

The Red Army welcomes you

Krasnaya Polyana in southern Russia has some of the world's best skiing - but, writes Tom Robbins, the transport to the slopes takes some getting used to

Tom Robbins

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It felt more like going to war than going skiing, and I was terrified. The giant Russian helicopter had spotted us and was approaching fast. The throb of its rotors filled my ears and vibrated my bones, the downdraft sent snow and ice blasting into my face and every instinct screamed 'run away'.

I cowered, face down and eyes shut while the noise grew so loud it seemed clear the pilot was going to land directly on us.

It was never like this on Treasure Hunt. In that, I distinctly remember the chopper would never land unless it was 100 yards from the nearest person, before Aneka jumped out and ran to safety, dramatically bending double. This pilot obviously hadn't seen it.

I looked up to find the helicopter's nose four feet from where I crouched, rotors hammering the air above. Heart in throat, and buttocks clenched, I stumbled blindly on board.

Maybe I was being a wimp, but in my defence, my first taste of heli-skiing was happening not in some jolly, familiar Swiss resort, but in the far south of Russia. Here helicopters are not buzzy little things with names like Squirrel and Gazelle, as in the Alps, but giant warbirds. Ours was a Mil Mi-8, the kind that has prosecuted the Soviet cause from Afghanistan to Chechnya, with room inside for up to 30 troops. And it looked like it wasn't exactly new ...

We were staying at Krasnaya Polyana, the country's premier ski resort - where Putin comes to ski and several oligarchs have homes. It is spoken of as 'Russia's Courchevel' and is even bidding as a venue for the 2014 Winter Olympics.

The reality is somewhat less impressive. The town, high in the Caucasus and two hours' drive from the Black Sea resort of Sochi, has just four ski lifts and is mainly a ragged jumble of wooden houses, divided by mud roads.

Rubbish lies strewn around the verges, being picked at by scavenging pigs. Packs of dogs keep up a night-long howling rota. Gruff soldiers check your passport before you're allowed to ski each morning, and instead of rosy-cheeked chalet maids, there are fur-coated hookers.

Yet if you are here to ski, this is arguably the best resort not just in Russia but the whole of Europe. The terrain could scarcely be better for off-piste skiing. Above the town lie bowl after bowl of perfect, untouched powder. It's unglaciated, so there are no concerns about suddenly vanishing into a crevasse, and after 600m skiing down open powder fields you enter widely spaced silver birch forests.

Last season, when snow in the Alps was thin on the ground, Krasnaya's skiers were bounding through thigh-deep powder week after week. The only snag is you need a helicopter to get to

it.

Once inside the chopper I begin to calm down. We lift off smoothly and start skimming above the pine forests, leaving the piste skiers far behind. On board are 10 skiers and snowboarders, two guides and three pilots. Just as I relax, Shaun, a chipper Australian boarder, discovers the windows can be opened (originally so soldiers could shoot out) and proceeds to lean half his body out, holding on with one hand, videoing himself with the other.

'Jeez that's a view,' he says. I don't remember that from Treasure Hunt either.

At the top of the ridge, at around 2,800m, the pilot touches the wheels down on the snow and hovers - land properly and the helicopter would disappear into the deep snow. Dennis, our French guide, jumps out and his Russian assistant George throws him the skis. Then like a row of paras, we shuffle along to the front of the chopper, turn left to the open hatch, and jump - five foot down to land in the deep snow. Suddenly back in the freezing blast once more, I curl foetus-like, but a few seconds later the noise recedes, the old bird veers violently off back down the valley, and we're alone.

I stand and look around and there's almost too much to take in. We can see for miles, with the peak of Mount Elbrus, Europe's highest mountain, poking up in the far distance. From our ridge we look down in every direction to vast snowy bowls falling away into wooded valleys. There's not a single sound, and not a single ski track. Dennis the guide remains the picture of gallic nonchalance. 'We go?' he shrugs.

There are certain runs with names that skiers love to drop - the Stairway to Heaven, the Wall, the Vallée Blanche and so on. All seven runs we did that day were better than any of them, but none even had a name.

Powder like this is as addictive as the Kate Moss kind and unfortunately not much cheaper. Is it possible to justify spending £2,500 on a week's skiing? Try hard enough and you can convince yourself it is.

In our week we made 30 helicopter drops, which works out about £85 per magical run - the price of a night out! A week in a Canadian heli-ski lodge would typically cost another £1,000. Flights to Sochi are reasonable, connections in Moscow easy, and there's no jet-lag. While the Russian helicopters may look old and soot-stained, their twin engines make them safer than small European models, and there has never been a hitch in the decade the heli-ski operation has been running.

Near the end of our first day we meet a group of American snowboarders shooting a movie. 'I do this all day every day all around the world, and it don't get no better than this,' says one.

'Today was sick, (meaning good),' says another. 'We're going back for a three-skiner (meaning a giant spliff).'

As the helicopter lands on the pad back in the town the rotors blow washing off all the lines. Such fine skiing means Krasnaya is changing. At the edge of the town's decrepit sprawl is a large Radisson SAS four-star hotel, ringed with a steel fence and looking as if it has been teleported there from Val d'Iserre.

Down the road is a top-notch French restaurant, with waiters in black tie, and fantastic food. Cranes are building new apartments all the way up the valley and the lines of rickety Russian farm vehicles are now punctuated by posh Mercedes and BMWs. In the muddy car park at the

bottom of the ski lifts, old women sell their homemade honey, while Muscovites in Prada ski suits wander past, carrying the latest top-of-the-range French skis.

Go now and there's a sense of adventure, of a sleepy Soviet backwater waking to find itself the centre of a tourist goldrush. Leave it five years and the town really will be Russia's Courchevel.

The real trouble with a trip like this is not justifying the cost, but that it's like your first time flying business class. Afterwards, skiing crowded pistes will never seem good enough again.

Factfile

Tom Robbins travelled with Elemental Adventure (0870 738 7838; eaheliskiing.com). A week's heli-skiing in Krasnaya Polyana - staying at the four-star Radisson SAS Lazurnaya Peak, all meals, transfers, six days' heli-skiing, guides, skis, and all safety equipment included - costs £2,321. You can also stay in guesthouse accommodation for £2,047. Long weekends, with three days' heli-skiing, are available for the first time this season and cost from £1,226. Flights to Sochi, via Moscow, are not included and cost around £400.

Heaven for the heli-skier

Absinthe

New this year, this is the ultimate ski experience. Absinthe is a 230ft mega yacht with library, whirlpool bath, staterooms and its own helicopter parked on deck. You heli-ski all day on British Columbia's Coast Mountains while the yacht cruises along the coast and meets you each night.

Cost: £116,600 a week for 12 people (£9,700 each).

Alaska

Steep and scary. The stable snowpack caused by the proximity of the Pacific means less risk of avalanches, so super steep lines can be attempted. You stay in a log cabin in the heart of the Chugach Mountains with the helicopter parked on your doorstep.

Cost: from £2,887 a week.

Kamchatka

Probably the most remote heli-skiing in the world, with long descents in wild and unexplored terrain. The 750-mile Kamchatka peninsula, in the far east of Russia, north of Japan, is home to fewer than half a million people. The skiing is usually on some of the region's 140 active volcanoes. Getting there is a mission in itself - fly to Moscow, then take a nine-hour domestic flight.

Cost: from £2,586 a week.

Himalayas

Unrivalled for drama. Land in the helicopter at 4,800m and you can still look up to peaks towering another 2,000m above. Heli-skiing is based in Manali, at the northern end of the Kullu Valley in India.

Cost: from £3,552 a week.

• All can be booked via Elemental Adventure

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