

SNOW

LIFE | LIFTS | LUXURY



**THE MYTHICAL
MATTERHORN**

**SQUAW VALLEY'S
SECOND ACT**

**LIVING LODGE
IN JASPER**

**THE SOUND
OF SOLITUDE**

**L'ABOMINABLE
BONHOMME**



**WARM
EMBRACES**

FURRY FASHION FOR FIRESIDE

PERFECT PLACES

An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain slope. A black helicopter is positioned in the upper left quadrant. A series of winding, wavy tracks cut through the snow, leading down the slope. Several small figures of skiers are visible along these tracks, providing a sense of scale to the immense landscape.

No Joke

BELLA COOLA HELISPORTS OFFERS MYTHICAL SKIING IN A MYSTICAL SETTING

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BY LESLIE ANTHONY
PHOTOS BY PAUL MORRISON

➤ “WHAT DO YOU CALL A SKI GUIDE WITHOUT A GIRLFRIEND?” “Homeless.” We chuckle at this oldie, coming as it does from the mouth of Bella Coola Heli Sports lead guide Jia Condon. And while what lies below our jutting ski tips also brings a smile, it’s no laughing matter: 4,000 vertical-feet of unimaginably good powder, on a stable snowpack during the deepest season ever in one of the deepest places going, only days after widespread warming and a risky avalanche cycle had made skiing anywhere along British Columbia’s coast an exercise in tiptoeing over eggshells. Add in dizzying vistas of monolithic peaks and lolling glacial tongues, and it indeed



Bella Coola's terrain runs from dreamily lazy powder runs to aggressive steep and deeps, and there might be a first descent with your name on it soon.



Following a millennia-old native trade route, explorer Alexander Mackenzie ended his epic two-year crossing of the continent here in 1793; seafarers Sir Francis Drake, James Cook, and George Vancouver all made stops. Later, explorers Sir Edmund Hillary and Thor Heyerdahl were drawn by the mystery of the Thorsen Creek petroglyphs, which most closely resemble those found in Polynesia — was there a connection to the enigmatic Nuxalk culture that has flourished here for thousands of years? That mystery remains, but modern pilgrims know that skiing Bella Coola is an experience like no other.

seems things are about to get serious for photographer Paul Morrison, his pro freeskiing son Ian, fellow pro freeskiier Tatum Monod, and myself. Or perhaps not.

“How can you tell if someone is a ski guide?” asks Condon over his shoulder, yanking down his goggles. Before we can answer: “Don’t worry — he’ll tell you,” as he disappears into a detonation of snow.

Only an hour flight from Vancouver, the Bella Coola Valley lies at the head of a tortured network of inlets on the British Columbia central coast. Rising directly from the sea to 10,000 feet, the mountains here are steep and heavily glaciated. A hybrid coast/interior weather pattern offers deeper, drier snow than areas closer to the Pacific, and higher stability than inland. Deceptively chiseled peaks drop 8,000 feet to valley floors — much like Europe and not at all like the rest of North America. It adds up to Alaska-style riding on much larger peaks, down massive aprons, convoluted seracs, and inviting couloirs. These are the longest commercial heli-ski descents in the world.

Upon its opening in 2003, Bella Coola was painted by a dozen snow-sport films as heli-skiing’s new Shangri-La — apt, given that this was the term (in various translations) used both by Nuxalk natives and Europeans to describe the lush, treed valley of meandering rivers and abundant wildlife. Bella Coola has always been a crossroads.

BCHS’s main accommodation is at historic Tweedsmuir Park Lodge, with luxe cabins arranged around a central eco-lodge that Sierra Club groups beat a path to each summer to watch grizzlies palm salmon from the Atnarko and Bella Coola rivers. An A-star B3 that guarantees small group sizes lands each morning beside the hot-tub/spa/mini-gym and a native-style teepee sweat lodge. Inside, gazing around the recently upscaled surroundings, those who visited in the early days might wonder, What happened to the stuffed cougar? While some memorabilia languishes in an upstairs office, most of the old Tweedsmuir’s dusty kitsch is long gone. The memories, however, are intact, and the stories have piled up as deep as the snowfalls: Here’s the corner where TGR director Todd Jones, passed out drunk, was buried in furniture by his crew, then filmed trying to battle his way out. There’s the table where Shane McConkey drew a sketch of the first rocker ski — the Spatula — after making the first big-mountain descent



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The Tweedmuir Lodge has been warming guests at this hearth since 1929, but guests rest their weary legs in luxury cabins filled with authentic native art.

on water skis (he would also film his first ski BASE jump here). Out the windows are runs like Morrison Hotel (named for ski hero Seth), made famous in many a jaw-dropping ski film.

A legion of ski and snowboard personalities aren't the only legends here. The amigos who operate BCHS are three of the biggest characters in skidom: infamous filmmaker Christian Begin, cinematographer Beat Steiner of Warren Miller pedigree, and Pete "The Swede" Mattson, the wisecracking, longtime guide synonymous with the history of extreme skiing in British Columbia's coast range. These days, mostly he presides over an extreme wine cellar and five-star fare at the dinner table with guests, while the other owners appear only periodically. It happens that Begin, an old friend, has had a chance to join us on this trip.

Our first day had been gray, gray, gray, and it was clear we weren't going anywhere. Unlike other heli ops, however,

at BCHS you can do what anyone else in the valley does when they have time on their hands: go fishing – even in February. It's mere steps to the Atnarko River, which is chock-full of rainbow, cutthroat, and steelhead, and Tweedsmuir supplies all the gear. Wading and casting wet flies along the river rimmed in huge, fresh cougar tracks, Tatum had hit a small rainbow while Begin netted a 26-inch steelhead.

When predicted clearing had set in next day, Condon made sure we'd taken off early. Our first run found only a few inches of new snow straddling hard patches from last week's warming, but as we stepped west in the heli toward the coast, we'd found 12, 15, 18 inches of cold crystal sticking to a firm base. From the air, the snow's surface, lightly scaled by the wind, resembled the rippling skin of some giant beast. Indeed many of the leg-burning plunges felt like riding the back of a long-tailed brontosaur; our longest and last of the day was more than 4,000 feet to valley bottom.

Back in the lodge after a dinner of succulent duck, the Swede barked news updates, weather reports, and bad jokes. On a roll, Condon couldn't resist a little oneupsmanship.

"What's the difference between a ski guide and a large pepperoni



You can ski in the morning, then fly to seaside hot springs to soak, pick mussels, and watch whales.

pizza?” Pause. “The pizza can feed a family of four.”

On the other hand, a pizza can’t ski glaciers in the morning, and then fly to seaside hot springs to soak, pick mussels, and watch whales in the afternoon. Such opportunities are what define BCHS. Down days here bring more than pool games: There’s fishing, but also archaeological hikes and visits to native mask carvers where you hunker in dark studios listening to rain and the spirit-animal legends that drive local mythology. And then, when the gloom lifts, you’re back out in a million-and-a-half acres, readying for another huge descent in deep, silky powder.

If you believe that snow is beautiful, magical, and transformative, then you accept that a day in the right kind can change your life. And a week? Well ... you do the math. Actually, I’ll do it for you. The most-easily reached heli-skiing in North America means you can ride the afternoon you arrive and the morning you leave. That’s extra time to explore an ocean of glaciers and knife-edged rock the size of the Swiss Alps. And while the mountains are huge, the three luxury lodge settings and small heli groups are intimate.

On the last morning, the young-gun pros fly deep into the folds of the coast range to scope a couloir that Condon insists has never been

Lead guide Jia Condon drives from the back seat before taking guests on a day of ski touring. Below, the artistry of First Nations totem carvers, which decorates the area.



skied. Debarking from the bird while it hovers gingerly above the couloir, the trio huddles close while the heli lifts away into silence. All there is left to do is ski it. For Tatum and Ian, who do so with panache, it’s their first-ever first descent. That’s a big deal for pros but the kind of thing even guests do in terrain this big and snow this good.

But lest they think their fortunes miraculous, it appears there’s a reason. “What’s the difference between God and a ski guide?” Condon had asked over the headphones as the A-star lifted from the lawn.

They’d glanced at each other, shrugging in unison.

“God doesn’t think he’s a ski guide.” ❁



LONELY AT THE TOP (PAGE 70)

❖ The Village's four condominium buildings provide another 212 units, and there are a few rentable private homes as well. The best apartments are in Creekside, with wood-burning fireplaces, generous space, an extra bathroom, and immediate access to the slopes and two lifts. The resort offers packages like the Storm Chaser, which last year cost \$167 per person per night for lodging, lift tickets, breakfast, and rental of performance skis and boots. Less than two miles down valley, another lodging and dining option is available at the rustic-style Silver Fork Lodge (silverforklodge.com). The hotel contains the Essentials Spa. The other fine-dining option is Honeycomb Grill, located in Creekside across a pathway from The Inn at Solitude, which is open for three meals a day. Breakfast and lunch are available in two base lodges, both self-serve-style and surprisingly good. The village bar, the Thirsty Squirrel, offers bar food and pizza. A fun and delicious splurge is a night at the Mongolian yurt, reached via cross-country skis or snowshoes over a short section of the resort's excellent Nordic trails. The chef of St. Bernard's offers a five-course meal cooked on an old iron stove in an alcove of the yurt. (A maximum of 22 guests for \$100 each.) The meal is excellent and the atmosphere convivial, depending on what you bring to drink.

❖ It says a lot about Solitude's commitment to maintaining the resort as it is that some years ago, Solitude had a permit to put a lift up Honeycomb Canyon. However, the owners were concerned that skiers would make laps up and down the fragile canyon, thus scarring up the powder quickly and destroying the private backcountry experience. Instead, they put in a short exit lift near the bottom of the canyon that puts skiers back on the front side, three lift rides away from dropping into the canyon again. It's a brilliant exercise in forced preservation.

❖ A decade ago, Alta and Snowbird initiated a single pass (for a premium) for the two resorts located in Little Cottonwood Canyon. Solitude and Brighton, both in Big Cottonwood Canyon, did the same. Park City Mountain Resort and contiguous Deer Valley have discussed a single pass for years, though it has not happened (the continuing ban on snowboards at Deer Valley being the most obvious sticking point). Canyons and PCMR could connect with the installation of one lift. If they can successfully overcome environmental challenges, Solitude and Canyons will be the first ski areas to vault across a ridge separating two of the valleys, thus taking a giant physical — and psychological — step in the eventual interconnect of all seven resorts. This would create a massive ski terrain of three interlinked valleys and 16,264 acres accessible via a

single pass — plus vast amounts of sidecountry and backcountry terrain — similar to such expansive European ski regions as the Three Valleys, the Arlberg, the Dolomite Superski, and Le Grand Domaine. skilink.com

EXTREME MAKEOVER (PAGE 78)

❖ Which reminds the editors of a joke about two guys from Boston who decide to break into the Vatican after they've had about 16 Peronis each. Grab us at some après bar, and we'll happily tell it. We have some pretty good Cajun jokes too.

❖ The new high-speed six pack from High Camp opens up new intermediate terrain, and speeds up access to the Shirley Lake area and Granite Chief. Future lift upgrades likely will include replacing slow fixed-grip chairs on Granite Chief, Red Dog, and Squaw Creek, possibly in time for winter 2013-14. More snowmaking on Home Run and Mountain Run will improve early-season skiing and allow intermediates to ride Squaw One lift from the base to the new Big Blue Express. There, they can access intermediate trails on the upper mountain, then ski all the way down to the base area.

❖ *Squallywood* by Robb Gaffney gives the inside scoop on Squaw's most extreme lines and a dose of the resort's hard-charging culture (squallywood.com). The book contains a chapter called "GNAR, or Gaffney's Numerical Assessment of Radness," which was written by

NO JOKE (PAGE 59)

❖ BCHS runs groups out of two other bases of operation: Bella Coola Mountain Lodge in nearby Hagensborg, and Pantheon Heliskiing, on the other side of the Monarch Icecap, where you stage out of a dude ranch called White Saddle Lodge. From the Bella Coola Mountain Lodge, the company runs an experts-only program called the Big Mountain Challenge, where participants use harnesses to get into some epic lines. Take that "Experts Only" seriously. BCHS's Pantheon base is used exclusively for private groups of eight or fewer skiers, and it's not just the lodge that they have exclusive use of — groups also get 1.1 million acres to themselves, nearly half of the company's 2.65 million-acre spread. bellacoolaheliskiing.com



PAUL MORRISON; LEFT: KEOKI FLAGG