



STORY DANIEL SCHEFFLER

SNOW FLIGHT

Heli-snowboarding is growing in popularity and is an ideal choice for those who want to conquer uncharted territory



PHOTOS: MANI RAAFLAUB, JULIAN LOVE

Luxury has changed, hopefully forever. No longer consumed with the proverbial over-bling and showing off, the realm of luxury now values the privilege of access and the freedom of time more than anything else. And so, heli-snowboarding in remote, uncharted terrain surges as the curator.

In the last few years, the seekers of true luxury in the snow sphere have started moving away from the big-name resorts, the overrun fancy hotel rooms and even the expect-to-find destinations – something else

has come into play and that is entry to remote slopes that are just inaccessible to the average snow addict. Helicopters have made this desire more popular, and with a few exclusive destinations in the world, heli-snowboarding is making serious tracks.

Danielle Stynes, the managing director of SwisSKIsafari.com, describes this in-the-back-of-beyond trend as the ultimate desire of snow connoisseurs who don't want "to see a crowded lift at all during their trip". One of her latest trips

ABOVE
A helicopter at the Alpina Gstaad in Switzerland takes snowboarders to uncharted terrain. Photo: Mani Raaflaub

OPPOSITE
The SwisSkisafari challenges those who are seeking new adventures.



PHOTO: MANI RAAFLAUB

is aimed at these snow buffs: a private chalet in a small alpine village crowned by off-piste door to door snowboarding and, of course, heli-drops at the highest peaks of the mountains.

Although helicopters weren't part of the sport from its first official bellow in the 1960s, the idea of being able to take your fibreglass and polyethylene board to the top of the mountain where nobody else has access to simply by hopping on to a helicopter wasn't far fetched at all. The pioneers of heli-snowboarding, Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH), introduced a

small helicopter to the mountains of western Canada and has over 50 years attracted the buffs of unblemished powder snow while building lodges and adding more sophisticated helicopters.

"As the founder, Hans Gmoser, had first pick of the best areas to ski in British Columbia, we now have over 3.1 million acres [1.3 million hectares] of skiable terrain – the largest in the world," says Jeremy Roche, CMH director of marketing and retail.

Even Richard Branson, Virgin's magic sovereign, spent a season at the CMH Valemount Lodge in the Columbia Mountains with family and friends. According to Branson's Virgin blog, the lot of them were "privileged to experience some of the most beautiful conditions we've ever skied in".

The exclusive-use lodge, a quick private plane jaunt from Calgary, is available to up to 10 guests and comes with private chefs, masseurs and the finest snow guides in the business. Days here are spent out on the slopes making fresh tracks, and evenings include private baths, yoga and stretching followed by exhausted sleep.

Across the ocean in Europe, heli-snowboarding is very different. Here, the high alpine terrain offers boarders descents that are long and varied leading to a more technical adventure. According to Stynes, the beauty of Europe is that "in a week you can find yourself crossing country borders, speaking different

ABOVE

After a day out on the snow, guests can warm up in the jacuzzi at the L'Apogée Courchevel in France.

RIGHT

The SwissSkiSafari arranges a helicopter to drop off a guest on one of the highest peaks.



WE WERE PRIVILEGED TO EXPERIENCE SOME OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CONDITIONS WE'VE EVER SKIED IN **RICHARD BRANSON**

languages and eating different regional specialities, which makes for a more unique travel experience". Imagine visiting Swiss monasteries inhabited by monks or stopping for tea in a mountain refuge in the Italian Ferret Valley.

The virgin slopes, and mastering them, can take some rehearsing. Guides, with avalanche training provided and equipped with emergency tools, take boarders up in the metal bird that does its drop on the highest peak possible. Perched on a white beauty of a slope the helicopter releases boarders ready for action. With no tracks, the thrill of uncombed terrain is finally understood. The free spirit of snowboarding finds its way to the board and ultimately onto the whiteness below. Roland Brunner, a top pilot in the European Alps says, "The marvel is that at each drop-off point there are so many snowboarding options suitable to everyone, not just powder specialists."

It is Switzerland that offers some of the world's best locations for heli-snowboarding – the cantons of Engadine and Graubünden. With SwisSKIsafari tours, the choices of where to stay are endless, but for privacy and a more permanent home setting it's all about St Moritz's finest, the Badrutt's Palace with the three-bedroom Hans Badrutt Suite.

With a view across the lake St Moritz and Engadin Alps, the hotel offers the finest dining in the area, including a Nobu, but it is the wellness centre that

attracts the die-hard boarders as they get out of the helicopter.

Nearby is also the famed village of Gstaad, the Hollywood royalty destination, with The Alpina Gstaad, as another idyllic spot to rest one's head after a day out on the slopes. The exclusive Panorama Suite, a 400-square-metre duplex apartment with three bedrooms, comes with private chefs, a spa and staff and provides for that privacy continued off-slope.

"Heli-skiing or heli-snowboarding are a great alternative for those who prefer to ski in fresh, untracked powder snow, away from the crowd of the slopes and the chair lifts," says Thomas Kohler from Air-Glaciers. Gstaad is a great location for heli anything with a heli base on the Saanen Airport, and six drop off points in the region.

And if France is more appealing, the L'Apogée Courchevel five-bedroom chalets, L'Amarante and L'Alpensia, come with discreet access to your helicopter, and if you're staying put for the day, private ski in/out and lift facilities. The home cinema and private chefs also entice after creating tracks in untouched top of the mountain snow all day.

From exclusive-use lodges, to the finest private chalets in the world, heli-snowboarding is for the seekers of exclusivity, but most importantly, it's for the adventure junkie wanting to find snow nobody else has ever seen. **✈**



GEARING UP FOR FLIGHTS

What to include in your skiing bag – some sexy helmets

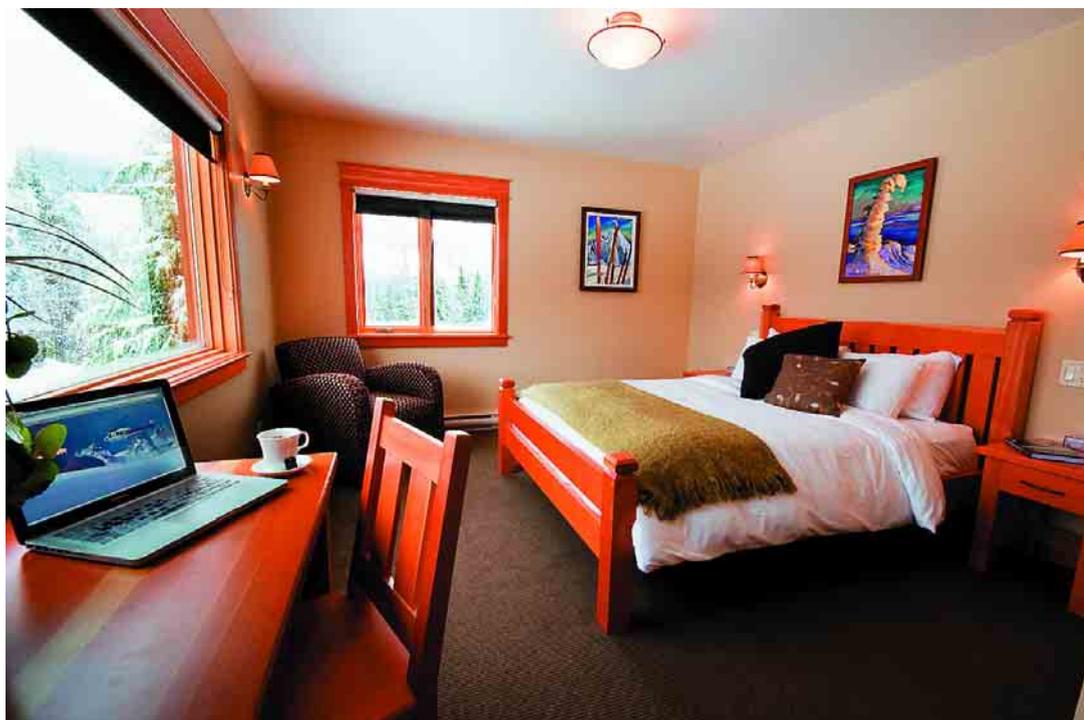
- Bogner Cool Factor: discreet in grey weather-proof tech wool for any condition on the slopes
- Indigo Snow Snake Black: for seekers of sleek as the cruising downslope begins
- Snow and Rock: skiing clothing and equipment
- Kask Lifestyle Lady with Fur Trim: even comes with Swarovski crystals for a little bling on the slopes and a leather carry bag
- Casco SP-3 Edelholz: au natural in wood for the subtler snowboarder
- Giro Edit: for the lightest possible load on your head
- Smith Variance: works well with the Skull Candy audio system for music on the slopes

For more information and booking your journey, let Michael Albanese handle the logistics: www.elementlifestyle.com
For trips to Canada: www.canadianmountainholidays.com
For trips to Europe: www.swisskissafari.com

How to get there

Canada: From Hong Kong fly to Vancouver on Cathay Pacific, from there a short hop to Calgary where CMH will transfer guests to any of their lodges.

Europe: From Hong Kong to Zurich on Cathay Pacific with various small flights every day to Gstaad, St Moritz and Courchevel. Book on www.cathaypacific.com



LEFT
Canadian Mountain Holidays' Gothics Lodge features spacious and cosy rooms.