



Climb every MOUNTAIN

Nearly 55 years after the first commercial heliskiing trip, helicopter-assisted backcountry skiing remains every bit as thrilling, frivolous and addictive as ever, enabling us to ski the most remote and beautiful pockets of the world

Words: Gabriella Le Breton

If, as they say, yachting is like standing in a cold shower and tearing up \$100 bills, heliskiing could be likened to tearing them up while standing in the freezer. However once you’ve tasted the sheer joy of floating through waist-deep snow, bouncing off bottomless powder pillows and between snow-cloaked trees, you too will be in thrall to what some skiers call “the rapture of the deep.”

Since its earliest incarnation in 1963, heliskiing has offered a heady mix of excitement, adventure and camaraderie set against the serene majesty of pristine winterscapes. We have Hans Gmoser to thank for a world in which helicopters provide the means to feed our addiction to untracked powder: Gmoser founded Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH) and pioneered helicopter-assisted off-piste skiing in the 60s.

CMH remains the world’s largest helisking operation today, still striving towards Gmoser’s original aim: “to manifest our desires to explore the distant, the new, the unknown; to be adventurers, to be able to throw back the shackles of our physical limitations and to go wherever our fancy urges us to go.” However, today’s overall experience is markedly different, with accommodation in plush lodges with spas, wine cellars and private cinemas rather than basic mountain huts. Technological advances have resulted in safer, larger, faster and more agile helicopters and have given skiers added security in the form of avalanche safety equipment and mobile communications.

Heliskiing has subsequently opened a world of opportunity for intrepid travellers. You can ski the Atlas mountains from a sun-dappled Marrakech riad, fly from the rooftop of the W Santiago to lap virgin peaks in the Andes, or bag first descents in Antarctica from the superyacht Cloudbreak – which comes with a custom helicopter, ski room and fireplace. You don’t even have to be a pro skier to take part, as less experienced skiers can start with a single heli-drop or a day on gentle, gladed terrain.

While each of these adventures delivers distinct ski and cultural experiences, heliski days across the globe share some commonalities. A daily safety briefing is a given, with information provided about avalanche safety kit, the local terrain, snow and weather conditions. Contrary to belief borne of extreme ski films, skiers do not leap out of the helicopter onto precipitous ledges but are deposited, with knife-edge precision, on safe spots. After a heli-huddle, kneeling down together in the snow as the chopper takes off, the silence of the mountains descends, you clip into your skis and enjoy the best powder run of your life. And repeat, all day, all week long.

The number of runs in a day depends on each group’s ability and the terrain – greater vertical descent translates into fewer but longer single runs. Veteran heliskiers typically log their “vert” (vertical descent), which can range from 3,000-16,000 metres per day. And, although heli-guides jokingly refer to “heli-belly”, blaming a slight paunch on the relatively effortless nature of heliskiing, even strong skiers will find a full day’s heliskiing hard work. If incentive is required to work on your fitness before signing up to a heliski trip, CMH famously gives its clients a celebratory ski suit each time they clock up a million vertical metres. ①

Photo credits

Photographer: Jochen Haar



Life in the snow

Heliski expert Flory Kern on life as an expedition guide.

Tempus: How long have you been skiing?

Flory Kern: I was born on Christmas Day, 1969 and was skiing almost before I could walk, so nearly 50 years now!

Have you always loved off-piste skiing?

I actually competed in slalom and moguls for several years, reaching World Cup level in my 20s, but competing actually made me crave the freedom of off-piste skiing. So I spent eight winters in Chamonix, always skiing on the outer edges as I tackled some of the most extreme faces there.

Tell us about your work as a heliski expedition guide.

I founded Flory Kern Ski Berge Abenteuer in 1998 together with some fellow qualified mountain and ski guides. I’m always on the lookout for new heliski destinations, forever fascinated by the endless possibilities of this sport. It’s given me the opportunity to stand on 6,000m peaks in the Andes and ski the Himalayas – unforgettable adventures I’ve shared with customers new and old.

For more information and to book a guided tour, visit flory-kern.de

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THE ULTIMATE BUCKET LIST

The world is your heliski oyster but here are a few top destinations for your bucket list.

British Columbia, Canada

The spiritual home of heliskiing, BC is hard to beat for its consistent snowfall, weather and terrain.

Kamchatka, Russia

Whether you’re flying over fire-ringed volcanoes or skiing down a volcano to a frozen beach, Kamchatka delivers wild, untamed skiing.

The Arctic Circle

Few things equal skiing virgin powder bowls down to dramatic fjords beneath the midnight sun in Swedish Lapland or Iceland.

Iran

The hot new thing on the heliskiing scene, Iran offers a remarkable cultural experience and thigh-burningly long descents on the towering mountains of Alborz.