

TO BECOME A BETTER **SNOWBOARDER**, FAST, NOTHING TOPS A HELI-TRIP. **By Josh Dean**

Chairlifts Are For Sissies

The helicopter lifted off in a stinging blur of snow, leaving us to stumble and squint and fiddle with buckles atop a mountain very far from wherever it was we had started out. There was nothing but white as far as we could see,

every peak seeming large enough to house the entirety of Vail Mountain and yet accessible only to those

sharing the helicopter. We gazed out at glaciers, bowls, chutes and — far below like patches of scraggly hair — fir trees almost impossibly well-spaced for making turns.

I was a relatively new snowboarder. I had taken up the sport a year prior, rather spontaneously after more than a decade of skiing, but had yet to negotiate anything more challenging than a black diamond with refrigerator-size bumps (not easy, or fun, but more annoying than life-threatening). Standing up there in thin air and near silence, facing a 3,000-foot-plus vertical descent, the only alternate escape having whoomp-whooped into the distance, I felt more than a little jittery.

Like ducklings, we fell in line behind our guide, Mike Aucoin, a 37-year-old with the uneven facial tan of the oft-goggled. Instead of choosing among runs sketched out on a resort map, he was selecting trails from an entire range of mountains. If this section of British Columbia's Monashee range was looking less than just right — too slushy, too windy, too avalanche-y — we could always have the helicopter zag a bit north across the Trans-Canada Highway on the next trip, in search of something better.

Aucoin has been guiding in this area for five years, all of them with Canadian Mountain Holidays, the world's first and largest heli-ski company, whose graying-hikers-on-vacation name doesn't do it justice. The C.M.H. guides, like Aucoin, are typically



A WHOLE LOT OF VERTICAL, ALL TO THEMSELVES The author's Monashees group gets ready for the long ride down.

cheerful, cliché-loving ski bums, many of them experts on both skis and boards. Unable to free up a full week for the more official Powder Introduction workshop, my friends (backcountry rookies also) and I had arranged for a mini-clinic within C.M.H.'s "pay as you play" program, which lets skiers pay à la carte for as many runs as they're up for. We formed a group, with Aucoin as our leader.

He told us to stay within a few yards of his track. When he stopped, we were to stop, uphill of him. Unlike a resort's runs, which are groomed and where obstacles are carefully removed, heliskiing terrain is unpredictable. Some of these snowfields are atop glaciers that feature crevasses deep enough to swallow a helicopter.

"Along the way we'll talk about some of the idiosyncrasies of heli-boarding," Aucoin said, perhaps as a way to make us stop with the nervous questions. And with that he was gone, making turns so consistent and graceful that you could measure his rhythm on a metronome. I followed almost his exact trail, staying just off his track, and immediately felt better about my riding. I hadn't noticed before that I was making bigger, smoother turns on my heel side (to the left, where I'm more comfortable) until I forced myself to match his path, and with fluffy, ankle-deep powder underfoot, it was simple to follow.

It took just one run — no, more like a few hundred yards — of floating at ludicrous speed on snow the consistency of flour to

HELI FOR FIRST-TIMERS

CANADIAN MOUNTAIN HOLIDAYS

Trips last three to seven days (roughly \$2,500 to \$10,000, including food and lodging; the seven-night Powder Introduction workshop starts at \$6,000). There are two four-day snowboard camps, starting March 22 and March 27. canadianmountainholidays.com.

RUBY MOUNTAINS HELI-EXPERIENCE

This operation works the relatively small range just outside Elko, Nev. Three-day packages are \$3,800, including food and lodging. Sessions are limited to 16 guests, who are guaranteed at least 39,000 vertical feet of skiing (or snowboarding). helicopterskiing.com.

TELLURIDE HELITRAX

This 25-year-old Colorado company now offers same-day trips from Aspen and Vail — guests are flown into and out of Telluride — as well as first-time powder tours. The terrain (in the San Juan Mountains) varies from intermediate to advanced. From \$1,095. helitrax.net.

BALDFACE LODGE

A somewhat cheaper yet still impressive backcountry option. Snowcats take groups from the lodge, three hours north of Spokane, Wash., into 36,000 remote acres. Around \$2,100 for three days, including unlimited runs, food and lodging. baldface.net.

realize that in all my years of sliding around on snow, I had experienced nothing remotely like this. How was I ever going to take a chairlift seriously again?

Aucoin paused at the top of a deep bowl; the drop from the lip required the sort of quick, sharp turns that are difficult to pull off on a snowboard. He reminded us to stay loose, to flex at the knees and waist. Most riders, myself included, tend to stiffen in steep terrain and make awkward turns, resulting in a rattling of the board known as “chatter.” Aucoin dropped in first and disappeared in a spray of powder. The first turn on a steep face is the worst — it always causes my stomach to

creature from “Alien” had claimed residence in his hip. But a few days later, he was riding like a lifer.

The only real hindrance is confidence. Since taking up snowboarding two winters ago, I’ve not been back on skis once. By last season I was feeling good enough to ride most any terrain but had yet to push myself. Could I handle unpredictable conditions? A guided, instructional heli-trip would surely answer that.

C.M.H. has access to nearly 16,000 square kilometers of terrain — that’s roughly a third the size of Switzerland. Tours are led from December to May out of 12 bases. Our hotel, in the town of Revelstoke,

dish out upwards of \$1,000 a day, including 68-year-old Ed Schechter, who had come to complete his mission of skiing five million vertical feet. (“I’ve probably fallen a million of those,” he told me.)

Riding in the chopper the second morning, Ed asked me how it was going. I told him that I’d actually caught myself laughing during runs. It’s something that also happens on roller coasters — a reaction to the overpowering cocktail of nervousness and exhilaration that drowned my brain as I was slicing through canyons at speeds that would have scared the bejesus out of me at a ski resort. With each run, I grew more comfortable, and by mid-afternoon I was keeping up with my friend Tyler, a far better and more experienced rider. We had negotiated various depths and forms of powder, some corn snow, some sloppy sun-baked spots, even a few pitches I would never have considered rideable before the trip. I had never felt so confident — or stimulated.

Of course, covering up to 30,000 vertical feet a day at high altitude has its downside; it wreaks havoc on leg muscles. Late on that second afternoon we descended from soft powder into some soupy melting stuff, and I found myself getting lazy with my turns. And at the speeds we were carrying, a loss of rhythm can be perilous. We paused to catch our breath and noticed that John wasn’t following. A skier from our helicopter stopped by to say that he had just seen our friend crash — hard. John appeared a few minutes later, covered in snow. He collapsed in a heap and said he was about ready to call it a day. “Dude,” Tyler said, “you have snow in your ear.”

Aucoin, naturally, had a cliché ready for the occasion. “We call that an egg beater,” he said, referring to a boarder tumbling at high speed, his board whipping around as he bounces down the hill. “Now you know what the yolk feels like.” ■

Ready to Ride The Deep Stuff

BACKCOUNTRY BOARDING PRESENTS UNIQUE CHALLENGES, AND REQUIRES SOME UNIQUE GEAR. THREE OF THE ESSENTIAL ITEMS:



1. Avalanche transceivers transmit and receive signals for search and rescues following snowslides. The **Pulse Barryvox**, from the Swiss company Mammut, also displays pulse and respiration data (in digital and analog modes). \$450. mammut.com.



2. The key to riding in deep powder is to keep the snowboard’s nose from digging into the snow. Special tapered boards like **Burton’s Fish** have binding mounts *way* to the rear, so that the rider’s weight stays back, and the nose stays on top of the snow. \$500. burton.com.



3. You’ll need a good pack. One of the best all-purpose models is the **Black Diamond Covert**, which includes ski/snowboard straps, a hydration system and an AvaLung, which extracts fresh air from the snowpack in case of an avalanche. \$200. bdel.com.

THERE I WAS, SLICING THROUGH CANYONS AT SPEEDS THAT WOULD HAVE SCARED THE BEJESUS OUT OF ME AT A SKI RESORT.

knot up — but I bent my knees, relaxed and pointed downhill. Free of tension, I let the board do all the work.

At the bottom of the bowl, Aucoin asked how everyone was feeling. “Most times, we apologize for conditions like this,” he said. Earlier in the winter, apparently, it’s not uncommon for powder to be chest-deep. “I’d call this mediocre. But we’re spoiled. For most of you, this is probably the best skiing you’ve ever done.”

There is no sport with a learning curve quite like snowboarding’s. At first it’s horrific; for a day or two (or three, if you’re a really slow learner) the process is absolute misery. A new rider will fall again and again and again, sometimes with such unexpected violence that he’ll swear he has been picked off by a sniper. At the end of the day everything hurts; it’s a small victory just to be able to sit down. A good friend of mine fell so many times while learning that he developed a hematoma the size of a small couch pillow. It looked as if the

British Columbia, was right next door to the Canadian Avalanche Association — not the first thing you want to see when you arrive for your introduction to heli-skiing.

My friends were, like me, nervous about the terrain, but what really freaked them out were the helicopter and avalanche safety briefings we got the first night. The instructor pointed out things not to touch (the tail rotor, for instance), as well as important features like the escape hatches. “In case of a crash, right?” the instructor said, and I saw my friend John wince. Avalanche beacon lessons and a mock rescue followed.

All of the lead-up is to prepare you for the potential danger of an uncontrolled environment, but what really happens once you get out there is almost impossible to describe without sounding like some sort of brainwashed proselytizer. I can only say that if you like to snowboard (or ski), it’s worth the cost. Nearly everyone I spoke with was a returning customer happy to