

Cheap Skiing Guide™

Special Adventure Edition

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Imagine a ski area with 933 square miles (~600,000 acres) of ski-able terrain, an area that is actually dozens of mountains, and receives an average of 720 inches of snow every winter. Now imagine so few skiers and riders that gliding down in someone else's tracks is unusually rare. Where is this resort? It's in the Columbia Mountains in British Columbia and it's a little different than a typical ski area in that all the lift operators are helicopter pilots.

It was my first foray into the world of heli-skiing and of all the words that might describe the sensation of floating over unimaginably light, dry, trackless snow, through nicely spaced stands of trees, and down vast open snow fields, ineffable (i.e., incapable of being described in words) is probably the most accurate. Sure, I could tell you it was phenomenal, awesome, fantastic, spectacular, incredible, and unbelievable, but the experience transcends these adjectives and soars into the realm of emotions that perhaps writers like Shakespeare could aptly describe. Those words escape me.

This year's special adventure began with a cross-country flight to Spokane, WA. Given the vagaries of air travel (especially during the winter months), it was a good idea to arrive two days prior to the first ski day. If flights are delayed or cancelled and you miss the ground connection, your prepayment is forfeited (payment in full is required to



Spectacular views. Photo courtesy Fred Noble

reserve a slot and there are only eleven on the helicopter). Trip insurance is another good idea. From Spokane, it was another six hours in a van to Nakusp, BC (BTW, passports are now required to get into and out of Canada). The heli-ski company I chose was [Canadian Mountain Holidays](#) (CMH) and among all the accolades I can tender about this company and their staff, they are extremely well organized. They've been in the business for forty-five years. Heli-skiing is not inexpensive but CMH includes lodging, all meals and snacks, equipment (bring your own ski boots), and a guaranteed amount of skiing (which varies depending on the package you choose—3 day, 4 day, 7 day, etc.). If you exceed the guaranteed vertical, it costs extra, but if conditions prevent CMH from keeping its promise, a pro-rated refund is proffered. It's important to understand that weather and conditions are always unpredictable and, just like it is with any other outdoor adventure, they are what they are. Fortunately, I hit it at a good... sorry, great time. Even though there hadn't been new snow for two weeks and snowfall-to-date was about three feet below average, conditions were fantastic. If you haven't experienced heli- or cat-skiing, it's difficult to describe the sensation, but floating over light, dry, virgin snow is about as close to flying as a human can experience.

Before heading out, an orientation about helicopter safety, avalanches, tree-wells, and other wilderness hazards was prerequisite. Then, each group went out to the airport and learned to operate the tracker beacon each of us was required to wear, in both send and receive modes. Sounds a little scary, I know, but every adventure carries an element of risk. In fact, the definition of adventure is "the encountering of risks." The CMH guides are extremely knowledgeable about mountain hazards and if skiers follow their instructions, the risks are minimal. CMH employs over 100 guides, each with



No competition for trackless snow. Photo courtesy Fred Noble.



Ineffable. Photo courtesy Fred Noble



Quintessential skiing. Photo courtesy Fred Noble

an average of 12½ years of experience and all are certified by either the International Federation of Mountain Guides Association or the Canadian Mountain Guide Association. Moreover, all guides are required to take ongoing refresher courses in avalanche hazard evaluation and stability analysis, weather analysis, and wilderness first aid.

The helicopter rides were also new experiences for me. Accommodations were a little cramped and the twin turbine engines were a bit loud (hearing protection was advised though few people used them) but the ride over the rugged terrain was spectacular and the pilot's skills were truly impressive.

Our first run was through some widely spaced trees, down a moderately steep slope. I think the guide wanted to assess our skills before taking someone down something beyond his or her ability. But that's when it hit me; an ineffable emotion blending thrill with a joy so deep I laughed myself to tears. When I caught up with the rest of my group, someone asked what I was laughing about. I just look back up from where I skied down; everyone tacitly understood.

Like other ski areas, each run had a name, such as UFO, Pleasure Center, Fuzzy Death Bunny, and Fractured Fairytales, but unlike lift-served areas, there were no trail signs and no tracks either.

Nakusp has natural hot springs and, at the end of each day,

many of us enjoyed soaking our tired legs in a pool-sized hot tub that was constantly being refreshed. Speaking of tired legs, if you're going to go heli-skiing, get in shape. I skied an average of 23,000 vertical feet per day and the weeks of exercise leading up to my trip weren't enough. The people in my group were advanced and aggressive skiers. Had I not been able to keep up, I could have requested a slower group; however, heli-skiing is generally not for beginners. Advanced-intermediate is the minimum recommended skill level. I should also add, our group was very dynamic and I came away from my trip with several new friends.

CMH also offers a stretching class for a half-hour each morning before breakfast, in which I participated and would highly recommend.

I'm certain there are many other heli-ski companies that are reputable and offer safe and exciting adventures, but I can only vouch for one, Canadian Mountain Holidays. They operate from twelve different lodges in BC and each serves a different region of mountains. At the very least, visit their [web site](#) and watch some of their [videos](#). If you're seriously interested in experiencing the most exhilarating kind of skiing in the world, email Fred Noble at noblecmh@aol.com. I'm certain you won't regret it.



No lift lines. Photo courtesy Fred Noble