to everything, even driving a car. All we can do is minimise those, and we do that by making sure everyone we work with adheres to some very tough requirements,' he says.

And how about client fitness? 'The fitter you are, the more you're going to enjoy it,' says Morland. 'So, typically, we're talking about someone who skis once or twice a year, maybe rides a bike to work, goes to the gym each week and is in reasonable shape.' And a good skier? 'It's not for the novice, but not just for pros, either. If you're a strong intermediate skier, you can heliski. And modern fat skis make powder skiing much easier.' This is not, he stresses, an extreme sport. 'Not at all. We've got people of 80 years old and of 12.' Most of

his clients, however, are professionals and entrepreneurs aged between 35 and 50: second-wave baby boomers. These are the clientele in the know who are making heliskiing popular. There is the cachet too: 'It's really just a super-premium ski experience – the best you can have.'

And right at the pinnacle? For the ultimate indulgence, you can charter a private helicopter and go bespoke. 'We arrange it all, picking people up from their home in London, New York, wherever, shipping their bags, private jet to the location. Lobster flown in from Maine, the best Champagne,' says Morland. He describes this as 'rock star living'. The white stuff – gets them every time. ■

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Six day trip £6,000

