Travel

Canada | In the north of British Columbia, a forgotten frontier town has switched from mining to offering some of the world's most sublime skiing. By *Simon Usborne*

After the gold rush

Frank Kamermans thought he was being scammed when a man said he was phoning from the White House. Kamermans, who is 60, took the call in the office of the Ripley Creek Inn, the folksy hotel and toaster museum he owns in Stewart, a forgotten gold rush town in northern British Columbia. He had opened the museum for me late last March, letting the early spring air warm his collection of 1,500 antique kitchen appliances. The oldest — an electric teapot — dated to 1893.

"But then I got talking to the guy and it really was the White House," Kamermans recalled. He was wearing a plaid shirt and a frayed cap embroidered with a black bird and the words "Raven Lunatic". "They wanted to know about the relationship between Stewart and Hyder, and specifically about July 1 and July 4, and how we celebrate together. We talked a while and then I just got on with the day."

I had heard about Hyder, a dead-end town of 50 people just across the border, at the tip of Alaska's southeastern panhandle. It lies just two miles down the road from the relative metropolis of Stewart (population: about 400), where I spent a week enjoying some of Canada's best — and remotest — heli-skiing. When I walked into Alaska, in a break between 1,500-metre tree runs in knee-deep powder, I passed the abandoned customs house, closed when Jimmy Carter was president. Outside the Yankee Trader gas station, where a 1970s truck still waited to be filled, only a friendly dog stopped to check me out.

On July 1, the crossing gets busier as Hyderites march into Stewart to join the Canada Day parade. Stewart then heads the other way, joining US Independence Day festivities that include the Bush Woman Classic, a race involving log chopping, pancake flipping, and the application of lipstick before the finish line. The tradition had intrigued the Obama administration, so at a joint press conference with Justin Trudeau at the White House last year, a few days after the call to Kamermans, Obama mentioned the towns as an example of a special relationship.

Few people listening to the president would have heard of either place. But Stewart, where fortunes have swung wildly with mining and logging riches, has quietly earned itself a name among prospectors in search of a more plentiful natural resource. Snow still choked 5th Avenue, the main drag, when I arrived with a group organised by Last Frontier Heliskiing. Each winter for more than a decade, the Canadian company, run by a dentist's son from Surrey in England, has taken over the Ripley Creek Inn, as well as the Bitter Creek Cafe across the street.

Getting there took some doing; a 10-hour flight from London to Vancouver, a two-hour flight north to the city of Terrace, then a four-hour bus ride (driving Vancouver to Stewart would take 17 hours). But the pay-off became clear the moment our A-Star 350 soared into the mountains. I have heli-skied before, in southern BC, but these peaks were of another order. It felt as if the helicopter's windows were magnifying glasses; glaciers the size of cities crept down every valley, winding between steep ridges that repeated into the distance.

Last Frontier's ski area, including Stewart and its other base further north at Bell 2, covers more than 10,000 sq km (that's a quarter of the size of Switzerland, or half a Wales). It receives 25 metres of snow each winter, on average — enough to bury an eight-storey building if it fell at once. At least a metre had come down in the days before my

Ripley Creek Inn's outdoor hottub

5th Avenue in the town of Stewart
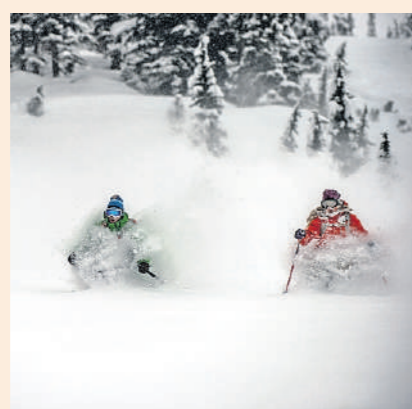
arrival. I sunk almost to my waist as I climbed out of the helicopter for the first runs of the week. Wide-open Alpine faces turned into runs of perfectly spaced trees. And with small helicopters and groups of just four, plus a guide, we were able to access narrow forested couloirs that would be off-limits to the groups of up to 11 that are standard with many heli-ski operators.

Hundreds of miles from any ski resort, these ranges were first skied in earnest in the late 1960s. Herb Bleuer, a Swiss mountain man, had been called in to improve safety at Granduc, a local copper mine where an avalanche had killed 28 workers. Bleuer brought his touring skis with him, bagging unnamed peaks on his days off. Years later, in 1991, Bleuer helped to launch TLH Heliskiing much further south. Not long after that, the company took on Mike Watling, a wide-eyed, ski-mad 22-year-old Briton from Dorking.

Inspired by Bleuer's tales of a greater wilderness to the north, Watling later pooled savings and joined two other Swiss skiers, including Franz Fux, a guide at Canadian Mountain Holidays, the first and biggest heli-skiing company, to launch Last Frontier Heliskiing.

At Bell 2, their first site, opened in 1996, more conventional luxury cabins for up to 36 guests have mushroomed around an old gas station, 50 miles from Stewart. In 2005, Ripley Creek joined the Last Frontier map, hosting up to 24 guests at a time.

In Ripley Creek's ski room, one of the inn's sprawling wooden buildings, Jocelyn Lang took care of all the equipment. The retired mountain guide and CMH alumnus remembered jumping ship to recce what became Last Frontier's tenure in the early 1990s. "We just went, 'can I ski there, land me there'," the 66-year-old New Zealander told me. "Some of the run names are really boring because sometimes we couldn't think of enough." From the top of a run called Barcelona, head guide Colin Moorhead pointed out a series of still unnamed peaks. Later, we skied Cruise Control, a 1,500-metre descent to a lake without a name. Vast bowls of undisturbed snow glistened in every direction.

The skiing was some of the most indulgent of my life, but at Stewart, Last Frontier stands apart from the luxury approach that defines the heli-skiing industry with an operation that is as remote as it is gloriously rustic. On day

two, after skiing almost 12,500 metres (imagine doing the Vallee Blanche, Europe's longest lift-served descent, four and a half times without touching another skier's tracks), I sunk into Ripley Creek's hot tub, a plastic affair plonked in the yard next to a rusting tug boat. Rooms were comfortable but modest. "Luxury here is flying around one of the last wildernesses and skiing powder top to bottom 15 times a day," Watling told me at the Bitter Creek bar.

I skied with a Dutch trampoline tycoon, an Austrian ophthalmologist, a German Olympic mogul skier turned health app entrepreneur, and a biotech fund manager from San Francisco. Drew Searl, an Arizona pacemaker salesman, was on his eighth trip with Last Frontier. He had brought friends, and quickly made more. Each night, fuelled by martinis, the American engaged the equally ebullient Dutchman in a raucous singing contest, dealing a knockout blow with a word-perfect rendition of Snoop Dogg's *Gin and Juice*. "For me this is a true vacation," said Searl. Strong skiers can burn through the 100,000 vertical feet included in Last Frontier's seven-day package; additional feet cost C$47 per 1,000. Searl sometimes coughs up several thousand dollars at check out. "It's literally the single greatest cheque I write all year long," he said.

Half way into the week, spring warmth had begun to arrive. Happy to have enjoyed the best of the week's skiing, I spared my credit card to spend time in town. In the summer, roadtrippers go to Stewart to gawp at the naked glaciers and watch bears eat salmon. In the winter it's dead. But the towns once buzzed with frontier spirit year round. Fifteen years after the Scottish Stewart brothers went looking for gold in 1902, a town of 10,000 people had built up around 5th Avenue. In 1908, a German

nobleman opened the grand Empress Hotel, the site of lavish new year balls.

The first decline in mineral prices came just before the first world war; it almost killed the town and closed the Empress. The hotel still stands, a shuttered monument to a series of booms and busts still playing out today. At Raine Mountain Hardware, Mike Ginka remembered growing up in the 1970s, when the Granduc mine was booming (it closed in the 1980s) and Stewart had a swimming pool and two schools. Now even when mines do well, they fly workers into camps. "It's sad because people don't bring families here any more," Ginka told me. At Brand New Video, a DVD and ice cream store, Angela Brand, a former mayor of Stewart, said her daughter was the only graduating student at the town's surviving school.

The picture is bleaker still in Hyder, which once boomed alongside Stewart. As I walked there along the brackish estuary, geese flew over black tree stumps and snowmelt poured over the empty road from the rocks above. After passing the abandoned customs post, I explored the deserted streets. At the end of an ice-covered track, smoke rose from the chimney of a small wooden house. Lester and Laura Lee Catron have been married 57 years and moved here in the 1970s from Oregon. Lester, who is 78, now spends much of the summer collecting wood to survive winter, but the couple have never looked back. "This is our little corner of paradise," Laura Lee said, gesturing at the mountains.

On my way back to Canada, where a passport is required (a Canadian customs house was established more than a decade ago to end the smuggling of cheap American guns and cigarettes), I

knocked on the door of the Glacier Inn, run by Jody Bunn and opened by his father in the 1950s. When bad weather occasionally grounds the helicopters, Last Frontier sometimes organises an excursion to the inn. Visitors have traditionally written their names on dollar bills and pinned them to the wall. "There's over 95,000 dollars on these walls," Bunn told me. "The idea was that if you were ever broke you could come back and get your money."

It was too early to be "Hyderized" (downing a house shot of unknown origin), so I wound back to Ripley Creek. Kamermans said Last Frontier had brought only modest winter profits to his inn, but he enjoyed the sight of skiers from Holland and Arizona traipsing past his museum on their way to breakfast.

He had journeyed west from Ontario more than 35 years earlier, in search of adventure. He is now hopeful that recent investment in the seaport might bring the good times back to Stewart and Hyder. In the meantime, as skiers in the know continue their winter migration, Kamermans and his wife are considering plans to retire to a remote, solar-powered home they have in the far south of the province. "Even in a place like this, sometimes you just need to get away from it all, you know?" he said with a smile.

Main image: heli-skiing with Last Frontier in British Columbia. Left: the Ripley Creek Inn. Far left: skiers enjoying the powder near Stewart
Steve Rosset; Dave Silver; Reuben Krabbe, Pure Soul Media

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Simon Usborne was a guest of Elemental Adventure (eaheliskiing.com) and tourist board Destination British Columbia (HelloBC.com). Elemental Adventure offers trips to Last Frontier Heliskiing from C$6,700 for four days, C$10,800 for seven days, full-board and including transfers from Terrace, guided heli-skiing, skis and safety equipment. Air Canada has daily flights from London to Terrace, via Vancouver, from £740