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Flying High

Heli-skiing in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia

Photography by Keoki Flagg

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There are certain words and expressions that take on disproportionate significance while seeking good snow in April: steep northeast face, 9,000-foot elevation, corn snow, helicopter, guide...

The words flash through my mind as, still dazed and dazzled months later, I recall a short but intense visit to TLH Heli-Skiing in B.C.'s Coast Mountains last April. All those concepts appeared in abundance. Visions of arcing down yet another 40-degree northeast face, the sun casting my two-storey-high roostertail's shadow before me, pulse through my brain and stop my work dead.

The approach had taken Ski Canada's editor, Jain MacMillan, and me from the magazine's ski test at Sun Peaks near Kamloops, past Cache Creek to Lillooet, where the Fraser River punches its remorseless hydraulic fist through a huge canyon into the Coast Mountains. From Lillooet, TLH's base lodge is another 100km northwest by a packed-dirt road piercing the Coast Mountain's eastern slopes, past a long reservoir and up onto a small, secluded lake.



Keoki Flagg Photos

"The snowboarders are right behind us, so spread out and trash as much of the face as you can...."

This is big country, enormous country. My various skiing, whitewater and fly-fishing peregrinations around Alberta have made me think of my home province as pretty big country. But the Chilcotin region-where towns are 100km apart, where the "highways" consist of narrow tracks along the edges of a 40-mile-long reservoir and a wandering eye can send you plunging off a cliff, where you lose yourself among range after range of mountains rising a mile above the bewildering matrix of valleys, where the peaks you skied yesterday are the laset ones on the horizon today - this is big country.

TLH's 830,000 acres - 1,200 square miles - of domain are themselves swallowed up in this vastness. The helicopter, with its strange duality of seemingly limitless mobility juxtaposed against its avian fragility, intensifies the feeling of exploration and isolation. The result is a grandeur that, in all its elements, elevates the act of skiing towards the threshold of epic. If the snow is right.

It was.

During our visit, the grass at the lodge was green and the nearby Bell 212' s took off in a hail of sand and gravel. Not to be deceived, however: the initial flight in is a good 30km, and during the morning we leapfrogged our way onto one of the Coast Mountains' main spines.

Our guide was Glen Wortley, a self-described redneck and - bless his heart - snowboard-hater, whose standard pre-run briefing usually consisted of "Ski the fall line," plus occasionally, "The snowboarders are right behind us, so spread out and trash as much of the face as you can." The one time Glen said, "Don't ski over to the right," Ian felt compelled to issue a Clintonian reply: "Can you define the word don't."

One of the unique benefits of a significantly more stable snowpack than heli-skiing in the Interior is the noticeable lack of the army-like regimentation normally found heli-skiing. The biggest benefit, of course, was being able to ski the steeps, something that many good skiers complain has all but purged from other Canadian heli-skiing operations by avalanche angst.

But Glen proved adept at finding the late-season powder on the steep northeast faces that lurk all over TLH's terrain. As Glen explained, in spring, the northeast faces get only morning sun, when the air is still cold, doing minimal damage to the precious pow. North and northwest faces get afternoon sun, when the air has warmed, wetting the snow. The snow is best of all on northeast faces shaded further by rock walls.

One of TLH's best practices is having only two groups of skiers per helicopter. Not only is your ride almost always waiting for you at the bottom, there are also far fewer of the time-sapping fuel runs found at operations that run three, four or even five groups per machine. As well, it cuts way down on helicopter clatter shattering the wilderness air, and - more importantly - skiing urns defiled by 50 sets of tracks.

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— George Koch, MountainZone.com Correspondent


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