

Travel

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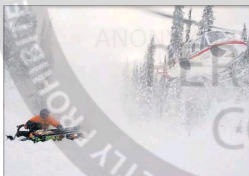
Section K

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BRITISH COLUMBIA

A powdery paradise



The remote Galena wonderland is accessible in winter only via helicopter.

Heli-skiing is downhill heaven at remote Canadian lodge

By MARK SISSONS
Special Contributor

In British Columbia's mountainous interior, the ultimate downhill ski experience awaits those who dare seize it.

A guy wearing goggles is yelling at me, and we just met.

"Do you speak English?" shouts veteran Canadian Mountain Holidays heli-ski guide, Bernie Wiatzka, confronting me for getting lost on our very first run — a super long, super steep maze through tightly packed forests appropriately called Mega Bubba. "What part of follow my tracks didn't you understand?"

Wiatzka may talk tough, but there's a method to his rudeness. Ensuring that his clients not only enjoy but survive their heli-skiing holiday, for starters. Unlike in politics, going rogue in heli-skiing is never a good idea.

The next morning, Wiatzka again makes it crystal clear: "Most people who ski into crevasses die," he says after our group of 10 skiers and boarders exits a thundering Bell 212 helicopter on the glistening peak of a massive glacier. "So if you want to die, ski on the right of my line where those crevasses are."

Crevasses, avalanches and tree wells large enough to swallow you whole. These are the ever-present dangers that await avid off-piste skiers and boarders who flock to Canadian Mountain Holidays' 11 lodges and their exclusive 3 million-acre tenure — over a third the size of Switzerland — with its endless untapped virgin powder fields. But if you crave the ultimate downhill high, there's nothing even close to the exhilaration of carving your swishy signature down on the powdery face of a remote mountain that resort-restricted skiers and boarders can only dream of tackling.

Accessible in winter only via helicopter, remote Galena Lodge, where Wiatzka has guided for over 25 years, is known worldwide for its ultra-deep snow, steep tree skiing and plenty of drops and cliffs for those who are into big air time. Three major valleys converge close to this legendary backcountry lodge, a magnet for expert riders and skiers, including the world's snowboarding elite. Even for intermediate backcountry skiers like



Set in the heart of British Columbia's wilderness, Canadian Mountain Holidays' Galena Lodge is renowned for its steep and deep tree skiing terrain.

Photos by Mark Sissons/Special Contributor

Danger and untapped powder await heli-skiers

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me, that all adds up to a powdery paradise.

Safety first

All of this convergence of wow factors makes Galena also the most challenging place to guide of all the Canadian Mountain Holidays areas, daring seasoned guides like Wiatzka to safely push their guests beyond their comfort zones while keeping the group well within theirs.

On Wiatzka's orders, we buddy up for safety while tackling the insanely steep, densely forested runs Galena is famous for, pounding through thigh deep powder, plunging off sudden drops and having the time of our lives. When the clouds disperse, our chopper soars higher, depositing its giddy passengers on mountaintops with miles of powdery slopes to play in awaiting us wait. Heaven doesn't have to wait. It's already here.

"Heli-skiing ruins all other kinds of skiing. You can't beat it," says Lloyd Taylor, a screenwriter from Los Angeles on his first backcountry ski trip. "There's no sensation on earth like floating through powder for as far as you can see surrounded by the most beautiful vistas you could possibly imagine."

Taylor and his friend Paul Ellis, also from L.A., admit that they didn't know what to expect when they signed up for this guy's getaway on steroids.

"I had a lot of anxiety, just a lot of unknowns," says Taylor over dinner one evening at the lodge. "But it has exceeded my expectations, tenfold. Once I got here I felt like I was in great hands. They are such pros here at Galena. I feel very safe."

Safety is the No. 1 priority for Canadian Mountain Holidays and Canada's other heli-ski operators. Their businesses, as well as the lives of their



Photos by Mark Sissons/Special Contributor

Galena is a great choice if you are looking for steep tree skiing and epic pillows.

guests and employees, depend on it.

Canadian Mountain Holidays is the largest single employer of mountain guides worldwide with over 120 professionals averaging more than 14 years of experience. Each guide has completed an 8-year certification process with the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides or the International Federation of Mountain Guides Association.

"I feel like Galena's guides strike the right balance between managing the safety of the whole group and letting individuals have a really good time," says Tad Dodson, a technology consultant and certified ski guide from Lake Tahoe, here for his first dose of wilderness spring skiing, Canadian style.

He's clearly impressed. "Heli-skiing here is a great way to ski the most powder you'll ever ski per hour in your life," he adds.

Team spirit

Dodson, Taylor and Ellis are in my group, one of three divided ac-

If you go

Accessed via a helipad located 175 miles north of Kelowna via Revelstoke, Canadian Mountain Holidays' Galena Lodge has 20 single and 12 double/twin rooms, all with private bath, plus a bar-lounge area, dining room, exercise equipment, games room, shop, massage, whirlpool and sauna. Five- to 7-day heli-ski packages starting from \$5,124 run from early December to early April. For more information, visit canadianmountainholidays.com or call 800-661-0252.

ording to stamina and skill level during a five-day trip to what is arguably the best powder snow in North America. Camaraderie grows quickly and organically as we take one plunge after another into what is for everyone except our guides the great unknown.

"I've got your back" soon becomes a familiar refrain as we rapidly become a cohesive unit, cruising down the runs in unison, the odd spec-



File map



British Columbia's spectacular Selkirk Mountains offer adventurous challenges for strong off-piste skiers and snowboarders.

tacular crash notwithstanding. This instant bonding is one of the great unexpected pleasures of heli-skiing — or for any wilderness activity, for that matter — where lives depend on the kindness (and alertness) of strangers.

At Galena's spacious, comfortable lodge, we celebrate each exhilarating day together over après-ski drinks and in the hot tub before gathering for communal meals where every member of staff pitches in serving and clearing plates. The guides and senior staff take turns joining us for dinner.

"It's a real communal vibe here," notes Ellis. "The staff sits at your table and interacts with you, inviting you into their world. It's very intimate and feels like real kinship."

Since Canadian Mountain Holi-

days founder Hans Gmoser basically invented heli-skiing back in 1965, his vision of bringing guests and guides together to enjoy the best skiing mountains on earth hasn't changed much. Even famously taciturn Wiatzka — who one afternoon dramatically demonstrates how to extract ourselves from a potentially deadly tree well — happily breaks bread with us over dinner, patiently answering questions he's no doubt heard a thousand times before.

"I'm feeling the Bern!" exclaims one of our group later that evening, eliciting a trace of a wry smile from our favorite guide as we stand kibitzing around Galena's huge fire pit, everyone swapping tall ski stories. Up here at world heli-skiing country headquarters, that's not some trendy political rallying cry. It's the call of the wild.

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