

WHIRLWIND

For those who don't want to work too hard, Eagle Pass Heliskiing is happy to give you a boost into the backcountry. **BY ANDREW FINDLAY**

I slid through a forest of stout Douglas fir and cedar reminiscent of coastal B.C., while fat, feather-light snowflakes drifted lazily down from a sky of white clouds mottled by sunlight. In front of me, guide Norm Winter busted trail through the silent woods, meandering around cavernous tree-wells and contouring the steeper pitches doing what guides do best—gain elevation while also minimizing cardiac output. Behind me, 71-year-old Manfred

Hescher puffed like a vintage steam engine, but beamed a wide grin nonetheless. No wonder he was happy. The previous evening when I arrived at Eagle Pass Heliskiing's base of operations west of Revelstoke, the septuagenarian was sharing a hot tub with three sporty 40-something gals from Canmore. Today he's snacking on shin-deep freshies in a magical forest that's practically all his own. European, astonishingly fit for his age and with a Type-A, goal-oriented personality on

proud display, Hescher may be your archetypal heli-skiing client.

In 2006, perseverance paid off when Winter and his partners Dave Scott and Andy Freeland secured their dream heli-skiing tenure in the Monashee Mountains west of Revelstoke, an enviably sweet chunk of terrain with a predictably deep snowpack and everything from steep, tumbling glacier descents to tasty tree skiing rivalling anything on the planet. At the same time, they realized they were entering a crowded market that has grown to more than 20 different heli-skiing companies in B.C. That's why Winter, Freeland and Scott decided to forge new ground in an effort to grow the market, attract new clients and see if they can turn guys like Hescher, with more than 15 seasons of heli-skiing notched on his ski poles, onto the joys of heli-assisted ski touring.

"It's a really challenging time to be launching a heli-skiing company," Winter admitted with a chuckle. "But this is kind

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of a dream for all of us.”

An hour earlier, the chopper had whisked us from the quaint lodge at Griffin Lake next to the Trans-Canada into this sub-alpine valley of old-growth forest high above the dwarves of Three Valley Gap’s kitschy Enchanted Forest. Soon we were enjoying our own private enchanted forest. The helicopter did most of the hard work in less than 10 minutes. For the rest of the day, we’d be earning our turns with a little sweat equity until Winter summoned the bird for a return flight to the lodge.

We paused for a break and Hesch, between deep inhalations, took the opportunity to tell us about all the miles he puts on his road bike every summer. Heli-skiers are generally a competitive bunch so I humoured his bravado. For Euros like this guy, with the ways and means to heli-ski several weeks every winter, logging more than a million-and-a-half feet of vertical with Canadian Mountain Holidays over the years, heli-touring is a novel experience. So

far he seemed intrigued, if not outrageously enthused.

“When I tell people at home about this, they won’t believe it. I love the peace and the meditative quality of it,” Hesch said, sounding like he still needed to be fully sold on the concept.

Though Winter and his partners hoped Hesch would head back to Europe and help spread the gospel of heli-assisted touring to his well-heeled buddies, they knew Eagle Pass’s bread and butter would still be conventional heli-skiing for the vertical-obsessed.

Before launching Eagle Pass, the business partners had earned their stripes with other companies—more than 40 years of guiding between them. Eagle Pass has all the hallmarks of the new style of boutique heli-skiing venture, typical of the direction this B.C.-born-and-bred business has been heading in recent years. In other words, smaller is better. Four-to-one guest-to-guide

ratios and 12 guests maximum per week keep the experience intimate and personal. The company’s 1,000 square kilometres, contained within more than a half-dozen cherry-picked blobs of terrain north and south of the Trans-Canada Hwy in the Monashees, is blessed with a predictably fat snowpack. In Eagle Pass’s first season it averaged four metres, and they had 10 weeks of skiing, with only a handful of down days due to rain and other inclement weather—not bad for season number one. And to give you an idea of just how boutique Eagle Pass is, all they need is 150 clients per year to be sold out.

However, with the proliferation of heli-skiing companies since the late Hans Gmoser pioneered this audacious form of *glisse* in the Bugaboos back in the early 1960s, there’s a concern these days that more and more heli-skiing companies are competing for a static or perhaps even shrinking pool of potential clients.

“I’m not sure how we can grow the



There is something sublime about skiing through trees as thick as a car is wide

market,” Winter said. “All three of us have sunk our savings into this company.”

Winter, Scott and Freeland have all leaned heavily on their personal client lists gleaned from years of working for the giants, Canadian Mountain Holidays and Mike Wiegele, as well as other smaller companies. Without those valuable contacts and past clients, getting Eagle Pass off the ground would have been like trying to turn granite into gold.

That’s why start-ups like Eagle Pass, without many pennies in the piggybank for marketing, realize it makes sense to sometimes market as a group than to go it alone. Helicat Canada—formerly the B.C. Helicopter and Snow Cat Skiing Operators’ Association—represents close to 30 heli- and snowcat-skiing companies in B.C.

The organization has formed a marketing committee to ensure the heli-skiing market grows and the industry remains vital. First order of business has been to raise the profile of the industry in the eyes of government and public. A 2002 study commissioned by the industry claims that combined the heli- and snowcat-skiing business has a value-added annual economic impact of more than \$100 million and employs roughly 1,200 people, 650 of them full-time. More importantly, the committee is working hard to put the best ski boot forward in terms of safety and standards, and to ensure that the public is aware of the rigorous training that guides go through before they ski with their first group of clients.

“To be a member of Helicat Canada a

company has to meet certain standards set by the association, and member and aspiring member companies are subject to routine audits,” said John Forrest, VP of Helicat Canada and owner of Northern Escapes Heli-skiing based in Terrace, B.C. “If one company has an accident, it reflects on the whole industry.”

Public relations on the economic and safety file is one thing, but expanding the market is a different ball of snow altogether—something essential for the longevity of small and big players in the heli-skiing world alike. Everybody agrees, though the number of heli-skiing options has expanded immensely, the industry hasn’t done a great job of attracting newcomers to the sport. And there’s no doubt heli-skiing struggles with a few persistent public-image problems. To make it in the industry you have to offer something unique that delivers the goods to people with more money than time. And increasingly that means a boutique experience with smaller groups and an exceptional attention to detail on the customer-service side of the equation.

One image problem that has perhaps hindered market growth is the notion that



Photos: PETER MOYNES

THE PRICE OF POWDER

Eagle Pass Heliskiing,
www.eaglepassheliskiing.com

- » 3-day heli-assisted touring package: \$2,600
- » 3-day heli-skiing package: \$4,400

Helicat Canada,
www.helicatcanada.com

heli-skiing is an extreme sport where you huck from helicopters AK-style onto knife-edge ridges.

“One of the questions I routinely get asked is if you have to jump out of the helicopter. We’ve got extreme-skiing films to thank for that,” Forrest said.

Consequently, heli-skiing still predominantly attracts testosterone, hence in theory there’s an untapped market of women out there with disposable income burning holes in the pockets of their fur coats. Despite the gloomy economic times, baby boomers in Canada are coming into some serious disposable income, yet Canadians account for less than five per cent of heli-skiers—another untapped market.

Niche products are another way to grow the market. That’s what prompted the folks at Eagle Pass to offer heli-assisted touring as an option for guests. Other ideas include partnering with winter resorts for combined heli- and lift-riding packages—a way to attract affluent oil execs from Calgary to head west for a long-weekend skiing adventure. Helicat Canada’s website acts like a portal for aspiring heli-skiers, kind of

like a one-stop shop to find out who’s doing what in the now vast array of offerings in the high-end powder market. However, one thing Helicat Canada can’t do to attract new heli-skiers is drop the price. The sport is and will remain expensive.

“It’s no secret that this sport costs a lot of money and for most of our clients, their time is worth more than their money. That means giving the guests what they want,” Forrest said.

At the end of the day, all the dining-room service and chocolates on the pillow in the world won’t make up for exceptional terrain and frequent faceshots. Which is what Manfred Heschler and I had that March day with Eagle Pass Heliskiing.

Wind gusted when we topped out next to red wands marking a heli-drop. We quickly clicked out of our bindings and Heschler wrestled with his skins that misbehaved in the wind like a pair of unruly snakes. Being punctiliously German, he persevered and managed to fold the skins neatly before stuffing them into his backpack.

Guide Winter pointed the boards downhill and we disappeared into a forest that

appeared as though it were gladdened by the ski goddess herself, but instead was rendered by nature into perfectly skiable trees. Light, fresh white dust swirled from the tips of my skis, and Heschler and I exalted in the effortless quality of the snow. There is something sublime about skiing through trees as thick as a car is wide, and were probably alive when Christopher Columbus landed in North America.

Guys like Heschler will get a lot of mileage in the boardrooms of Europe with tales of first descents of alpine glacial lines and lower-elevation tree shots that have never witnessed the passage of skiers. And if he can sell his buddies back home on the virtues of the uphill track and fleeting descent, Heschler will have helped Eagle Pass blaze new ground in the rarefied world of heli-skiing. ❄️

Postscript: Despite best efforts, the stress of running a new business caused the three-man partnership to implode since this story was written. Scott and Winter have moved on to other guiding pursuits, while Freeland, with new investors, remained deep in Eagle Pass powder.