

PISTE OFF

PANTHEON DOUBLE-DOWN



The Himalayas' little sisters.

Words by **Leslie Anthony** | Photos by **Eric Berger**

YOU CAN'T LIVE AND SKI IN B.C. without knowing about heliskiing. And if you know about heliskiing, then you've probably heard of Bella Coola Heli Sports—the one-of-a-kind operation run by three longtime outdoor-film-biz buddies in the province's biggest, baddest, snowiest terrain.

Based out of the historic Tweedsmuir Lodge some 40 minutes from town, Bella Coola Heli Sports (BCHS) broke onto the scene in the early millennium with a series of ridiculous and popular film segments. This is where Shane McConkey expertly railed steep spines on a pair of water skis, then, back at the lodge, sketched out what would become his game-changing, reverse-camber fat ski—the K2 Pontoon—on a napkin. This is where Quebecois sensation Hugo Harrisson blew minds with his high-speed descents of classics like the Seth-pioneered "Morrison Hotel." And this is where Mark Abma, a big-mountain neophyte called into a shoot for MSP's *Yearbook* after someone got injured, was legendarily thrown into a chopper with veterans Harrisson and McConkey. Before Abma knew what happened, the line he skied that day helped garner him the coveted "Male Performer of the Year" at the Powder Awards. BCHS is known for making ski history, and also for surprises—surprising size, surprising terrain, surprising snow. In that vein, perhaps most

surprising is that BCHS also operates another tenure that might be even more mind-blowing: Pantheon Heli Ranch.

The area is so stunning and so Himalayan in scale that Hollywood films like *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet* and *K2* were shot on its ramparts. The Pantheons (a subrange of the Coast Mountains, closer to Williams Lake) surround Mt. Waddington, British Columbia's highest peak at 4,019 metres—discovered only in 1925 and first named Mystery Mountain. Even today the area remains wild and relatively inaccessible, the heavily glaciated terrain offset by the thick forests and deep valleys guarding Waddington's flanks. Although the Pantheon heliski experience is totally different than the coastal vibe in Bella Coola, it's equally unique. Because it's a small-group program based out of a remote working ranch a few hours east of Bella Coola on the Chilcotin Plateau, only a handful of lucky folks have made tracks here. One who has done so multiple times is renowned photographer Eric Berger, a longtime friend with BCHS owner-operators Pete "the Swede" Mattsson, Beat Steiner and Christian Begin.

Last February, Berger was just finishing up an assignment in Nakusp when a text from Begin likely caused him to spill his Caesar and slip on the way to the hot tub: the three amigos were heading to Pantheon to do some exploring—could he come? It was an invitation he couldn't turn down.



Crystal Lee becomes a small fish in Bella Coola's big pond.



"Get to the choppa!"



Ice, ice baby.



Size does matter.

PISTE OFF

THE CLOSEST LOCATION TO B.C.'S BIGGEST PEAKS, WITH POTENTIAL FOR THE COUNTRY'S LONGEST VERTICAL DESCENTS.



Home on the range.



The three amigos.

"Those guys have done an incredible job in Bella Coola and they've had this gem of Pantheon for a while that's a little more underground," says Berger. "But if someone goes there and hits it right, it's heliskiing on a whole different scale. Plus, the rustic component with the cattle ranch is kind of cool. I'd been before, but it's hard to shoot because there's not really room to jump in with a small group of clients. Typically, you'd go at the start of the season when they're flagging runs."

Indeed that was the case, with lead guide Paul Burnsten conducting snow studies as well. But there was also a bigger mission afoot. With Pantheon Heli Lodge running one small group in a private heli based out of the far-off-the-grid King family ranch, remoteness was part of the experience. But it also meant skiers were on their own out there, and having a second chopper operating in the area for safety reasons had BCHS considering a second small-group option out of the nearby Foster's Ranch. That required poking around the massive tenure.

"It wasn't your typical heli trip," notes Berger. "Normally you go somewhere, find a zone, and bang off a few runs, but here we were flying past amazing terrain en route to even more amazing terrain. When the weather's good, as it was for us, you get into the kind of stuff I've never seen anywhere—huge glaciers flowing together and unbelievable vistas. When weather moves in the scope gets smaller but you can still find tons of natural glade skiing."

With good snow in a visually stunning setting, the boys made the most of it. And as they worked their way

farther into the Waddington group, whose height usually sees it affected by wind, they lucked into the opposite—some 30-to-40 centimetres of unaffected, feathery snow that made for memorable skiing and shooting.

"Waddington is so big, so caked in ice and glaciers, with such huge relief, that when you're on it you lose perspective. But if you're skiing across from it and look over, you're like, 'Oh my God,'" Berger enthuses. "There's potential for huge, thousands-of-metre runs, and massively long couloirs lurking everywhere. There was one Swede said was the longest in the Coast Range but hadn't been skied yet because the one time they climbed up to it, there was ice in the entrance. It's still waiting for someone..."

In the end, they found what they came for, and have now officially founded and launched Foster's Heli Ranch—the closest location to B.C.'s biggest peaks, with potential for the country's longest vertical descents. "One memorable run was where two big glaciers came together and we skied on the moraine between them. Off to one side was this huge field of broken ice, the biggest most impressive icefall I've ever seen," recalls Berger.

Now both Pantheon and Foster's Ranches will serve as gateways to home-style hospitality as well as enormous unexplored terrain, Canada's best alpine, and great tree skiing. Zones filled with thousands of epic first descents as far as the eye can see, where naming runs becomes part of the plot. What kind of ski history will Bella Coola Heli Sports write here? Only time—and Caesar-spilling images like these—will tell.

HIGH FIVES

BELLA COOLA HELI SPORTS - bellacoolaheliskiing.com