



HELL



All aboard the Whistler Hell. PHOTO / CHRIS HOOKING

STORY BY + RACHAEL OAKS-ASH

SCAT

Who holds the cards?



Powder Mountain's big red cat. PHOTO / CHRIS HOOKER

+ WHEN PLAYING SKI BOOSTERS POKER, DROPPING FRANCE'S LA GRAVE, CHAMONIX'S VALLEE BLANCHE, COLORADO'S SILVERTON AND INDIA'S GULMARG INTO THE GAME MAY WELL GET YOU THE CHIPS, BUT THERE ARE TWO HANDS THAT COULD WIN YOU THE GAME. Bluff all you like by calling cat skiing "poor man's heli skiing" and you're bound to win a few rounds, but mention a chopper and fresh powder and watch the others throw down their cards. But are they really all that different? Is one cat hand truly worth more than the hell other? Both cat skiing and heli skiing utilise mechanics to get snow lovers off piste without working up a hiking sweat, and both offer untracked powder when Mother Nature permits. >



“I’VE DATED MEN WHO ON PAPER LOOKED SENSATIONAL, BUT WHEN TRIED AND TESTED FAILED DISMALLY, and there’s so many other contributing factors to a good day’s skiing than a Y chromosome”

Rachael Oaks-Ash. Like a good man, a good day’s skiing can be hard to find.

HELI VS CAT

Conrad finds some fresh Canadian Mountain Holidays Gothics Lodge terrain. PHOTO / RACHAEL OAKES-ASH



LEFT: Photographer Chris Hocking has a go in front of the lenses.
PHOTO / RACHAEL DAVES-ASH
FAR RIGHT: The office.
PHOTO / CHRIS HOCKING
RIGHT: Rachael is all smiles.
PHOTO / CHRIS HOCKING



SKIING WINS THE RACE CHRONOLOGICALLY.
AN INDUSTRIOUS YOUNG AUSTRIAN IN CANADA,

Gmose, took to the skies in April 1965 launching the first original and now biggest heli ski operation Cana-fountain Holidays, or CMH, as it's affectionately known, in-sports 40 seriously cashed-up skiers each week to 12 e luxury lodges high in the Canadian Rockies.

skiing was also pioneered in Canada when Allan Drury d the ignition on the first Caterpillar truck filled with expect-ers in 1975 in Canada's West Kootenays. Drury's Self-lderness Skiing lodge is still considered one of the best, 14 guests each week bedding down in the lodge for a powder fix.

ctees of cat skiing go on about the fact that when the heli-r doesn't go out due to adverse weather conditions the il, so there's no waiting around for days for a break in the er to get to the good stuff. Devotees of heli skiing retort the weather's that bad who wants to go out anyway?

impler to just do the maths to stop the fighting. With 95 ent of the world's heli and cat skiing taking place in British biala, Canada we can just compare the figures.

Whistler Heli Ski has access to 40,000 square hectares of ski-arrain for their standard heli day operations, meaning they et the best aspect available with the conditions. Powder tain Cat Skiing is half an hour from Whistler with 1740 hec-in which to play.

oder Mountain, unlike Whistler Heli Ski, guarantee a mini-of 7000 vertical feet in a day of skiing with an average of uns with no charge for extras. The Whistler Heli Ski oper-offers packages of three, four or six runs with extra charges ery run thereafter.

Truth is for most it does come down to the hip pocket - \$730 for three heli ski runs and \$80 for every extra, versus \$479 for double the runs and then some. You don't have to be Alan Greenspan to know which looks better on paper.

Yet I've dated men who on paper looked sensational, but when tried and tested failed dismally, and there's so many other contributing factors to a good day's skiing than a Y chromosome - snow, for one. You can't force nature's commitaphobe to show up, it's either going to shower you with love or leave you ice cold, and if you're lucky you'll time it right for the day after a snowstorm. If not you'll be watching the cold front come in the day after you left.

This little Miss Snow It All timed her Whistler cat and heli adventures poorly. The last snowstorm was four days prior and it had been blue sky days since with few subzero days. It could go either way, sun crust, crud or wind-blown powder, but then skiing is a gambler's game.

Snowboarder Ken Achenbach knows this. As the founder of twin tip snowboarding technology his gambles in the industry have paid off and he now owns Powder Mountain Cat Skiing. He runs a pretty schmick operation servicing the company's five mountain peaks.

Today we're heading to Cypress, an open-bowled area above the tree line. Last time I was here it was a white-out and we went to the trees in Tricouni to get some definition. Our lead guide would ski down and make a "coooo-eee" sound in the hope we'd make it down based on our aural sense alone. The powder was so perfect you could ski it blind.

There's 11 of us. Most are cat ski virgins and are pumped to get some off-piste powder. Powder Mountain claims 40 per cent more snow than Whistler Blackcomb and from the cat windows it's looking good.

We have two guides, one lead and one tail meaning those who want to pick up the pace can go up front and those who are more hesitant have someone to help them down. Safety's first when in the backcountry and we go through a thorough avalanche transceiver experience once on the snow.

Our first run dictates most of the day. Up top it's wind impacted and slightly tricky underneath, but once we hit the apex of the pitch it's clean powder for a good 500 metres or more before giving way to some semi-spring-like conditions tracked from the day before.

Nothing our crew can't handle, and on the 15-minute ride back up in the back of the cat I watch our guides make note of where next to ski to get us the best lines possible.

They do well as we find fresh, untracked powder again and again, dropping into gullies of white stuff laid out just for us, or so it seems.

If you're with a quick crew

you can easily get through 10 runs if quantity is your goal. Lunch is provided and taken in the cabin on the way up between runs, and chocolates and drinks are in constant supply.

If you're not fit, then cat skiing may be a better option as there is more time to rest between runs than in heli skiing, but then if you're not fit you may not make it through the average eight runs. You can always sit out a run with the driver and take a trip back down as he comes round to pick up your fellow powderhounds once they've made it down. Now you can't do that in a chopper on a circuit day when weight determines fuel capacity.

We follow up the cat skiing day with a turn in a chopper for a four-run heli day with Whistler Heli. Picked up from the swanky Fairmont Chateau, I'm clearly doing the day in style, arriving at the heli hut in the back streets of Whistler to meet our guide, Vlad, and go through avalanche training.

It's a bit odd to be searching for a transceiver in a car park with no snow, but we get the gist of what we need to do should the snow slide.

Fat skis are de rigueur and you can trade your toothpicks for planks at the hut. Vlad's a man of many talents. Turns out he can drive a bus too as he takes his group out to the chopper pad, 15 minutes drive from Whistler.

Heli skiing companies tend to divide their skiers into expert, advanced and intermediate. Trust me, whatever they say, you are; if you haven't heli skied before you will be at least a level below. True off piste is a great leveler designed to knock the ego into line. It can also be a right royal pain when you want to ski hard, but the rest of the pack have resorted to snow ploughs.

Vlad's at it again, only this time he's a helicopter expert talking us through the safety aspects of alighting from the chopper. There's 10 in our crew going up to ski some open bowls and etiquette must be adhered to. With only one guide, yep it's Vlad again, we must go down one at a time behind him, no jumping other folks' fresh lines.

The terrain is undulating, a surprise to most first-timers who equate heli skiing with James Bond or Warren Miller. You don't jump from the chopper with skis strapped to your feet, that would be silly. You do get out, huddle around each other until the chopper departs, then pick up your skis where your guide has taken them from the helicopter.

It's a pure delight to watch first-timers' faces when the chopper disappears and they're left standing free atop of a remote mountain. It's even more exciting to witness their first turns in virgin heli snow as the grin spreads from one ear to the other. Pretty soon they're whooping and hollering and tumbling in snow so light it doesn't hurt when you fall.

Heli runs aren't always long and they're rarely steep on classic day trips. They're designed to make you come off the mountain feeling like a rockstar, which is why they say you only have to be an intermediate groomed skier to experience it.



Guide Vlad puts Rachael through her paces.
PHOTO: CHRIS HOOKING

HELI VS CAT

Whistler Heli Guide Vlad Lamoureux takes first tracks as usual.
PHOTO: CHRIS HOOKING



“I WATCH OUR GUIDES MAKE NOTE OF WHERE NEXT SKI TO GET US THE BEST LINES POSSIBLE. THEY DO WELL AS WE FIND FRESH UNTARACKED POWDER AGAIN AND AGAIN, dropping into gullies of white stuff laid just for us, or so it seems.” Rachael Oakes-Ash shows faith in her guides.



“WHEN YOU PUT 40 SNOW-FIXATED FOLK IN ONE LODGE, PROVIDE THEM WITH FOUR HOT MEALS A DAY, A BAR, lounge and hot tub with 1923 square kilometres of terrain as a daytime playground then you’re creating friendships for life.”

Rachael Oakes-Ash



HELI VS CAT

BELOW: Annabel and Caroline Palmer tear up some Canadian Mountain Holidays Gothics Lodge terrain while Rocky the pilot hovers overhead. PHOTO: / RACHAEL OAKES-ASH
LEFT: Powder Mountain cats awaiting skiers. PHOTO: / CHRIS HOOKING



+ Like most adventure activities there's a status play within the upper echelons. Heli ski days are considered Disneyland by those who take on the big kahuna, the heli ski week. Then when you get there with Canadian Mountain Holidays there's another echelon again, the private heli ski week when Fortune 500s book out entire lodges for themselves and their family.

I'm no Fortune 500, but I sure am fortunate enough to take part in the ultimate ski poker hand. Seven nights at CMH's Gothics Lodge during a snowstorm cycle that delivers 20 centimetres of fresh daily, thigh-deep powder turns, face shots, tight wooded forests, cream-filled glaciers and a whopping 14 runs a day for one week straight.

This is when heli skiing blows everything else out of the water, when you have to train to enjoy it. Powder skiing bonds people, and when you put 40 snow-fixated folk in one lodge, provide them with four hot meals a day, a bar, lounge and hot tub with 1923 square kilometres of terrain as a daytime playground then you're creating friendships for life.

One week here with a daily routine of stretch class, breakfast, nine long runs, lunch, five more runs, hot tub, massage, après drinks then dinner and you will never be able to return to resort skiing, let alone a 4-run heli day or even a 10-run cat ski. On a journo's wage I'll need to save every penny to make it back every year or hock my first born to raise the \$8000 plus before flights.

If skiing is about boasting then consider me a bragger. I know which hand wins in my game and the stakes just keep getting higher. I hear there's a private yacht called Absinthe with a helicopter on the bow docked in Victoria Harbour, Vancouver... **PH**

THE HARD FACTS

What: Heli skiing and Cat Skiing

Where: Canada, the original and the best.
www.canada.travel

Who with: Whistler Heli Ski
www.whistlerheliskiing.com
Powder Mountain Cat Skiing near Whistler
www.powdermountaincatskiing.com
Canadian Mountain Holidays - The Gothics Lodge
Book through Australia's exclusive CMH agent, Travelplan, and plan ahead for a full heli week adventure.
www.travelplan.com.au or 1300 754 754

How to get there: Air New Zealand fly direct to Vancouver from Sydney via Auckland. If you're cashed up and doing CMH then book up the front of the plane for total flatbed comfort and 42 Below cocktails. If not go for Premium Economy and give those ski legs some extra inches to stretch.
www.airnewzealand.com.au or 13 24 76.