

The Dallas Morning News



THIS MONTH: SKI AND SNOW

TODAY: Heli-skiing in Canada DECEMBER: City life: New York. Madrid, Istanbul,

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WITH SKY AT YOUR BACK



A helicopter deposits a group of heli-skiers on a mountaintop n British Columbia's outh Chilcotin

In the Canadian Rockies, experience the rush of heli-skiing

By MARK SISSONS

EAR GOLD BRIDGE, British Columbia — "To be honest, I am not here to visit Canada. I came here to go heli-skiing. If the best skiing was in North Korea, I would go there."

So says Frank Naumann, a taciturn, middle-aged software engi-neer from Coburg, Germany, as we sip lagers and watch the snow swirling outside. Today was supposed to be Naumann's first chance to finally realize a lifelong dream of heli-skiing in the Canadian Rockies. But Mother Nature has gone and dumped all over his deep-powder

See HELI-SKIING Page 4K



British Columbia, where the sport top heli-skiing operators



NORTHERN IRELAND

Road leads to intrigues of 'Game of Thrones'

locations from the hit TV series

By JOHN OSEID

COUNTY ANTRIM, Northern Ireland — "A mad-man sees what he sees," said Philip McComb as we drove over the green Antrim plateau, a steady Northern Ireland rain

slashing at our coach windows.
As even a modest watcher
of HBO's Game of Thrones knows, our guide was quoting Ned Stark from "Winter Is

Following single-lane ads, our McComb's Coach Travel tour took us through the Travel four took us through the nine gorgeous glens that carve their way through County Antrim, which experiences "five seasons in a day."

Home to the fictional medical Westers Antrim is whose

eval Westeros, Antrim is where much of GOT is filmed, in-cluding the pivotal misty hill-side scene in which Lord Ned beheads a Night's Watch de-serter, dismissing the crazed man's prophetic warning of having encountered the dread-ed Whitewalker creatures. Later, in a dark cave off the

shore at Cushendun village, we huddled around McComb.

generated imagery trans-formed the small space into the creepy den where Mel-isandre gives birth to the cerie "shadow baby" assasin. Skirting past spectacular headlands along the Causeway Coastal Route, we drove right into Larrybane Quarry, and I immediately recomized the

immediately recognized the white limestone cliffs as the amphitheater-like camp where lady knight Brienne of Tarth triumphs in a sword duel. After a week of binge-

watching four seasons of GOT, I may not speak the invented language of Dothraki, but I know my House Stark from House Lannister. Still. I was no

Heli-skiing is British Columbia's specialty

"Don't worry, Frankie, we're still looking good for tomor-row," shouts veteran heli-ski guide Matt Valade from across the bar at Tyax Wilderness Resort, a recently renovated 29-room luxury log lodge with a large dining room and a state-of-the-art spa on the shores of Tyaughton Lake, 200 miles north of Vancouver. "Make sure you bring your powder legs," Valade adds. "You're going to need them." Half a century after heli-

Hara century are nei-copters first transported dare-devil recreational skiers high into the mountains of British Columbia, heli-skiing is still the ultimate alpine rush for many. Today, more than 90 percent of heli-skiing operations call the immense ranges of the Canadian Rockies home, which makes Canada the sport's undisputed world cap

One of those operations is TLH Heliskiing, based out of Tyax Lodge in the heart of the South Chilcotin Range. Rising from a high plateau, cool, dry air meets the storms of the air meets the storms of the Pacific here, resulting in a deep, buttery-smooth snow-pack that's consistently drier than what's found on the west side of the Coast Mountains. And boasting an average annu-al snowfall of 15 to 80 feet across a range that spans some 830,000 acres, from rolling slopes to steep chutes to beautifully treed glades, this is prime heli-ski country. Now, if it could just stop snowing and let us let 'er rip

Calm after the storm

Naumann's impatience turns to nervous anticipation at breakfast the next morning when Valade gives us the green light to go heli-skiing. Even though the skies have yet to fully clear and landing high on the surrounding glaciers is temporarily out of the question due to serious avalanche risks, he reckons we can safely check out some lower-elevation glad-ed runs through moss-covered

pines packed with fresh snow.

Because of the inherent
risks involved in heli-skiing, Canada's operators, including TLH, take safety extremely seriously. After the requisite avalanche safety exercise, each skier is issued a Vario ABS backpack with strict instruc-tions to keep the rip cord from catching on anything while in the chopper, lest it inadvertent-ly launch the internal airbag. Designed to help keep you on or near the snow's surface. giving you a fighting chance should you be swept away in a deadly avalanche, ABS backpacks are now standard safety gear among many heli-ski operators. Out here there are never any guarantees, but they do provide some peace of mind.

Prepped and pumped, our group of nine skiers and two guides piles into the jet-pow-ered Bell 212 chopper waiting to transport us to vast stretc of untracked powder, where vast stretches





Dry, deep and light, the snow on the South Chilcotin Range is made for heli-skiing

beautifully treed runs and steeps await. Turns out, I'm the only North American in the group. Joining me are three Swiss German couples, one Swiss Italian and last night's German drinking companion, finally cracking a smile. Since I'm the only one who

has heli-skied before, I expect our first day in the mountains to be a steep learning curve for the others, who are all excellent resort skiers. Hundreds of potential runs await us, and Valade has assured everyone that after many years spent skiing the South Chilcotin backcountry, he has a pretty good idea where all the best powder stashes are hiding.

Into the wild

With a helicopter you can access untouched terrain that resort-bound skiers can only dream about. TLH offers one helicopter per group, which means more freedom to venture out to where the best snow conditions are without losing

time coordinating pickups and drop-offs all day with other groups. That means our op-tions are only live. tions are only limited by weather and terrain. And because TLH offers unlimited vertical, we can ski or ride as much as we can handle with-out worrying about incurring

additional charges.
On this morning, my Euro-pean companions sit in stunned silence as the magnitude of their vast wilderness playground unfolds beneath us, 200 times larger than Vail, Colo., and 10 times larger than Les Trois Vallées, France. After touching down and bailing out of the helicopter, they start off making clinically tight turns, zigzagging in tight, precise formation, as they normally would down any crowded slope in the Alps. Except these runs are always empty, and go on and on seemingly forever through waist-deep British Columbia powder. "Don't be afraid to spread

out and take wider turns as long as you stay within the boundaries I've indicated," shouts Valede as we prepare to descend a typical 3,000-foot-long gladed run. "But always make sure you buddy up in the trees." Naumann, now nicknamed

Naumann, now nicknamed Frankie Longlegs by our guides, nods sternly at me. We'll be partners in the woods today, keeping tabs on each other as we follow Valade through piles of light powder, ever vigilant to avoid tumbling headfirst into deadly tree wells—deep, narrow areas of loose snow around the trunks of snow around the trunks of trees that can literally swallow up and suffocate an unlucky skier. It's weirdly comforting to know that I've got the Nau-mannator watching my back out here.

Backcountry bliss

Safely back at Tyax Resort that afternoon, my Swiss com-panions hover around the massive rock fireplace facing a lake-view dining room, excitedly swapping first impres-

When you go

TLH is one of the closest heli-skiing operations to a majo TLH is one of the closest hell-skiing operations to a major international airport. Guests can choose to fly directly to the lodge from Vancouver, arrive via helicopter from Pemberton Airport, a three-hour drive north of Vancouver and just half an hour from Whistler. or take a chartered bus from Vancouver or Whistler. Transfers from Vancouver are included with all packages. Additional transfers may also be arranged. Because o its prowintly to Whistler, a hell-ski adventure at Type. Resort can also be easily combined with a stay at North America's largest snowsports resort. tlhheliskiing.com.

Staying
Canada's largest log lodge, the 29-room Tyax Wilderness Resort
& Spa offers spacious, comfortable accommodations in a
pristine backcountry setting tyax.com.

TLH is the only BC-based operator offering unlimited vertical and single-group helicopters as standard heli-ski packages which range from three to seven days. All packages include unlimited vertical and use of powder skis and Vario ABS

sions. In the space of a few memorable hours they've gone from reserved to revelatory as they take turns describing their first heli-skiing experi-

"When I saw the YouTube videos of heli-skiing here, I said, 'Wow, is it really true?' " recalls Roger Stucki, a rea estate executive from Zurich. "This is much, much better than I ever imagined. The immensity of powder here is just crazy."

It's been a long first day in

the mountains, and the single-malt whiskeys and three-course gournet meal featuring locally sourced West Coast cuisine feel like well-deserved rewards. Some guests have booked post-dinner massages booked post-dinner massages or will subject wind-whipped skin to a eucalyptus steam bath or detoxifying infrared sauna. Others will play a round of billiards beneath the lounge's quintessentially Canadian moose head or soaktheir slope-stiffened muscles be-neath a cloudless night sky in the lodge's huge outdoor hot

Unlike my European crew mates, who've all signed on for a full week, I only have another day to experience these mountains before I have to head back home to Vancouver. And it will be a memorable day that will see our group tackle the steeps and cruise glacier after glacier on breathtaking runs that seem to go on forever. By the end of it, the Swiss have all adjusted their skiing styles to open up and just cruise rather than wiggle their way down epic glacier faces. Even Frankie Longlegs, as serious a man as I've ever encountered, won't be able to stop grinning like a 10-year-old. "I have to tell you," Nau-

mann will confide to me in a conspiratorial tone as we lounge in the snow around our helicopter during lunch, "I like this Canadian heli-skiing very

Take that, North Korea. Mark Sissons is a freelance writer in Vancouver, Canada.

Catch a wave — at a ski resort

Silver Mountain's indoor water park doubles the fun

By JONATHAN MARTIN

The ritual après-ski drink at the Idaho ski resort Silver Mountain comes with a unique twist: 60,000 gallons of water per minute, moving at 35 mph. That volume is shot across a surfing platform at an indoor

The water park is the flashiest element of an effort to draw families to smaller and less known northern Idaho ski areas. Silver Mountain and Lookout Pass, 25 miles apart on Interstate 90, offer good bargains and ample snow.
After a day teaching my
daughter to do stem Christies

at Silver Mountain, while enjoying short lift lines and dry Western Rockies snow, I set-tled down with a local microbrew at Silver Mountain's

congressional pork paid for a 3-mile gondola ride linking the resort with the struggling former mining town of Kel-

logg.
The gondola carries skiers to the base of Kellogg Peak and Wardner Peak, which offer diverse terrain — steeps, trees, cruisers, three snowboard

parks, a tubing center — and 2,200 vertical feet of skiing across 1,600 acres and five lifts. There are no frills in the lodge and a few slow, old dou-

Silver Mountain is in Kellogo Idaho, just off Interstate 90.

Back at the base, the water park, which is the size of a football field, kept my preteens heavily occupied for two straight nights. A lazy river snakes between a children's water fort, the surf wall, two tube slides and spray areas. The family next to us were

