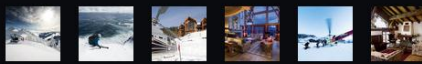


DESTINATIONS

Heli raisers

A select group of ski professionals is upping the ante on the heliskiing experience, offering total privacy, exclusivity – and unparalleled luxury. **Tom Robbins** reports



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TOM ROBBINS

Revelstoke, British Columbia, is a humble sort of place, a remote mountain town built to service the local sawmills and the railway that passes through. Its tiny centre consists of a few snow-choked streets offering hardware and liquor stores, gas stations and a handful of motels. Those looking for fun head to the Village Idiot, a pub with chairs made from old skis, then perhaps move on to the Last Drop, where there are pool tables and line-dancing classes on a Thursday. In short, it is not where you would expect to find the world's most exclusive ski chalet.

But though it lacks the designer shops of Aspen and the Michelin stars of Courchevel, Revelstoke has riches of a different kind. This is one of the snowiest towns on Earth, claiming a typical annual fall of between 12 and 18 metres, and a record of more than 24. By way of comparison, Zermatt in Switzerland expects an average of just four. High above the town, at the top of a run called Paradisio, the snow has fallen so hard that the smaller trees are almost overwhelmed, only their highest branches poke up above the great white tide. The larger trees are so completely encrusted in ice they look like hunched figures wrapped in capes – locals call them "snow ghosts". And even as we stand marvelling at this monochrome world, the snow keeps falling, catching shafts of late afternoon sunlight so that the air sparkles.

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We ski down between the snow ghosts, moving fast to avoid getting stuck in the drifts. At the bottom of the slope, an A-star helicopter is waiting and we clamber in. We lift off, swooping low over forests, then tracing the banks of the frozen Illecillewaet River until we emerge on the edge of Revelstoke and approach our final destination – not a heliport, or a hotel, but a private helipad outside Bighorn, the chalet that is our temporary home. As we come in to land we can see through the glass walls of the vast lounge to where Peter Hughes, the chef, is laying out a tray of canapés. He hears the chopper, turns and gives us a smiling thumbs-up.

Locals are used to the sound of rotor blades. Heliskiing arrived in Revelstoke in 1970, brought and then developed by immigrant mountain guides from Austria and Switzerland. In the years since, the town's abundant snowfall, and its position in a cleft between the Selkirk and Monashee mountain ranges, has helped it grow into the unofficial world capital of the sport. At least four heliski companies operate in the area, with guests billeted in the comfortable but far-from-stylish hotels in town or in shared heliski lodges out in the hills. The arrival of Bighorn last season brought an unprecedented level of luxury to Revelstoke; it also marked the start of a new trend in the industry – the private heliski lodge.

It is the creation of two young Britons, Michael Kirkland, 33, and his brother Chris, 30. Both are exceptional skiers, with sporting CVs that include periods as instructors and racers. Their idea was to take the type of super-luxury chalet you might find in Courchevel or Gstaad and transplant it into the Canadian wilderness, the heartland of heliskiing. Their guests would enjoy complete privacy in the chalet, and rather than having to travel each morning to a commercial helipad, the helicopter would come to collect them. Where conventional heliskiers share a helicopter with strangers, and one aircraft might service three or four separate groups in rotation, guests at Bighorn would have exclusive use of their own machine, all day long.

Today that idea has become an imposing, timber-framed reality, with eight double bedrooms arranged around a living room with a vast fireplace and 15-metre-high windows looking out over the Columbia River to the misty slopes of Mount Begbie. The feel is of a grand Scottish hunting lodge – there are colossal timbers of Douglas fir, chandeliers made from antlers, tartan soft furnishings and even the odd antique map of the [Highlands](#). At first the effect might feel a little geographically disorientating, but it is all too easy to relax into the fantasy.

We play pool in the games room, watch ski films in the cinema, study the scenery through an antique telescope and sit by the fire nibbling local charcuterie (elk, moose, bison and duck). We swim in an indoor pool, then laze in the outdoor hot tub, occasionally dashing out to grab a beer from a bar made of ice, before retreating to watch the rising steam mingle with the falling snowflakes.

No effort, or expense, has been spared. The cheese has been sourced from a farmers' market in Vancouver, seven hours' drive away; the bathrobes have been imported from a Welsh firm that also supplies the Queen; the chanterelles have been foraged from the woods just beyond the kitchen. All of which doesn't even touch on Bighorn's other USP. The Achilles heel of heliskiing is that in bad weather, helicopters do not fly. In conventional wilderness heliski lodges this means "down days" spent watching DVDs or playing interminable games of backgammon. But Bighorn has a solution – you simply drive down the hill from the lodge to the chairlifts and gondola at Revelstoke's resort. Launched on December 22, 2007, Revelstoke Mountain Resort so far has just four lifts – but what lifts they are. The descent from top to bottom is 1,713 vertical metres, the longest in North America, and there are enough trees and high alpine bowls to keep even the most hardcore skier happy.



Elena Arzak's perfect weekend

The joint head chef of her family's three-Michelin-starred Restaurant Arzak, in San Sebastián, which was recently named one of The World's 50 Best Restaurants, also co-directs the kitchen of Ametsa at The Halkin hotel, London

Such is the cost of this full-on private heliski concept – renting Bighorn for a week, including five days' heliskiing for 12, starts at around £106,000 – that it will always remain a rarity, but other operators are sensing a demand. Arctic Heliskiing will this season offer private groups (typically of eight or 12) exclusive use of its base in northern Iceland, from where they can tackle peaks that have never been skied before and runs that end on the shores of the Greenland Sea. Privacy is assured – the lodge is a former farm at the head of a deserted valley, albeit one with outdoor hot tub, spa and sensational food.

Groups of up to eight can also hole up at White Saddle Ranch, a working farm in the Coast range of British Columbia. It is a long way from the refinements of Bighorn – built from hand-hewn logs and with shared bathrooms – but those eight guests get to share a ski area covering 1.1m acres (a ratio the operator, Bella Coola Helisports, claims no one else can match). More are set to follow. Chad Pike, vice chairman of Blackstone Europe, the investment and advisory group, is in the process of establishing the Eleven Experience, an extravagant collection of 11 holiday properties in restored historic buildings stretching from Wiltshire to the Bahamas. The plan is that by 2014, two of the properties – in France and Iceland – will be operating as private heliski lodges, with room for up to 12 and at a price of \$11,000 to \$15,000 per night.

A month later, and on the other side of the world, I am in an even more unlikely setting for a private heliski lodge than Revelstoke – France's Tarentaise valley, home to some of Europe's finest ski resorts. Following complaints about noise and pollution, heliskiing has been banned here, and across France, since 1985, but that has not deterred Claire and Tom Jeffery, a former marine lawyer and chartered surveyor. They spent years scouting for a chalet with space to land a helicopter right outside, then set about developing ideas for how a French heliski lodge could work within the law. One solution is simply to fly over the border and into Italy, where heliskiing is allowed (the chalet, Pook Heli-Lodge, is four miles from the border and within reach of three Italian heliski operators.

During my weekend visit, we fly up over the border post on the Col du Petit St Bernard and land at 3,000m close to the summit of Mont Miravidi, below the looming face of Mont Blanc. We push off north, descending the wide expanse of the Glacier du Breuil, before winding through some tight couloirs and arriving, 45 minutes later, at the Vallon du Breuil to await our pick-up. Julien Ottobon, our guide and a local dairy farmer, whips off his rucksack to produce bread, saucisson and some of his own Beaufort cheese, which he serves on an upturned ski; a bottle of Chignin-Bergeron is thrust into the snow to chill.

Later we ski back down the Vallée de Veis into France, fighting through bushes to our collection point beside a waterfall, the Cascade de Beaupré. Though heliskiing is forbidden in France, pick-ups are permitted, so within minutes the helicopter is whisking us from this remote valley back to the chalet, where the hot tub is bubbling and a barbecue is beginning to smoke.

The other way of side-stepping the law is to use the helicopter as a taxi – flying from the lodge to be dropped in one of the many nearby resorts, which might include Val d'Isère, Tignes, Sainte Foy or Les Arcs, all no more than a couple minutes' flight away. Why use a chopper to ski in a conventional resort? Because it allows you to stay beyond the hubbub, and to experience an altogether more serene side to the Alps. Pook Heli-Lodge is in a hamlet called Les Laix, a tiny cluster of ancient farmhouses perched on a grassy balcony high above the valley floor. Though it doesn't have Bighorn's high-end polish, the chalet, which dates from 1881, has character in spades. In the galleried main living room are sofas around a log fire, a grand piano and a long wooden dining table overlooked by a mounted stag's head. There's space for 12 in six double rooms, plus two further bunk rooms.

Les Laix has no shops, no nightlife, no entertainment – just a small chapel built in 1624. Outside the lodge, you can swing in a hammock watching the sun slip behind distant peaks, in total silence except for the occasional bleat of a goat. It is a world away from the throbbing Europop and table-dancing of Val d'Isère – or, a two-minute flight. It is also perfect for a long weekend. On our final day, we ski in Les Arcs until the lifts close, then return to the chalet to change. Normally there would be a mad scramble into a taxi for the three-hour drive to Geneva airport. Instead, we have tea and eat homemade cake until 6.30pm, when the helicopter comes to collect us – 27 breathtaking minutes later, we touch down on the apron at Geneva, ready to catch a plane back to the real world.

Tom Robbins travelled to Canada as a guest of **James Orr Heliski** (01799-516 964; www.heliski.co.uk). In the Alps, he was a guest of **Pook Heli-Lodge**, Les Laix, 73700 Montvalezan, Savoie (07747-747 734; www.valheliski.com) which offers a week from £12,000, including food, wine, transfers and staff. Short trips are also available. **Bighorn**, Mackenzie Landing, Revelstoke, British Columbia, Canada VoE 2S3 (020-3432 0726; www.bighornrevelstoke.com) costs from £40,700 per week for up to 16 people, including food and alcohol and four staff (heliskiing is extra). **Arctic Heliskiing**, PO Box 88, Dalvik, Iceland (+354-698 9870; www.arcticheliskiing.com) from €4,760 per person for a four-day trip. **Bella Coola Heliskiing**, +1604-932 3000; www.bellacoolaheliskiing.com, from £3,436 for three nights. **Eleven Experience**, +1866-479 4677; www.elevenexperience.com. **White Saddle Ranch**, Tatla Lake, British Columbia, Canada VoL 1Vo (+1250-476 1285; www.whitesaddleair.com). **British Airways** (0844-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies from London direct to Vancouver from £613 or Calgary from £635.

