

Travel

The Dallas Morning News

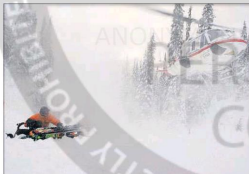
Section K

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DALLASNEWS

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

See DANGER Page 5K

Ski all day, glamp at night

Fly-in, fly-out base camp offers wilderness with amenities

By MARK SISSONS
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As our sleek Astar AS350 helicopter swoops down like a bird of prey into the twisting river valley, I half expect to hear Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" blasting from its

onboard speakers and the pilot shouting maniacally about loving the smell of napalm in the morning. Thankfully, this isn't *Apocalypse Now*. In heli-skiing, Canadian style, in one of the largest tenures that North America has to offer — over 3,000 square miles of wild and pristine backcountry deep in the Skeena Mountains east of the historic Northern British Columbian town of Smithers.

Snowfall is reliably heavy up here and the dry powder plentiful due to a fortuitous confluence of coastal precipitation, interior dryness and

a cooler northern climate. Best of all, the variety of terrain is massive: steep and deep vertical slopes with intimidating names like Eye of the Tiger, powder bowls feeding into pillows and chutes, and tight trees alternating with acres of open, sweeping glades. All surrounded by some of the most spectacular alpine scenery the cradle of heli-skiing has to offer.

My companions — eight middle-aged Australians and a peripatetic young Italian advertising executive

See HELICOPTER Page 5K



A spacious "Freedom" with a view is where skiers congregate for gourmet meals and evening socializing.

Skeena Heli-skiing

PHOTO BY MARK SISSONS FOR THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
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Helicopter is parked outside your tent

Continued From Page 1K

on a round-the-world ski sab-batlon — are clearly having the time of their lives judging from their whoops, wide-eyed grins and triumphant high fives at the end of every breathtaking run. Most are first-time heli-skiers, bedazzled by the grandeur of these mountains and thrilled to be realizing many a resort-bound skier's ultimate fantasy.

As one of their number, a hulking construction contractor named Pete Roberts shouts to me after one particularly breathtakingly long run: "Mate, this is as bloody good as it gets. I can't believe we're actually here."



An Astar AS350 helicopter is at Base Camp's exclusive disposal.

Glamping gone wild

This isn't the first time I've boarded a whirlybird for a multi-day dose of backcountry bliss. A veteran of several heli-skiing adventures in the province where the sport was born over half a century ago, I'm nonetheless intrigued by Skeena Heliskiing's uniquely immersive fly-in, fly-out concept called Base Camp.

Entering its third season of operation, Canadian heli-skiing's first foray into "glamping" is erected at the start of each ski season and accepts guests for just a brief six-week window before being taken down when the snow melts come April.

Located in the Skeena's Kudo Valley, Base Camp comprises one spacious communal geodesic dining tent nicknamed the "Freedome," a hot shower tent, and five two-person sleeping tents equipped with thermostat-controlled heaters and rustic log beds covered in cozy sheep wool duvets. Waste products are flown out and compostable toilets are used to minimize environmental impact. Designed as a "no-fills" option to pricier packages, Base Camp appeals to heli-skiers more excited about close proximity to the best runs than Jacuzzi, wine cellars and après-ski, in-room massages.

"It was our goal to provide something new to heli-skiing, an all-inclusive experience that is truly a wilderness experience," says lead Skeena guide and company co-owner Giacomo "Jake" Frei, a former professional ski racer and guide in Europe with over a decade of experience heli-ski guiding in British Columbia.

Base Camp may be a more authentic wilderness experience than most heli-skiing accommodations, but it still offers amenities like gourmet food, hot showers, ski boot dryers and all the beer and wine we can consume after a hard day in the steeps. Best of all, our very own helicopter is parked just yards away, waiting to sweep us up into our private powder playground each morning.

Bonding in the bush

At Base Camp everything slows down — except the skiing and socializing. Designed as an intimate environment where everyone can feel a part of a memorable adventure skiing experience, its setup fosters authentic backcountry bonding and is perfect for groups.

I make fast friends with the Aussies, mostly blue-collar types who grew up together in the same small



Harriet Hadfield Photography

Skeena Heliskiing's immersive wilderness Base Camp includes one spacious communal geodesic dining tent nicknamed the "Freedome," a hot shower tent, and five two-person sleeping tents.

town near Sydney. They're here to celebrate one of them reaching the mid-century mark, saying that Base Camp's more rugged appeal was exactly what they were seeking.

Back for a second tour of downhill duty, Nico the Italian assures me that he wouldn't trade Base Camp's spontaneous camaraderie for the more posh creature comforts of nearby Bear Claw Lodge, a palatial five-star fishing chalet located in the nearby Kispiox Valley, only 12 minutes away from us by helicopter. Skeena Heliskiing leaves Bear Claw for the entire winter season to accommodate guests who would rather be pampered after hours than trek through the snow for midnight bathroom breaks.

A healthy addiction

During our week at Base Camp, we experience the full gamut of Northern British Columbia weather. On sun-drenched bluebird days, we effortlessly slice our signatures into glistening



Skeena Heliskiing

Base Camp guests sleep in cozy two-person winterized tents equipped with thermostat-controlled heaters.

glaciers. On the occasional morning or afternoon when inclement weather prohibits flying, Jake's hyper energetic brother, Schimun, the camp handyman and self-appointed entertainment director, organizes impromptu ax throwing and Mölkky (Finnish bowling) competitions in the snow.

Schimun is also in charge of stoking metaphorical firebank bonfires where we gather after hearty dinners to swap ski and war stories. On our final night together gathered under a full forest moon, I step away

from the flames for a moment to take it all in. Miles from nowhere, a small group of like-minded travelers have bonded over our love of the great outdoors, our healthy addiction to backcountry adventure, and this once in a lifetime heli-skiing experience made even more memorable by the knowledge that we're camping — OK, call it glamping — in the heart of the some of the most mind-blowing heli-skiing country on earth. That notion doesn't smell like victory. It smells like snow.

Danger and untapped powder await heli-skiers

Continued From Page 1K

me, that all adds up to a powdery paradise.

Safety first

All of this convenience of wow factors makes Galena also the most challenging place to guide all of the Canadian Mountain Holidays crew, 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 insidiously 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 below. 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

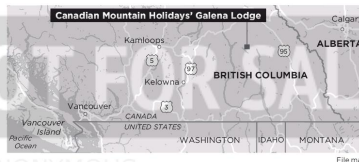
Dodson, Taylor and Ellis are in my group, one of three divided ac-

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 the what is for everyone except our guides the great unknown.

"I've got your back" soon becomes 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, every one 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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