



## Skiing's 'Wild West' takes off

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By Julie Clothier for CNN

(CNN) -- Imagine skiing on untouched snow where chairlifts, queues and other skiers don't exist.

It might sound like an impossible dream, but this is the world of heli-skiing, where skiers are dropped to remote locations by helicopter to ski down runs layered with the most perfect powdery, virgin snow.

As ski resorts in the northern hemisphere begin to wind down with the arrival of spring, the heli-skiing season still has a long way to go.

Former Londoner James Morland started Elemental Adventure in 2001. Back then, his company took just 15 people heli-skiing throughout the season, to both Canada and the Himalayas.

Now based in Chamonix in France, Morland says he expects to take up to 250 people on trips this year with Russia now rivaling Canada in the popularity stakes.

Before starting the company, Morland worked as a ski patroller in Canada, where most of his earnings were spent on heli-skiing trips in Alaska in the springtime.

It's a concept that has been around for about 30 years and started in Canada, where the industry is well-established.

The Kamchatka Peninsula in the far east of Russia, meanwhile, is still a bit "rough around the edges," according to Morland, which he says is part of its charm.

"It's for those people looking for great skiing and amazing adventure. It's a pretty unique experience," Morland told CNN.

"From the phone calls I get, more and more people are looking to do something a little bit different.

"We're trying to make some of these places more accessible -- whether they're more adventurous destinations, or more culturally unique -- making them available to people who wouldn't otherwise know about them."

In Kamchatka, skiers stay in accommodation in downtown Petropavlovsk, a 20-minute drive from the helicopter base.

From there, they are transported to the slopes of a volcano range. Each run is, on average, 1,400 vertical meters long (4,600 vertical feet), roughly taking an hour to ski down depending on how fast you travel. The longest run in Kamchatka is 4,000 vertical meters (13,100 vertical feet).

Morland's favorite part of a skiing trip is seeing the looks on people's faces when they land in the snow for the first time.

"You go from the sound of the helicopter to the sound of absolute solitude in the space of a few seconds.

"You're surrounded by untouched slopes in the wilderness with just you and your friends. There are no chairlifts and the helicopter is at the bottom waiting for you when you ski down," he says.

"It's incredible. It's like landing on another planet. It's unlike anything I've ever seen before. There are volcanoes smoking everywhere, you can ski right down to the beach, down to sea level. Some of the runs go on for what feels like for ever. It's the wild-west of heli-skiing."

Heli-skiing is not just for expert skiers, says Morland, but you need to be at least an intermediate-level skier or snowboarder, with some off-piste experience to deal with unpredictable weather conditions.

"Very often, there's powder and blue skies but like anywhere, some days it's not perfect. Some days it's difficult and you have to be able to cope with that."

The heli-skiing season in Kamchatka, Russia, runs from March to May and trips cost 3,950 euros (\$5,250).

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