

Heli skiing offers the ultimate snow-filled rush, as **Rachael Oakes-Ash** discovers in the Canadian Rockies.

Flights of fancy



Scream here and no one will hear you. That's the point. The thrusting peaks of the Monashees Mountains, in British Columbia's Canadian Rockies, are miles from anywhere.

Come winter, you'll find them laden with metres of dry snow, teasing powder hounds with their ridges, tree-lined chutes and open bowls. The only way in is by chopper and the world's original heli ski operators, Canadian Mountain Holidays, have the licence.

No one told me about my teeth. They raved about floating on powder through a fun park of fir trees on pitches of 40-degrees plus; they spoke of gin and tonics in the lodge hot tub; they even pointed out the favourable ratio of men to women. But they didn't tell me my teeth would freeze.

It's the perma-grin in sub-zero conditions that

It's impossible not to smile in these conditions

does it. Step out of the helicopter into thigh-deep snow and watch it take off into the sky, leaving you with no way down except on your skis or snowboard. Stop, take a moment, look up at the peaks and count the folks around you on two gloved hands then experience the deafening silence before hollering. It's impossible not to smile in these conditions.

When you've mastered the black diamond runs of Telluride (Colorado, in the United States), St Anton (Austria) and Fernie (British Columbia), you're ready for the Monashees.

I've always fancied a helicopter as my preferred mode of transport and for eight glorious days in remote Gothics Lodge I have my pilot, Rocky, pick me up at 9am.

There's an inner club of heli skiers who are happy to perpetuate the myth that heli skiing is for the extreme skier or boarder who jumps from a chopper that hovers 10 feet above the ground. I understand why they want to keep it to themselves but I'm happy to tell you that there are no daredevil antics required.

Heli guides are the sherpas of the sky, they'll take your skis, put them in the chopper and take them out

when you land. Click yourself into your skis and follow the guide, making your own fresh tracks.

The late Hans Gmoser was the godfather of heli skiing. An Austrian who emigrated to Canada, he was the first to introduce commercial heli skiing to the world in 1965. Forty-three years later and his company, Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH), has 12 remote lodges in the heart of British Columbia.

For up to 10 nights, guests have little contact with the outside world. The Gothics Lodge sleeps 33 in comfy, home-style rooms minus the mod cons. There's no need for in-room TV or even phones – it's all about forgetting where you came from and living in the moment. If you want a drink there's no mini bar, rather there's a maxi bar in the lounge area by the fire, by the billiard room. Alarm clocks? Leave them at home, a gentle bell is rung outside the door by obliging staff at 7.15am for stretch class and again at 8am for those who have slept in and want breakfast.

Doors are left unlocked as trust and camaraderie are encouraged. It's all very *Sound of Music* – with rum-spiked hot chocolate. Baskets of muesli and chocolate bars are left next to the drying room for skiers to fill their pockets with before heading up the mountain. The chopper has its own supply of sports drinks and water. With more than 40 years of experience, these guys know what you need before you do.

I'm delighted to share my daily helicopter journeys with seven Brazilian men of varying chivalry and one dapper British lad with a cheeky grin. What woman doesn't glow when there's no competition?

Not that the men are thinking of much more than cutting a fresh line through virgin snow. Some are repeat guests, adding new vertical feet each day to their existing accumulated total, in the hope of reaching the pinnacle of 1 million feet and the Marmot



Million Footer ski suit. More than 3,500 suits exist around the world in this exclusive club and CMH holds million-footer ski weeks so like can ski with like. It's easy to get addicted; after a week of 10 to 14 runs a day in pristine conditions, I am on a natural high. With four hot meals a day and hours spent at the bar sharing snow stories, I know chairlifts are my past and rotors my future.

The camaraderie experienced by those who share a first leap from the helicopter lasts a lifetime and the Brazilians, my cheeky British mate and I are forever linked. Skype, Facebook and Outlook will receive a pounding in the bid to keep the dream alive.

Back home, I spend a week waiting at the front of my house for Rocky to land. Sadly he never does.

Getting there Air Canada (www.aircanada.com) flies direct from Hong Kong to Vancouver, Canada, with onward flights to Calgary. Canadian Mountain Holidays operates in the neighbouring province of Alberta from December 20 to May 2. CMH guests stay at the Delta Calgary Airport Hotel before early morning departures to the lodges, including British Columbia's Gothics Lodge. Log on to www.canadianmountainholidays.com for more.