

NOW THAT'S A SKI LIFT

LUXURY TRAVEL

There's one way to ditch the crowds and find the pure powder – take a helicopter. Olympic skier **GRAHAM BELL** reveals why heliskiing is the only way to fly and how you can join him on a very special Canadian ski trip...

IF YOU'VE EVER been before, you'll know what I mean when I say heliskiing is the ultimate treat for the keen skier. If you're a heliskiing virgin you can look forward to finding untouched powder without having to fight through lift lines plus there's a real sense of freedom in being so far into the back country.

Sure, if you happen to be in the right place at the right time you can find some great powder using a resort's lift system, but unless it snows a couple of feet every night and clears every day, all the fresh powder will be skied out pretty quickly. With heliskiing, the areas that can be accessed are so expansive the powder remains fresh for days.

You don't have to be a former Olympic skier in order to heliski, either. As long as you're reasonably comfortable skiing in deep snow you should be able to heliski, and your guide will choose different gradients of slope depending on your standard.

Of course, racing downhill at speeds of over 90mph is the ultimate buzz in skiing, but the rough, icy race-courses are very tough on the body. Heliskiing, on the other hand, is all about finding deep fresh powder that gives you an amazing feeling of weightlessness. It can be dangerous, too, but only if you start looking for cliffs to drop off or steep couloirs to ski. In any case, heliskiing is always guided by professionals who know their mountains and can expertly judge the risks.

If something does go wrong you have a chopper nearby for a rescue.

Most people find heliskiing easier than skiing off-piste in a resort; the powder

is fresher and not tracked out, and you can avoid the cruddy section at the end of the run where you have to make your way back to the lift. It's not just for skiers, either. If anything, it's slightly easier to heliboard than it is to ski, but only because it's less hassle loading the basket on the side of the helicopter. Plus, you can avoid the long flat sections that are the bane of a snowboarder's life. I'm at a standard on a board now where I have just as much fun facing sideways as forwards.

My first heliskiing experience was in New Zealand. We had been training on icy pistes for about three weeks. At the end of the trip it dumped with snow and we were able to organise a heli-day at the last minute. It's certainly not often you're that lucky, and the snow conditions were perfect.

Now I've well and truly got the bug and have heliskied all over the globe. Canada has some of the best heliskiing in the world, and is often backed up by a cat operation (where Sno-Cats are used to access the back country) if the weather is too bad to fly. Alaska has some great steep slopes that catch an incredible amount of snow. If you want to continue the fix into summer, head to Chile – the Andes are really impressive, on a whole different scale to the Alps.

I'll be returning to Canada over New Year to join and host the second leg of the **square mile** heliskiing trip, which begins with three days of skiing in

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Whistler before transferring deep into the north of British Columbia for four days of heliskiing. Northern BC had excellent snow last season, and is the best place to go in January.

That's where I join the adventure, and I'll be on hand to offer tips, share some of my stories and experiences and take to the skies before landing and skiing off in guaranteed fresh powder alongside the guests. Heliski experts Total Heliski, who are partners with **square mile** for the trip, will be there to pick the very best operators and areas to guarantee excellent snow conditions.

Whether you're an experienced heliskier or looking for your first taste of one of the most exhilarating winter sports out there, you should join us in British Columbia over the New Year break. I can't wait for the trip – heliskiing always leaves you wanting to come back for more. ■

○ You can join Graham and square mile on an exclusive New Year's heliski adventure in Canada. The trip departs on 27 December for three days of skiing in Whistler before transferring to the luxurious Yellow Cedar Lodge in British Columbia for four days of heliskiing, returning to the UK on 5 January. Places cost £6,385 pp (T&Cs apply); for more information visit squaremile.com/heliski or contact Hayley on 078 3402 0067

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