

Bargain or blow out

From £119 a week to £500 a day, how do skiing's two extremes compare? Tom Robbins joins the jet set in Canada

Tom Robbins

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About 700 miles north of Vancouver, on a lonely snow-covered road that pushes on to the Yukon and Alaska, is a petrol station. There's not much traffic - just the occasional juggernaut swishing past, ferrying colossal tree trunks out of the wilderness and south to civilisation. Sometimes a truck pulls in, and the driver jumps down from his cab and scuttles quickly inside, to warm up with a polystyrene cup of coffee. Few probably even realise that they've stopped at one of the most exclusive ski resorts in the world. Or notice that, round the back of the building, there's an outdoor hot tub where Swiss bankers and English entrepreneurs sit among the rising steam, drinking wine and smoking cigars to celebrate another great day's skiing.

This is the domain of Last Frontier Heli-skiing, a ski operation so extravagant it borders on the absurd. Around the hot tub are a cluster of log cabins which house up to 30 skiers who have made pilgrimages across the world to be here. All are paying at least £500 a day, not including flights or bar bills, but inside the cabins are plainly furnished with no gold taps or linen sheets, in fact not even a television. Rather the luxury, the indulgence, is the snow - lighter, fluffier than anywhere I've been - and the extreme lengths that are gone to so the customers have exclusive access to it.

A short walk from the cabins are the two helicopters that will ferry the guests up to the surrounding mountains - a ski area 25 times larger than the whole of the Trois Vallees or, put another way, six times bigger than Greater London. Or more than 100 square miles per person.

But then, this really is the middle of nowhere. A place quite mind-bogglingly empty. Getting there from my flat in Clapham hasn't been easy. First there's the 10-hour flight to Vancouver, followed by a few hours of jet-lagged staring at the bedroom ceiling in the plush airport hotel. Then it's up before dawn for a flight north, during which the sense that I'm heading for the back of beyond, or in local parlance 'the boonies', really begins to take hold. In two hours we don't fly over a single electric light, just mountains and glaciers turning from grey to blue as the sun begins to rise.

But of course, even in the middle of nowhere there's a Hertz desk, so at Terrace airport I pick up a huge 4x4 to begin the four-hour drive even further towards the Arctic. About a mile from the airport the radio dies. Not broken, it's just that there are no people to broadcast to. It gradually becomes clear that there's not going to be anywhere to stop for lunch either - what look like towns on the map turn out to be individual houses, or even just junctions in the road. I drive on in silence, except for the crunch of tyre on snow and the gentle thwack on the windscreen of what are known here as 'suicide birds' - little finches that sit on the road and then, instead of scarping, fly straight into approaching cars. The first is appalling. I stop and reverse to see if the little thing is dead. It is. Never stood a chance against two tons of Ford Expedition. After a while, you realise there's nothing you can do about it - honk your horn,

flash your lights and they still come at you - so you have to bite your lip, accept it's a tough world out here, and zoom on with occasional birds plinking off the car.

So it's disorientating, when I finally arrive, to go upstairs for a beer and find a group of jovial Chelsea-ites standing in slacks and saying things like: 'The thing is, there really aren't any decent pubs on the King's Road any more.' One of the other guests has come from a sheep farm in rural Australia, another from a swish gated community in Kuala Lumpur, and lots from Switzerland and Austria, where you'd think they had enough snow of their own. And yet despite the global clientele, and the millions of dollars they presumably represent, as we plug bottles of Kokanee the atmosphere in the small log-pannelled room is relaxed and low-key, little different to any ski bar in the Alps.

Next morning, we wander over to a stretching class, given by the on-site masseuse to reduce the risk of pulled muscles. In the ski room, boots are warming on the electric drying racks and there's a vast selection of skis to choose from, including super-wide models, manufactured in tiny quantities especially to flatter even the most tentative heli-skier.

Down at the helipad, in groups of five, we squash into the Bell 407, which when starting up sounds alarming similar to the gas hob in your kitchen - click, click, click then a whoosh as the fuel catches fire. The rotors spin up to speed, everything starts to vibrate, then suddenly you're away, soaring over the lonely road, rivers and forest and frozen lakes.

We flop out of the chopper into the deep snow, the tumult subsides and we look up to find ourselves on a mountain's wide, open, sunny flank. There are no ski tracks, no sign of human life. Below, the slope is wide and gentle, open at first then becoming spotted with small trees to slalom around. This is not extreme skiing. There's no negotiating difficult rock steps, no couloirs - less to be afraid of than in your normal European ski resort. Nor are the group extreme skiers. There are lots of falls and plenty of breathers, and one of the group is 72.

But it is wonderful. You turn with minimal effort, and the tails of the skis throw ethereal plumes of snow into the air behind you. Between 60 and 100ft of snow falls each winter here and you gorge on it, indecently and carelessly eating up mile after mile of fresh tracks, run after run of what in an Alpine resort is a scarce resource to be sought out and prized. This is the sensation that draws people across continents: a sense of complete freedom, of finding your own route down remote virgin slopes, being alone in the wilderness.

Of course, it's all an illusion. A vast infrastructure, invisible but expensive, is at work. Each morning before the guests rise for breakfast, at least five guides hold an hour-long meeting, taking in avalanche data from across Canada and satellite weather reports that have been processed hundreds of miles away in the supercomputers at Washington State and Seattle Universities. Then they go through each of the 450-odd runs - yes, though there's nothing to show it, at all times the guides are leading their charges down established routes - deciding whether it is safe to ski that day. Some runs are even closed for fear of disturbing the mountain goats if they have been spotted nearby. The helicopters cost £1,000 an hour to run and there are a full-time engineer, two pilots, radio operator, chefs, bar staff, maintenance men, delivery drivers - 25 people in all, out here, in the boonies, just to bring that taste of floating in powder to the privileged few.

None of this concerns us as we whoop through the trees. 'Yeeow,' screams Tim, the boss of an American restaurant chain. 'Ole, ole, ole,' shouts Gonzalo, a Spanish telecoms entrepreneur. After five or six runs, we ski down to find lunch miraculously laid out on a table cut from the snow.

Back at the lodge every national group is behaving exactly as per stereotype, so much so that the Brits have taken it upon themselves to organise a series of skits to entertain us during the evenings. Most involve the men dressing as women, clothes being put on back to front, and so on. The Australians and Canadians weep with mirth; the Germans guffaw and shout 'Hah, you English!'; the Swiss look on bemused.

On the final night everyone must come in fancy dress based on the names of the runs. There's a 'snow angel', a 'wipeout', a 'silver fox' and one of the English guys turns up in his wife's swimming costume. I go for the run called 'head plant'. Of course three others have done the same, so we sit there, drinking fine wine, plants gaffer-taped to heads, in the middle of the wilderness, while the occasional timber lorry rumbles past outside. Absurd but rather fabulous.

Essentials

Tom Robbins travelled with Elemental Adventure (0870 738 7838; www.eaheliskiing.com) . Prices start at £3,375, including seven nights at Bell 2 Lodge , all meals, two nights in Vancouver, guiding, skis, and return flight from Vancouver to the lodge. Tom drove there, in a car from Hertz (0870 844 8844; www.hertz.co.uk) and stayed at the four-star Fairmont Vancouver Airport (00 1 604 207 5200; www.fairmont.com). Air Canada (0871 220 1111; www.aircanada.com), the national flag carrier, flies to Vancouver from £400 return.

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