



Cool for cats

You don't need a helicopter to visit powder heaven, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.

In every snow-sport lover's life, having conquered the snow-plough and parallel turn and carved up the groomed runs across the resort, there comes a time to step off the trail.

They may even have tackled un-groomed snow on dedicated black-run terrain and the steeps and tree runs of the infamous double-black-diamond-rated ski runs in North America. But still it's not enough.

The next obvious step is to go backcountry to unpatrolled terrain that requires avalanche receivers and a safety guide to reach the skiers' dream – untouched powder. Trouble is, how to get there?

Sure, you can trek out with skins attached to your skis or a snowboard over your shoulder but a 45-minute hike uphill results in only a two-minute trip back down.

You could heli-ski but it is expensive. An average heli-ski day ranges from \$NZ725 (\$642) in New Zealand for three runs with Harris Mountain Helicopters (www.heliski.co.nz) to \$C8889 (\$9437) for a fully catered seven-night heli-ski trip in Canada with CMH (www.canadianmountainholidays.com).

Fine and dandy if you're Barry Billionaire, not so great if you're on a budget. But there is cat skiing. It is all the fun of heli-skiing at half the price and with double the number of runs for a set cost.

Snowcats, designed with caterpillar-style tracks to move on snow, are used to groom the runs. Up to 12 skiers can fit into the cat that can reach terrain helicopters simply cannot. When the weather prevents helicopters from taking off, the cats are still running in fresh snow.

Developed in the 1960s, cat ski operations now run throughout the world but the good stuff is found in Canada. Powder Mountain Cat Skiing is 20 minutes from Whistler



Blackcomb resort in Canada's British Columbia and has tenure of 1740 hectares of deep, virgin snow across five peaks. In two words, powder heaven.

The snow may be virgin but I am a first-timer too, both in a cat and on a true backcountry experience where lift queues, tracked-out runs and man-made snow are non-existent. I am nervous, scared the others in the group will be extreme masters worthy of a Warren Miller ski film and I'll be holding them up.

There are 14 of us including a lead guide and a tail guide and we make small talk as the cat moves from the mountain day lodge to the great remote outdoors – fraught with trees, gullies, open bowls, chutes and lips. Forty-five minutes later, we've made it to the top of our first run. We step out of the cat and straight into thigh-deep powder. This will be good.

Avalanche gear is distributed, checked, double-checked and tested as we run through a mock drill. The lead guide goes first and, once we've wrestled with our fat powder skis and clipped ourselves in, we're off.

There's a skill to skiing powder and I am not sure I have it but, thankfully, I don't fall and soon get the hang of riding the snow with rhythm, or so I think. Each run takes about



15 minutes; the cat waits for us at the bottom. When the weather is clear we're encouraged to make our own tracks – but not to go below the guide. I stick with the tail guide, trusting him to help me should I come unstuck. He gives me tips – pick up speed, skis together to create a platform, don't stop, just flow, even weight on both feet.

If the weather comes in, we have to search for the person in front in the white-out, ski on his tail and listen for the sound of the lead guide screaming “coo-ee” below. It's like skiing by braille and playing blind man's bluff in the pool with your eyes closed.

At one point the guide starts laughing when I fall backwards. He knows I'm not hurt but he realises I'm trying to ski the sky. I can't tell the difference between the snow and the air and vertigo has made me lose my balance.

It doesn't last long and the cat

Destination Powder Mountain, British Columbia, Canada

■ HOW TO GET THERE

Air Canada flies direct from Sydney to Vancouver. Whistler is a two-hour drive from Vancouver, see www.aircanada.com.

■ WHAT TO DO

Powder Mountain Cat Skiing operates from mid-December to the end of April. \$C479 (\$508) for one-day cat skiing, transfers, guides, safety equipment, lunch and snacks and guaranteed 7000 feet of vertical, minimum. Whistler Blackcomb, see www.whistlerblackcomb.com.

■ WHERE TO STAY

Spend the money you would have forked out for a heli-ski day on a room at Four Seasons Whistler, with superb mountain views and private balconies from \$C345 a night, see www.fourseasons.com/whistler.

Destination Mount Potts, New Zealand

■ HOW TO GET THERE

Air New Zealand flies directly to Christchurch daily from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, see www.airnewzealand.com.au.

■ WHAT TO DO

You don't have to wait for the northern ski season to enjoy cat skiing. Mount Potts is a heli-cat backcountry adventure a mere 90 minutes from Christchurch. A helicopter drops off the day's skiers and boarders to the mountain day lodge where the cat waits to transport guests up and down the hill. With an experienced guide, snow lovers get 10-12 runs in the day and, because the mountain is privately owned, there's no one else on the slope. Lunch is a picnic in the sun and there is a return helicopter flight. Cost is \$NZ399 (\$353) a person and for an extra \$NZ99 dinner, bed and breakfast is included at the Mount Potts overnight lodge, see www.mtpotts.co.nz.

takes us to tree runs where the contrast of the tree trunks provides visual definition. We're a mixed bag of ski and snowboard levels from intermediates to extreme skiers but the terrain suits all of us.

We get more than 10 decent runs in, each different – I lose count as we beg the cat driver to take us up just one more time. We have lunch on the run to avoid stopping, preferring to eat in the cat between each trip to new territory. When it gets hot we leave our excess gear in the truck; when it cools down we put it back on.

If skiers want to sit out a run, they hang in the cab with the cat driver and take a different ride. You can't do that with a helicopter where every seat must be fuel-efficient.

Back in the village I am told the helicopters didn't go out today; those who were booked are waitlisted for tomorrow. I say nothing. My mother always told me it's rude to gloat.

Take a powder ... unspoilt runs of virgin snow are accessible by snowcat even when the helicopters can't fly. Photos: Jessica Butler