

HERE COMES THE BUS

(Fall Line, Dec 2000)

As with most things in life, if you want the best you have to pay for it. But as Alf Alderson discovered, heliskiing really is worth the cost - and no, you don't have to be an expert skier to enjoy it.

Yeah, I know, mention the word heliskiing and most skiers subconsciously feel for their wallet before allowing themselves the luxury of dreaming about untracked powder for a moment. Then its back to the real world of lift queues, tracked out runs and the fact that a dream is all it will ever be.

But forget about the cost for the moment, and think about what you'd get for your money instead. I can tell you that it's not just orgasmic skiing but memories that really do inspire you on those wet, grey days back home when life is just a drudge - the kind of memories that remind you that there is a world out there that is happy and shiny and was once yours, even if only for a day or two.

Having had the chance to heliski for two days in the Chilcotin Mountains of British Columbia last winter I can also tell you that after you've done it once, heliskiing will clutch at you like the worst sort of drug, such that I personally will now save, steal, borrow or sell my soul to go back and do it again. And as with drugs the cost becomes irrelevant, the high is what it's all about. I'm speaking as a man who has spent most of his life looking for the cheapest ski deal going, and been born and bred in Yorkshire I can assure you that I do not cast aside lightly my groats and shekels.

Yet when I actually stepped inside the helicopter at TLH Heliskiing for the first time - come to think of it, long before I stepped inside the helicopter - my main concern wasn't so much the cost so much as whether I'd actually be able to do it - be able to ski knee-deep, ungroomed powder, because I'd never really managed it before.

I was at that stage in my ski career where I was the classic intermediate. One, maybe two (frugal) weeks a year on the slopes of Europe or North America meant I was quite at home on hard reds and easier blacks, but all over the place if I went near anything too steep or deep or off piste - which was exactly what everyone else in our 'heli' group was in search of.

And way out in the spectacular wilderness of the Chilcotin Mountains is not the place to discover that steep and/or deep still doesn't really do it for you and can you take an easy groomed run down please - 'cos there ain't no groomers for several thousand square kilometres, matey.

So, how did I get on? And how much did it cost? Well, I'll tell you that later, because surely you want to know what the whole heliskiing thing is about for the first timer i.e. me - and probably you, too?

What it's about is spoiling yourself. TLH is based at Tyax Lodge, a luxurious, remote mountain lodge sixty miles down a dirt track to nowhere where the words 'no' and 'can't' are not part of the vocabulary. Arriving there on a Friday evening you're greeted with a one hour lecture on what heliskiing is all about, which includes lots of serious words like avalanche, rescue, transceiver etc. And in case you were worried about not knowing

what to do should you be involved in an avalanche, fret not, because you will be getting up at 6.30 am the next morning to learn just that - and how to get in and out of a helicopter without decapitating yourself.

Arising before light to wander around in temperatures of minus 10 C is best glossed over here, because the fun begins a couple of hours later after you've been supplied with an avalanche transceiver (which you can now use, can't you?) and fat skis, and assigned to your skiing group (based on ability levels, in which case I was surprised to find that I wasn't in a group of one labelled 'Rubbish'). Having consumed a hearty breakfast you clamber into one of TLH's three 'helis' (or 'buses' - no-one calls 'em 'choppers') for the finest flight across the mountains you have ever had.

Within two minutes of leaving the lodge you're passing over true backcountry wilderness, and within 15 minutes you're coming in to land amongst unnamed peaks from which spill pillow smooth glaciers. We had the added bonus of clear blue skies and dazzling sunlight sparkling off deep, untracked powder - a bluebird day if ever there was one. Strangely, you don't notice all this at first - exiting a helicopter in ski boots, with snow blizzarding all around you and adrenalin coursing through your body, there are too many things going on to calmly stand and appreciate the impassive and indifferent beauty of the mountains.

But once the helicopter has clattered away and silence falls you can hear the involuntary gasps and exclamations as people take time to look around them. No ski lift in the world could ever take you to a place like this, a place where the only sign of humans is the footprints that surround the group, and where mountains march to the horizon in ever darkening shades of blue like some monstrous ocean swell.

When you take time to look down the slope you'll be skiing it, too, is like nothing you've ever seen in a ski resort - as far as you can see are smooth, untracked fields of powder, tailing off thousands of feet below into pine glades.

Yet even when you have 3,500 square kms of terrain, over 300 runs to go at, and only eleven other skiers to share it with, it's impossible to get rid of the skier's Pavlovian response to an untracked powder field which is, of course, to get down it before anyone else.

So, as our guide Cliff bids us to follow him down a perfect powder field I, like everyone else, can't get there quick enough and before I know it I'm slicing through shin deep powder. Only three bits of advice come to mind - keep your weight evenly spread over both skis, 'lift' out of each turn and get into a rhythm, and from there the fat skis and possibly a little of my own ability do the rest.

Sure, there were a few hiccups and a few falls, but after a couple of runs I found myself floating effortlessly through airlight snow, and the steeper the runs the easier it often seemed. This was, of course, some of the finest powder in the world, but then that's part of what you're paying for.

Amongst the other things you're paying for are the opportunity to ski all day long through angel dust, to look back up an empty mountainside and see your own deep 'S' turns outlined in the snow, and to realise that hey, given the right conditions and the right equipment powder skiing isn't that hard at all. In fact the hardest thing is knowing that in the real world of lift queues and skied-out resorts you're going to be very, very lucky to catch anything like this again.

But above all what I came back with from my weekend heliskiing was the knowledge that you no longer have to be an expert skier to enjoy the very

best that skiing has to offer (being loaded helps though). And having had the time of your life in the back of beyond the challenges of any given ski resort definitely become less daunting - during the rest of my stay in Canada I found myself looking for off-piste action that, before I heliskied, I wouldn't have gone near - essentially, it had made me a better and more confident skier.

So, is heliskiing for you? If you're a good to advanced intermediate then yes, it is. And please, please don't whinge about not being able to afford it - a weekend's stay at a place like TLH will cost you about the same as week in an average European resort, and I know for a fact which of the two you'll remember for the rest of your life...

HELISKI TIPS

DO

Keep your head - literally. Follow the advice of your pilot and your guide about how to get in and out of the helicopter safely. No wandering aimlessly around the arse end of the machine unless you want dicing.

Listen to your guide. Ski where he/she tells you unless you want to have your fellow skiers using their transceivers for real to find you under several feet of snow.

Take good equipment. You'll get a chance to use that powder skirt at long last - and you'll need it. Goggles with a clip attachment on the head band (so snow doesn't get inside when taking 'em on and off) and gloves with good wrist seals are also a must.

Drink plenty of water (we had a supply in the helicopter and drank whilst being carried back up for another run). Heliskiing is a hard work out and the altitude and dry air will quickly dehydrate you.

Do check your 'vert'. The amount of downhill you've skied will be posted up in the lodge at the end of the day. We did 24,300' on our first day, which apparently was fairly average - still not bad for five hour's skiing though.

Rush for the hot tub when you get back down from the mountain. It's the most popular spot at the end of the day, and if there are Germans in your group you're in trouble.

DON'T

Bother taking your own skis (unless you've got good fat skis). Most heliski companies will hire powder skis for very reasonable rates.

Drink too much in the bar. After a good day heliskiing you'll want to celebrate with a beer or two (and in my case some wine and whisky too). You'll then wake up early but not bright next morning and there's nothing worse than a hangover at altitude.

Wave your skis around near the helicopter - unless you want them sliced like thin cut bread.

Worry about your ability. After one run I forgot to be worried about being able to ski powder, and so will you. It's easy.

Worry about the cost. After one run I forgot about the cost - who gives a toss when you're having so much fun?

Forget your camera. You'll get the best ski pics ever, and if your mates

aren't impressed order them from your house, never to return.

SAY

"That was the best run I've ever done" - 'cos it will be, over and over again.

"I'll carry the emergency pack" - everyone has to take turns (it contains the First Aid and avalanche rescue kit), it ain't heavy and everyone likes a volunteer.

"After you" - just once, at least.

"How much vert have we done?" - the more, the merrier.

"I'm coming back again, and I don't care what it costs" - yes, you too have become a powder junkie.

"My round" - you can afford to be generous, you've just had your best day's skiing ever.

DON'T SAY

"Here comes the chopper" - it's 'heli' or 'bus' - no-one calls 'em choppers.

"Can I drive the chopper" - no you can't and it ain't funny, the pilot's heard it a hundred times before.

"Where's my transceiver/skis/goggles/brain?" (unlike the dim Brits we encountered staying at TLH) - you're holding everyone up and this is costing big bucks.

"That wasn't steep enough" - no-one likes a show off, and your guide will soon find you something more than steep enough after a comment like that.

"My round" - you've spent enough already, haven't you?

IF YOU HAVE TO ASK YOU CAN'T AFFORD IT...

We had a chat with Mike Watling, sales manager at TLH Heliskiing, about just what it costs to run a 'heli'. Needless to say he didn't give too much away (like the little known fact that they run on diesel and can do up to 65 miles to the gallon), but here's what we prised out of him over a bottle of Bowmore malt.

How much does it cost to buy a heli? A new Bell 212 is 5 million, second hand it would cost around 2 million.

What are the daily fuel bills? I could tell you but I'd have to kill you. (See, we told you they run on diesel).

Overall daily running costs? As above. (Hmm, not giving too much away here, Mike...)

Cost of spares (eg, blades, oil filter, fan belt...)? Well, a new set of blades, for instance, costs ,000, which is one reason we're not keen on you getting your skis or head in between them.

How often are they serviced? Every day, without fail.

Do you ever get any down time? Not when we have important journalists to visit.

What shameless flattery - now give us the truth. OK, half a day a week on average, due to poor weather - but when that happens there's plenty to do at the lodge including snowmobiling, sauna and fitness room, and of course the ever-popular bar and hot tub.

Max speed? 130 knots.

Can they do mid-air rolls?! Let me know when you're coming back and we can try it!

HELISKI OPERATORS IN CANADA

(all rates based on 99/00 season) Alf Alderson skied with TLH Heliskiing Ltd. Head Office: PO Box 1118, Vernon, BC V1T 6N4. Tel. 001 250 558 5379 Fax 558 5389 e mail info@tlheliskiing.com, www.tlheliskiing.com. Rates for last season were from 1,501 for two days to 4,989 for seven days. This includes accommodation, all meals, guide service, use of avalanche transceivers and bus transfer from Vancouver or Whistler. This also includes guaranteed vertical feet of skiing varying from 29,000' for a two day package to 100,000' for a seven day package.

OTHER OPERATORS IN CANADA

(you can generally assume for packages of more than one day that accommodation and meals are provided. All operators will also provide guides, fat skis and avalanche transceivers).

Purcell Helicopter Skiing, Box 1530, Golden, BC V0A 1H0. Tel. 001 250 344 5410 Fax 001 250 344 6076 e mail purcell-heliskiing@rockies.net. One day to seven day packages from 444 - 4,200.

Kootenay Helicopter Skiing, Box 717, Nakusp, BC V0G 1R0. Tel. 001 250 265 3121 Fax 001 250 265 4447. Three to seven day packages from 2,310 - 5,385.

Great Canadian Heliskiing, Box 175, Golden, BC V0A 1H0. Tel. 001 250 3442326 Fax 001 250 344 2316 e mail heliski@rockies.net. Semi-private and private heliskiing with four skiers max per guide. 4,905 - 7,191 per week.

Robson Helimagic Inc., Hwy #5 North, Box 18, Valemount, BC V0E 2Z0. Tel. 001 250 566 4700 fax 001 250 566 4333 e mail brigitta@robsonhelimagic.com. One to seven day packages from 399 - 3,899.

Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing, Box 159, Blue River, BC V0E 1J0. Tel. 001 250 673 8381 Fax 001 250 673 8464 e mail mail@wiegele.com www.wiegele.com. Three to seven day packages from 2975 - 4985.

Whistler Heliskiing Ltd., Box 849, Whistler, BC V0N 1B0. Tel. 001 604 932 4105 Fax 001 604 938 1225 e mail heliski@direct.ca www.heliskiwistler.com. One day heliski deals from 365 per person.

RK Heli-Ski Panorama, 2045 Panorama Drive, Panorama, BC V0A 1K0. Tel. 001 250 342 3889 Fax 001 250 342 3466 e mail info@rkheliski.com www.rkheliski.com. One to five run packages eg 516 for a five run package.

Selkirk Tangiers Helicopter Skiing Ltd., 1925 Laforme Blvd., Box 130, Revelstoke, BC V0E 2S0. Tel 001 250 344 5016 Fax 001 250 344 7102 e mail selkirk@rockies.net www.selkirk-tangiers.com. One to seven day packages from 475 - 4,191.

Last Frontier Heliskiing Ltd., Box 1118, Vernon, BC V1T 6N4. Tel. 001 250

558 7980 Fax 001 250 558 7980 e mail lfh@tlheliskiing.com
www.tlheliskiing.com/lfh. Part of the TLH group, Last Frontier is based in north-west BC and has one of the largest skiable areas in the world - over a million acres. One week packages from 4940.

CMH Heliskiing, Box 1660, Banff, AB, T0L 0C0. Tel. 001 403 762 7100 Fax 001 403 762 5879 www.cmhski.com. Three to seven day packages from 2,310 - 3,244.

Assiniboine Heli Tours Inc., #1, 1225 Railway Ave., Canmore, AB T1W 1R4. Tel 001 403 678 5459 Fax 001 403 678 3075 e mail assiheli@telusplanet.net. Organise heliskiing packages through most of Canada's heliski operators - call them for details.

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