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High time for snow time

For those with a taste for adventure, this unique Canadian heli-skiing concept offers a true wilderness experience.

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As our sleek AStar AS350 helicopter swoops down like a bird of prey into the twisting river valley, I half expect to hear Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries' blasting from its onboard speakers and the pilot shouting maniacally about loving the smell of napalm in the morning.

Thankfully this isn't *Apocalypse Now* and Robert Duvall's infamous character, Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore, isn't at the controls. I'm heli-skiing, Canadian style, in one of the largest tenures that North America has to offer — over 7,800 square metres of wild and pristine backcountry deep in the Skeena Mountains east of the historic northern British Columbian town of Smithers. Snowfall is reliably heavy up here and the dry powder plentiful due to a fortuitous confluence of coastal precipitation, interior dryness and a cooler northern climate. Best of all, the variety of terrain is massive: steep and deep vertical slopes with



intimidating names like Eye of the Tiger, powder bowls feeding into pillows and chutes, and tight trees alternating with acres of open, sweeping glades. All surrounded by some of the most spectacular alpine scenery the cradle of heli-skiing has to offer.

My companions — eight middle-aged Australians and a peripatetic young Italian advertising executive on a round-the-world ski sabbatical — are clearly having the time of their lives judging from their whoops, wide-eyed grins and triumphant high fives at the end of every breathtaking run. Most are



first time heli-skiers bedazzled by the grandeur of these mountains and thrilled to be realising many a resort-bound skier's ultimate fantasy. As one of their number, a hulking construction contractor named Pete Roberts, shouts to me after one particularly breathtakingly long run, "Mate, this is as bloody good as it gets. I can't believe we're actually here."

GLAMPING GONE WILD

This isn't the first time I've boarded a whirly-bird for a multi-day dose of backcountry bliss. A veteran of several heli-skiing adventures in the province where the sport was born over half a century ago, I'm nonetheless intrigued by Skeena Heliskiing's uniquely immersive fly-in fly-out concept called Base Camp. Entering its third season of operation, Canadian heli-skiing's first foray into glamping is erected at the start of each ski season and accepts guests for just a brief six-week window before being struck when the snow melts come April.

Located in the Kuldo Valley, Base Camp comprises one spacious communal geodesic dining tent nicknamed the 'Freedom', a hot shower tent and five two-person sleeping tents equipped with thermostat-controlled

heaters and rustic log beds covered in cosy sheep-wool duvets. Waste products are flown out and compostable toilets are used to minimise environmental impact. Designed as a 'no-frills' option to pricier packages, Base Camp appeals to heli-skiers more excited about close proximity to the best runs than Jacuzzis, wine cellars and après ski in-room massages.

"It was our goal to provide something new to heli skiing, an all-inclusive package that is truly a wilderness experience," says lead Skeena guide and company co-owner Giacom 'Jake' Frei. A former professional ski racer and guide in Europe with over a decade of experience heli-ski guiding in British Columbia (BC), Jake is as experienced as they come.

Base Camp may be a more authentic wilderness experience than most heli-skiing >>



Fast fact

The captivating lights of the Aurora Borealis are caused by electrically charged particles from the sun entering the Earth's atmosphere and colliding with gases.

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The Aurora Borealis occasionally lights up the night skies above Base Camp. **Clockwise from top left** Guests have an AStar AS350 helicopter at their exclusive disposal; Canadian heli-skiing's first foray into glamping; guests sleep in cosy two-person winterised tents equipped with thermostat-controlled heaters.



accommodation, but it still offers amenities like gourmet food, hot showers, ski boot dryers and all the beer and wine we can consume after a hard day in the steps. Best of all, our very own helicopter is parked just yards away, waiting to sweep us up into our private powder playground each morning. And what it may lack in luxe creature comforts, our remote retreat more than makes up for in authentic BC backcountry ambience. Irradiant under gentle snowfall on evenings when you can faintly hear wolves calling to each other across the valley, its constellation of white tents resembles a cross between frontier outpost and a moon base.

BONDING IN THE BUSH

At Base Camp everything slows down, except the skiing and socialising. Designed as an intimate environment where everyone can feel a part of a memorable adventure skiing experience, its setup fosters authentic

backcountry bonding and is perfect for groups. I make fast friends with the Aussies, mostly blue-collar types who grew up together in the same small town near Sydney. They're here to celebrate one of them reaching the mid-century mark, saying that Base Camp's more rugged appeal was exactly what they were seeking. Back for a second tour of downhill duty, Nico the Italian assures me that he wouldn't trade Base Camp's spontaneous camaraderie for the more posh creature comforts of nearby Bear Claw Lodge, a palatial five-star fishing chalet located in the nearby Kispiox Valley only twelve minutes away from us by helicopter. Skeena Heliskiing leases Bear Claw for the entire winter season to accommodate guests who would rather be pampered after hours than trek through the snow for midnight bathroom breaks.

A HEALTHY ADDICTION

During our week at Base Camp, we experience the full gamut of northern BC



Fast fact
The Skeena Mountain range offers the largest heli-skiing adventure playground in the world, covering an area of 9,525 km².

weather. On sundrenched blue sky days we effortlessly slice our signatures into glistening glaciers. On snow-squall punctuated low visibility days the woods beckon, lovely dark and deep. On the occasional morning or afternoon when inclement weather prohibits flying, Jake's hyper energetic brother, Schimun, the camp handyman and self-appointed entertainment director, organises impromptu axe-throwing and Mölkky (Finnish bowling) competitions in the snow.

Schimun is also in charge of stoking nocturnal riverbank bonfires where we

gather after hearty dinners to swap ski and war stories. On our final night together gathered under a full forest moon I step away from the flames for a moment to take it all in. Miles from nowhere a small group of like-minded adventurers have bonded over our love of the great outdoors, our healthy addiction to backcountry adventure, and this once in a lifetime heli-skiing experience made even more memorable by the knowledge that we're camping — ok, call it glamping — in the heart of the some of the most mind-blowing heli-skiing country on Earth. That notion doesn't smell like victory. It smells like snow. ■

Clockwise from top left Guests congregate in Base Camp's spacious 'freedome' for gourmet meals and evening socialising; Gourmet meals are prepared by a private chef; Guests gather round a riverside bonfire to celebrate another epic day; Skeena Heliskiing's private helicopter in flight; Snow boarding through powder; With plenty of powder to play in, conditions are perfect for heli-skiing in BC's Skeena Mountains.

FACT FILE

How to get there: The nearest airport (Smithers) is located only 1.5 hours from Vancouver and 4 hours from Calgary. Flights are available daily from Vancouver International Airport directly to Smithers. The Skeena van shuttle will take guests on the 1.5-hour drive from Smithers to the Bear Claw Lodge, where the helicopter is waiting to transport them to Base Camp, an 8-minute ride away.

Where to stay: The Skeena Base Camp Heliskiing package is a fly-in, fly-out six-day option for those seeking an adventurous wilderness experience catered to a maximum of ten guests per week. Skiers should be strong intermediate, advanced or expert. The all-inclusive per person price is CA\$8,900, which includes the industry-standard 100,000 feet of guaranteed vertical. All packages start on a Friday morning (7:30am pick up) and end the following Thursday morning (9:45am departure from Base Camp).

More information: skeenaheliskiing.com/lodge/base-camp