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TRAVEL

LATEST NEWS AT CALGARYHERALD.COM/TRAVEL

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SATURDAY, MARCH 3, 2012

TRAVEL
NOTESGet hyper-local
in L.A and
San Francisco

WEB BUZZ • If you're planning a first-time trip or even a revisit, here's a new app that digs deep into L.A. and San Francisco.

Local authors help unlock the secrets of the two California cities.

Name: Know What
Available for: iPhone, iPad

What it does: This app curates hyper-local city guide information from people who "know what" they're talking about. Locals — who are also authors, journalists and well-known bloggers — reveal their city's possibilities based on their favourites.

Cost: Starts at \$2.99

What's hot: Go straight to the themes (Arts & Culture, Food, Kids & Family, Nature & Outdoors, etc.) or authors that are important to you. Get "On the Trail of the Black Dahlia" from expert tour guide Esotouric, or "The Best Veg Good in the Bay Area as Picked by Genius Experts" from popular vegan lifestyle blogger Vegansaurus. I was hungry to download "San Francisco's Top 30 Taquerias." Like this app? New York, Chicago, Boston, Seattle and Portland, Ore., will be added this year.

What's not: In-app purchases are a big turnoff. Why charge \$2.99 upfront if it's going to cost an additional 99 cents to \$3.99 for each guide within? Just break the cost down per city, and charge for that. I'd rather pay \$6.99 for a city guide than \$2.99 three times.

Worth it: Yes and no. You're getting top-notch content in a gorgeous format with easy-to-use directions, but tapping into all the articles could put a dent in your wallet. Browse topics before you get too excited.

— Jen Leo, Los Angeles Times

Tag your bags
with a dash
of style

GEAR • Moleskine notebooks have long had an enthusiastic following.

The brand's association with creative minds has made it the Apple computer of the notebook world: It has diehard groupies with cult-like devotion to the name and classic style. If you are one such fan (or long to be one) you'll be pleased to hear that the Moleskine name has grown to include luggage tags.

Constructed with the same esthetic as the time-honoured scribblers — hard cover, rounded corners and elastic closure — the baggage identifiers are sold in several vibrant colours, as well as inscribed with the brand's signature phrase, "In case of loss, please return to..."

— Herald News Services

POWDER
to the peopleInnovative
heli-skiing
course helps
novice
wilderness
skiers master
the steeps

MARK Sissons
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD
VALEMOUNT, B.C.

"I've never been glade skiing in the wilderness before! Just don't look at the trees and you'll do fine," instructs the man I've just met who has my life in his hands for the next seven days.

Perched on a windswept ridge line, I digest his advice while the Bell 212 helicopter that just deposited us on the roof of British Columbia's Cariboo Mountains swoops away between

snowcapped peaks that rise like whitecaps on an ocean of clouds.

Forcing visions of a head-on hardwood collision from my mind, I point my fat skis toward the fall line of a wide, untouched slope smothered by a blanket of powder. Further down lies an obstacle course of snow-encrusted fir trees that take on whimsical shapes.

I'm awkwardly carrying drunken S-shapes in the snow, tumbling often into waist-deep, feather-light powder.

Then cautiously weaving through the silent forest far below, forcing myself not to look at those darn trees. The whoosh of my boards, yelps of joy from my companions, and our guide's "whoop whoop!" yodel, directing us toward our pickup location are the only sounds that break the silence of this timeless wilderness.

No wonder they call your first heli-skiing run "the point of no return."

WHERE HEAVEN AND
EARTH MEET
Helicopter-assisted



CMH's "Powder 101" groups are led by two specially-trained guides, allowing for practical instruction and splitting the group according to ability.

sking and snowboarding in Western Canadian mountain ranges like the Cariboo, Selkirk and Bugaboos is as good as it gets. Easy access to massive amounts of terrain, unmatched snow conditions and some of the best operators in the business have made this rugged region legendary among powder hounds.

So what's a powder pup like me with barely an off-piste run to my name doing off the grid, playing with the big dogs? Until recently, heli-skiing was generally considered an extreme sport only accessible to well-

heeled, elite skiers. Like most mountain mortals I watched those Warren Miller movies showing daredevils plunging down impossibly steep and deep wilderness runs in exhilarating dances with gravity with awe and envy.

Then I heard about an innovative new weekend intro to heli-skiing course offered this season by industry leader Canadian Mountain Holidays. Designed to make heli-skiing more accessible to average resort skiers with deep pockets and a willingness to get outside their comfort zones, "Powder 101" aims to help them make the transition to a new world of deep

powder wilderness skiing. Suddenly, learning to carve my snowy signature down untracked slopes blanketed with the fluffiest champagne powder on Earth seemed achievable for a groomer grinder.

Since CMH practically invented the sport of heli-skiing in North America, and has been the undisputed industry leader for over 40 years, and has exclusive access to a wilderness area half the size of Switzerland, I figured I'd be in good hands on my first foray way, way out of bounds.

"If you're comfortable on intermediate runs at most resorts, willing to tackle the occasional black-diamond run, and have a real sense of adventure, you're ready for Powder 101," the CMH representative assured me when I made inquiries back in December.

Fast-forward a month and here I am living every skier's wildest dream — riding in helicopters, cruising down untouched glaciers where a single "run" would hold entire ski areas in other parts of the world, and carving first tracks through pristine backcountry filled with evergreen forests half buried in the fluffiest snow on Earth.

SEE POWDER, PAGE I2

Each of CMH's 11 lodge operations encompasses more than 1,000 square kilometres and offers over 125 runs for the exclusive use of up to 50 skiers.

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12 Saturday, March 3, 2012

TRAVEL

Breaking news at calgaryherald.com

POWDER: Safety comes first and then get your backcountry groove on

FROM II

All under the expert supervision of senior CMH guide J.E. Lacombe, a warm, exuberant and incredibly patient French Canadian who has been leading groups into these mountains with CMH for nearly 20 years. He recently helped design the Powder 101 intro program, which features two guides, on-slope instruction and a more relaxed pace.

"This week I'm going to show you all how to safely ski with a partner in the mountains and forests and recognize some of the hazards inherent in wilderness skiing," Lacombe explains to my group of Powder novices during mandatory avalanche training on our first morning at CMH's Cariboo Lodge.

SURVIVAL SKILLS

Safety, of course, is of paramount concern in heli-skiing, where fatalities do occasionally occur. No matter how well trained and prepared we are, equipped with avalanche beacons, shovels and probes, the real risk remains that we might inadvertently trigger one of these deadly tsunamis of snow, ice, rocks and debris that every winter snuff out lives in the wilderness. Or plunge into tree wells — dangerous areas of deep, loose snow surrounding the buried trunks of trees that can literally swallow a skier or snowboarder, possibly causing serious injury or death.

"My biggest concern from a safety perspective prior to coming was the risk of avalanches, the idea of flying in the helicopter, and as we got into the training, the tree wells," admits Powder instructor Brian Nilstoft, a pharmaceutical industry executive from Delaware on a long-awaited family adventure with his brother Erik and retired father, Clas, a ski racer in his youth who now lives in Aspen.

"There was a lot of trepidation and anxiety. Two weeks out I called my dad and said I'm really nervous. He said he was nervous too," Nilstoft adds.

FINDING A RHYTHM

Initial concerns quickly turn to childlike delight as our novice group (ranging in age from 25-70, roughly a third of whom are female) gradually gets its backcountry groove on. With Lacombe's expert guidance, I quickly learn to relax my burning quads and find the rhythm of floating on deep powder, leaving what resemble jet streams of snow in my wake.

Executing small vertical movements instead of wide carving arcs, turning both skis into a single platform while bouncing up and down slightly to pressure the snow, maintaining level shoulders facing the fall line to better negotiate the tight turns required while skiing trees, and resisting the urge to sit back when the going gets steep — it all starts to make muscle memory sense after a couple of days.

Speed, I soon discover, is also

my friend on powder, unlike on groomed runs, where rapid acceleration often ends in a crash. The faster I go, the better I'm able to maintain my balance and float on top of the powder, which acts as a natural break if I exceed my velocity comfort zone and risk overtaking Lacombe. Heli-skiing cardinal rule No. 1: the guide must always remain well out in front of the group to plot the safest course through avalanche zones and avoid potentially deadly encounters with cornices, rocks, crevasses and hidden cliffs.

FAST FRIENDS

The satisfaction that comes with learning the basics of backcountry skiing is rivalled only by the camaraderie that rapidly forms within our group.

"Each of us has a responsibility to look out for our partners and for the entire group," says Lacombe one day over a slope-side lunch delivered by chopper when I ask him what, besides the spectacular scenery and singular adventure, makes heli-skiing so special and rewarding.

"There's this sense of shared accountability that you wouldn't necessarily encounter at a ski resort. These mountains have a way of bringing people together, and also of bringing them down to Earth," he says.

For 60-year-old Evans Ward, a Vietnam veteran on his first heli-skiing tour of duty, this week is ultimately about teamwork.

"Heli-skiing is a totally unique experience. There are no lift lines. You're out there all by yourselves. On top of incredibly beautiful mountains, watching out for each other, which produces instant group camaraderie," he says, joking that the last time he was in a helicopter he was being shot at.

"This is a whole lot better," Ward adds, smiling.

SNOWFIELDS OF DREAMS

What, indeed, could be better than having at your exclusive disposal nearly 2,600 square kilometres of the world's most challenging skiable terrain dumped on by up to 15 metres of snow per season. A helicopter standing by to deliver you daily to snowfields of your dreams. A luxury wilderness lodge to call home that offers gourmet cuisine, a well-stocked wine cellar and pampering spa facilities. Most refreshing of all, a genuinely friendly staff that goes out of their way to make you feel like you're spending a week at a family-run lodge. Everyone from



A Canadian Mountain Holidays guide watches one of the company's Bell 212 helicopters prepare to ferry a group of skiers to another epic run in B.C.'s Cariboo Mountains.

Mark Sissons for the Calgary Herald

If You Go

■ Canadian Mountain Holidays offers 11 heli-ski areas in British Columbia. Each location offers world-class heli-skiing, with access to both wide-open glacier skiing and tree (glade) skiing. All lodges provide comfortable rooms with fully stocked private baths, gourmet cuisine and spa facilities.

■ CMH's Cariboo Lodge is located in British Columbia's Cariboo Range, which offers a wide range of both extensive alpine runs and phenomenal tree-skiing. Consistently high levels of snowfall in the North Thompson Valley ensure that the Cariboo enjoys prime heli-skiing conditions until late in the season.

■ Powder 101: The intro is CMH's new course designed to get novices ready to make the transition to powder skiing. Each intro group consists of up to 10 skiers. These trips are designed to introduce strong intermediate skiers to deep snow skiing and move them past the initial hurdles of skiing in wilderness terrain. This program is not for beginner skiers. You should be a newcomer to deep snow skiing and at least a strong intermediate skier.

■ Trip costs: Seven-day Powder 101 trips are available starting from \$6,100 per person, which includes all meals and transport to and from Calgary.

■ When to go: Heli-skiing season

in Western Canada normally runs from December until the end of April, and occasionally into May.

■ Getting there: CMH trips begin and end in Calgary, from where guests are transported by bus and helicopter to the company's remote wilderness lodges.

■ Peak preparation: Proper conditioning is vital to making the most of your heli-skiing holiday. Hire a personal trainer, hit the gym, and start a serious exercise and stretching program at least eight weeks before your trip.

■ Recommended gear: Outfitting yourself in the right all-weather gear is essential to getting the most out of your heli-skiing holiday. Two industry leading Vancouver-based technical clothing manufacturers, Arc'teryx and Westcomb, provide premium-quality, stylish, highly functional all-mountain apparel lines guaranteed to make your days carving fresh wilderness tracks as comfortable as possible.

■ You also may want to pack a handy hands-free video camera to document your alpine adventures. Then post the proof online for all of your jealous friends and family back home to see.

■ For more info, visit canadianmountainholidays.com or call 1-800-661-0252



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