

Hooked on white magic



Rachael Oakes-Ash has been knocking hard on the powder ceiling this winter, desperate to break through

HIGH-flying action on the slopes above Lake Wanaka. Picture: Harris Mountain Heli-Ski

THE POWDER ceiling keeps most skiers in a blue rut for years because those yet to break through the ceiling believe the myths given to them by the skiers above – that powder is extreme, there is no other colour than black and off piste is reserved for the elite.

The small club of elite skiers at the top have known one another through ski school camps, yearly time out at the folks' lodge and seasons as young adults in US resorts. They think vertical has no limit, off piste is the ultimate and helicopters are personal taxis to the snow world.

But you don't have to be an Olympian to enjoy what's on the other side of the ceiling – powder.

Heli-skiing may be expensive but it's worth every cent for the bragging rights alone, plus it gets you off piste and in powder at a level appropriate to you.

Mention "heli" and watch your mates' eyes glaze with envy. If they've done it before they'll be begging for the spare seat in the chopper, if they haven't they'll think you're a snow god.

Eighteen months ago I was snow-ploughing beginner runs. Blue runs looked like frozen Niagara Falls from where I was sitting (on my butt) and that made heli-skiing equivalent to base jumping – totally insane.

Taking to the snow in my mid-30s, I was hooked, some would say obsessed, with playing catch-up. Two ski seasons, intensive women's ski programs and weeks of private tuition meant I was knocking hard on the powder ceiling this winter, desperate to break through.

The chance came in New Zealand's North Island with some "back country", which in my head was up there with "heli", something I thought only the big kids could attempt. Four days skiing the

active volcano known as Mt Ruapehu proved me wrong. "Back country" literally means past the ski field boundary and with free mountain hosts to guide you, the only question is, why not?

The runs go from undulating green to ego blue and James Bond black.

Either way, you'll be turning virgin snow in natural lava basins. It's the hike back up that wears you out, so best take a sherpa. Better still, go south and take a chopper.

Harris Mountains Heli-Ski has access to some 3000 square kilometres in New Zealand's Southern Alps with 400 runs from 200 peaks in seven separate mountain ranges from which to choose.

Heli-skiing is weather-dependent, which means you don't know if you'll be airborne until the morning of your holiday dawns.

Our first day's skiing is cancelled and I am surprised to feel relief; it seems I am more fearful than excited.

At 3am I am still chugging back cocktails in Queenstown in the belief the next day won't go ahead. An 8am wake-up call telling me to be in the Sofitel foyer pronto meant heli-skiing was on.

My fellow skiers are pumped and ready for action in the back of the van. I, on the other hand, begin to sweat when listening to the radio communication and its talk of winds, eastern aspect and melting snow.

I have two fears in my life – drowning in water and drowning in an avalanche. Shame I tried to drown both in martinis the night before.

The pre-flight safety drill tests our skills with the avalanche transmitters and receivers and peaks my anxiety, until I meet Russell Carr. He's been heli-skiing for 26 years, has been in only two avalanches in his life and lived to tell

both tales.

He explains the weather conditions and points out unstable snow from the window of the chopper, letting me know we won't be skiing that.

Carr is good, very good, and I vow to stick close to him.

After months of short turns, long turns, jump turns, bumps and chutes I thought I knew what skiing was all about. One run down an isolated mountain on virgin snow, far from civilisation, in supreme wilderness was all it took to realise I hadn't a clue.

Forget lift queues, crowded runs and cappuccinos. Standing on the top of a mountain in silence, a wide open space of pure snow in which to play and only three other people up there with you, that's what alpine skiing is all about.

If you think you're not good enough, then you're wrong.

A questionnaire establishes your "heli-level" which ranges from Heli 1 (an intermediate with no powder experience) to Heli 4 (you can ski any snow, any mountain).

There's no jumping out of hovering helicopters commando-style; the chopper lands on the snow and you crawl out, putting on your skis once the pilot has departed.

Wide powder skis are fitted the day before to your standard ski boots and a couple of tips given to you at the top of the run are all you need to ride the white wave.

Come lunchtime you'll be guaranteed of two things – you'll be starving but you won't want to stop.

When you finally break the powder ceiling you will realise one thing – the snow is definitely whiter on the other side.

Getting there

**New Zealand, South Island: Harris Mountains Heli-Ski: \$NZ695 (\$630) for three runs, extra runs \$85. www.heliski.co.nz
Tel: + 64 3 442 6722**
US, Colorado: Helitrax is Colorado's only heli-skiing operation and will take you from Aspen, Vail, Steamboat, Crested Butte

and Telluride for a five-run day from \$US795 (\$1050). www.helitrax.net
Canada, British Columbia: Whistler Heli-Skiing in Whistler Ski Resort has three heli ski runs for \$C670 (\$756). www.whistlerheli-skiing.com
Europe: Heli-skiing is

illegal in France for environmental reasons but can be done in most other European countries under controlled conditions. Most heli-skiing involves booking a guide and then booking a helicopter. Tourist offices at your ski resort will have information on operators.