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POSTERS

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COOLA

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HIGH SEASON 2019
EIGHT DOLLARS



ohhhhh,
**BELLA
COOLA!**

With a tenure 500 times the size of Vail, four separate luxe lodges, and a mystical Pacific coast vibe, Bella Coola Heli Sports remains the world's most unique heli-ski operation.

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photography by MATTIAS FREDRIKSSON



WE SKI KNEE-DEEP POWDER ON A 100,000-YEAR-OLD BASE, APARTMENT-BLOCKS OF ICE TUMBLING TO OUR LEFT.

between, we learned about the history and culture of the valley's Nuxalk Nation, master mask-carvers who performed a bonfire dance at the lodge on a night where stars arced overhead like diamond dust spilled on velvet. Of course, when the weather gods permitted — and despite 20 of us fighting for space in a single helicopter — we also skied.

That skiing was unlike anything any of us had ever known. Though the lodge sat in a lush, treed valley, staircase pillow lines were only a five-minute flight away, and above these hovered a vertical labyrinth of phantasmagorical peaks that, once breached, opened unto another planet — one ruled by alien spires, titanic glaciers, 3,000-foot couloirs, and prolific snows averaging 100 feet each season. There were no clients on that first trip, just pro athletes, photographers, filmmakers, and writers with a wealth of experience in Europe, South America, Alaska, and the North American inter-mountain west who could claim, quite fairly, to have seen it all. Though Bella Coola Heli Sports had yet to find its footing, we all shared the same conviction: there was no place like it.

Flash forward 18 years and I'm on the short, hour-long flight from Vancouver to Bella Coola, where a view of the Monarch Ice Cap reveals a torment of mountains and valleys swirling in every direction. At its center, the ice stretches between peaks like a sheet pulled taut on a giant bed, glaciers rippling its corners like scrunched blankets. Even from up here the scale is surreal; when you're actually skiing along its edge, those vistas became Himalayan.

At the airport, dozens of skiers are departing, more arriving; the latter, myself included, change into ski gear in a hanger stocked with gourmet sandwiches and snacks. After standard safety instructions, we load into a veritable fleet of choppers, and, within

The first time I went to Bella Coola Heli Sports we drove 12 hours to get there. We ate pasta, stayed up late drinking whiskey, and complained when the toilets shut down due to overloading. Bitchy coastal weather that pinned us down for days meant plenty of ski videos, endless games of pool, and ridiculous amounts of time spent trying to nail a moth-eaten cougar mounted high on the wall of historic Tweedsmuir Park Lodge with a beer cap to the eye.

But it wasn't all fraternity hijinks: we also fished the river running past the lodge; drove an hour into the ramshackle port of Bella Coola to survey wind-worn totems along a 60-mile fjord; flew to an oceanside hot spring where we picked mussels at low tide; and hiked to startling petroglyphs whose alien figures Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl attributed to Polynesian seafarers. In

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Chad Sayers drawing his line in epic snow
clockwise from left

1. Bella Coola Heli Sports founders: Pete Mattson, Christian Begin, and Beat Steiner
2. Art of the indigenous Nuxalk people.
3. Bella Coola's abandoned historic harborfront cannery.



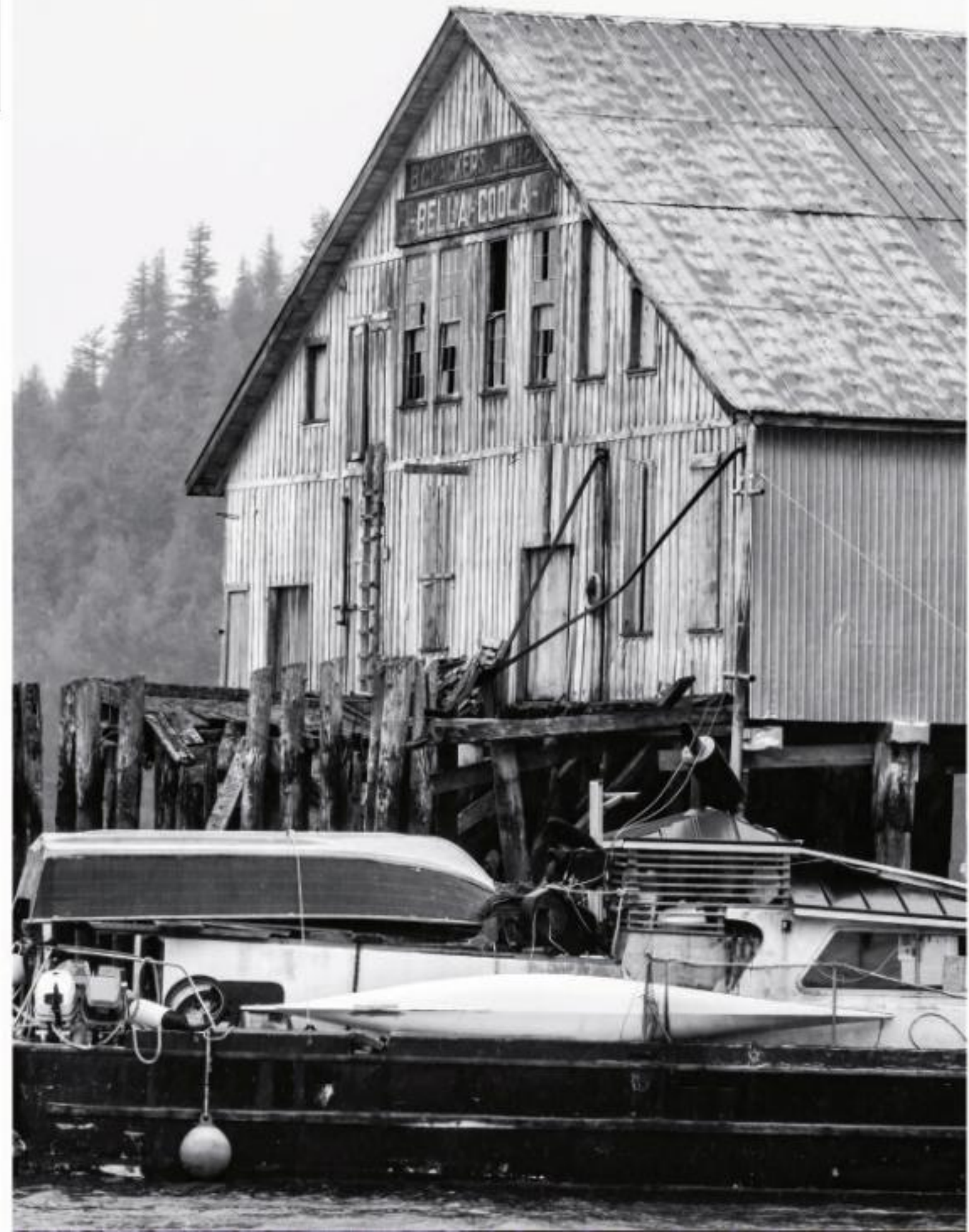
a couple hours of leaving the city, are making life-affirming powder turns while our baggage finds its way to the lodge ahead of us. Clearly, things have changed at Bella Coola Heli Sports.

Happily, some have not. Our first drop, on the same pillows as all those years ago, doesn't disappoint, having been fluffed overnight with two feet of new. Ditto the long, languishing glaciers on which we spend our afternoon. Landing at an overlook of the massive and heavily fractured Jacobsen Glacier, we ski knee-deep powder on a 100,000-year-old base, apartment-blocks of ice tumbling to our left.

High-fiving ensues. The loud, loquacious group I'm with seem particularly excited. And with good reason: this enchanting terrain is theirs, so to speak. As founders/owners of BCHS, Christian Begin, Pete "The Swede" Mattson, and Beat Steiner are enjoying a rare day out together in their astonishing 2.64 million-acre tenure. It's great to see the friends I recall yelling at each other over radios during film-shoot disagreements now skiing together like the lifelong pals they've become.

We bump out to a zone called *Cloudbreak*, where the great skiing suddenly turns magnificent — the deep, cold snow so intoxicating we ski until the horizon flames crimson.

Legendarily, BCHS's "Three Amigos" forged their friendship in the busy outdoor filmmaking industry around Whistler. Christian



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and Beat were cinematographers with a string of high-profile movie credits, while The Swede served as guide and safety coordinator for their shoots. Searching for a less-crowded venue than the late-'90s Whistler media circus, the boys discovered Bella Coola and made a deal with the owner of a funky 1920's summer fishing lodge: they'd pay him a fee for every head they brought in. After ski photos from this new nirvana circled the globe in 2001, top snowsport photographers and filmmakers beelined to Bella Coola. The resulting imagery was an aspirational black hole that sucked in the entire global snowsports industry, making Bella Coola's decidedly steep-and-deep terrain its collective brand. With the freeski revolution in full swing, a new cosmic big-mountain spigot gushed open beside the well-known streams emanating from Alaska's Chugach Range and the European Alps. Bella Coola film segments by Seth Morrison and Hugo Harrison made history, and Shane McConkey invented his revolutionary reverse-camber fat ski here.





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Skiing by 100,000 year old glaciers puts things in perspective.

clockwise from left

1. Legendary pilot Richard Lapointe picks up for another powder run at Jacoben's Glacier.
2. Cozy bonfire at Tweedsmuir Lodge.
3. Locally sourced fish for dinner at Tweedsmuir Lodge.
4. Fly-fishing is a great down day activity.



Commercial clients, meanwhile, were equally blown away, and BCHS quickly became a world-renowned bucket list destination. The musty, kitsch-filled lodge was renovated and modernized as the central hub of a base encircled by comfortable guest cabins. Culinary and wine offerings ratcheted ever-upward until they topped out in the five-star range. Most importantly, BCHS opened more bases — 12-person Eagle Lodge, closer to town; Pantheon Heli Ranch, a small-group heli-ski experience for eight based out of a working cattle ranch near the spectacular Pantheon Range; and the even more boutique (only four guests) Mystery Mountain Lodge. With such a diversity

of ski experiences — including a multi-day ski safari that flies clients 120 miles between bases — the operation's exclusivity remains unmatched.

No one — certainly not the Three Amigos — could have predicted this back when we were flicking beer caps at a stuffed cougar. Bella Coola may have risen to the ranks of luxury, but my recent trip showed me that the one thing we always believed would never change: this coastal colossus remains the most unique heli-ski operation on the planet. **S**