



skin to thin air

TAKING FLIGHT

FIRST CONCEIVED TO DELIVER A.T. SKIERS DEEP INTO THE BACKCOUNTRY, HELI-SKIING RETURNS TO ITS ROOTS. **BY MAJKA BURHARDT**

On the third morning of any ski-touring trip, certain things are guaranteed. Your legs will be sore, you will already have had too much alcohol, and you will question the wisdom of filling every day with as much vertical as possible. Today is no different. My alarm goes off early and my left hip flexor reminds me I've skinned 9,000 feet in the last 48 hours. More than a foot of fresh has fallen, but this isn't a normal ski tour: There's also a helicopter outside my window. You see, I'm actually heli-skiing, though I'm doing it as envisioned by the late

Hans Gmoser, famed founder of Canadian Mountain Holidays Heli-Skiing and of commercial heli-skiing itself. We're using helicopters to efficiently access remote ski-touring terrain, but from there our legs must do the rest.

Like many heli-ops around the world, CMH now offers heli-assisted ski-touring trips for skiers who'd rather climb what they ski (or at least most of it) than simply be dropped off on a peak for a quick run. Helicopters ferry groups to remote drainages that would otherwise take days of skinning to reach, and guests

pay 35 to 50 percent less than the cost of a standard heli-ski trip.

CMH, the heli-ski industry's largest operator, never meant to become a heli-ski company. Gmoser initially saw the chopper as an ideal tool for accessing great touring terrain. But it's hard to say no to a quick lift uphill, and as CMH grew based on that premise, Gmoser's idea idled until 2009, nearly five decades after its genesis. With growing public interest in AT skiing, better gear, and a booming heli-skiing business, the time seemed right for CMH to revisit its ski-touring roots.

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Topher Donahue (2)

Two hours after waking up, I begin a 2,000-foot descent through thigh-high powder on Pyrite Glacier in the Sir Sandfords, a subrange of southern BC's Selkirk Mountains. Before day's end I'll summit Mount Centurion and Mount Sir Sandford, traverse two major valleys spread over 11 miles, and carve 5,600 vertical feet, all in time to be back at the lodge for a massage, beef tenderloin, and hot apple strudel. I'll hear the heli's roar only twice—on the way in and on the way out.

I've never minded a little pampering. But I haven't always been a sucker for such decadence. I grew up racing on icy Minnesota slopes, and by my 20s I was an avid tourer with an "Earn Your Turns" bumper sticker and a deep contempt for pudgy heli-

skiers in teal one-pieces. Theirs was a kind of skiing I couldn't afford, so I had no interest in it.

But I've grown up and so has heli-skiing. I'll take the luxuries if the trip is designed to make me sweat a bit. CMH and other outfits usually pair the ski tourers with regular heli-ski clients, with great benefits for the tourers. Trips are less expensive for the tourers because they fly only twice a day instead of all day, and they can often ski on low-visibility days when the regular clients are lodgebound. And of course it's easier to justify a third dessert when you've spent the day climbing.

If you don't have time for a multi-day heli-tour, much simpler versions of the concept abound. Operators like Washington's North Cascade Heli, and

some ski areas like Colorado's Silverton Mountain, offer single heli "bumps" to distant peaks, ridges, or lodges for a fraction of the cost of a longer trip.

The big draw for me was getting somewhere I wouldn't have been able to reach otherwise. I had spent years skiing the 10 percent of any range I could access from a base camp, yurt, or hut. Heli-touring amounts to a steroid injection to this plan. Had this kind of super-touring been available 15 years ago, I wouldn't have been so self-righteously against heli-skiing. But we just weren't ready for each other yet. ♦

Majka Burhardt is a writer and climbing guide. Her second book, Coffee Story: Ethiopia, was published in August.

Left: Skier Charles Goldman.
Right: It ain't all about the up.

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