



TO RUN IS TO FLY

HELI-SKIING LEGEND CMH JUST LAUNCHED CHOPPER-ASSISTED MOUNTAIN RUNNING PROGRAMS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA'S HIGH ALPINE TERRAIN. HERE'S HOW IT FEELS AND WHY YOU SHOULD GO.

by MORGAN TILTON

Crouching on the scree with my head down and hands shielding my ears, I brace myself for the aftershock of the rotor wash. The whoop-whoop of the dual-blade and acute hum of the double-turbine engine quickly fade, as the Bell 212 helicopter dives into the valley of Vowell Creek below us. A thrilling calm soon surrounds me on the 400-foot wide Grizzly Ridge. The helicopter has left us here in the Purcell Mountains on the northeast periphery of British Columbia's Bugaboo Provincial Park. To our south rises Bugaboo Spire, a captivating shark fin that's listed in Steve Roper and Allen Steck's *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*. We all stand up, encompassed by silence.

I'm here with seven other travelers for the inaugural mountain running program of world-renowned heli-ski company CMH Heli-Skiing & Summer Adventures: It will consist of three days of helicopter-supported point-to-point runs that link high-alpine meadows, ridges, lakes and summits sans established trails. Singletrack hardly exists, and any defined segments are created by mountain goats plus a few paths maintained by CMH. The getaway is co-led by two of the program's creators: Emily Compton, a certified Hiking Guide with the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (ACMG), and James Madden, an International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations (IFMGA) Mountain Guide.

Five minutes earlier, our 6,530-pound sky-taxi swooped us up from the backyard staging-pad of Bugaboo Lodge, CMH's oldest log shelter. Austrian mountain guide Hans Gmoser, CMH Founder,

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pioneered heli-skiing with a slow-moving two-seater Bell 47 helicopter, in 1965. According to *Bugaboo Dreams: A Story of Skiers, Helicopters, and Mountains* by Topher Donahue, a tank-shaped Nodwell snow machine carried and rope-towed groups of adventurous backcountry skiers 27 miles one-way to reach a sawmill camp, which served as the basecamp, at the foot of Vowell Glacier and the iconic Hower Spire Massif. For seven-day trips, Gmoser lifted skiers, one by one, to the tops of powder laps. Known as a purist mountaineer and environmentalist, Gmoser was driven to share the wilderness with people while leaving as little impact as possible: Heli-skiing avoided the footprint left by a ski resort, ski lifts,

and roads. So, after more than a decade of guiding skiers, he saw the future and began the first heli-skiing operation.

A cold breeze cuts sideways over the ridge. I welcome it. It's 10 a.m. and the sun warms the sparkling quartz and granite beneath our feet. We run south, hopping between cascading step-stones and white mountain-heather. I follow Compton, who moves fast and fluidly over the terrain. She's been a trail and ultrarunner for 16 years, and years ago, she and Madden began blueprinting a variety of segments here for guided runs including steep, 500-foot descents on soft mud shale (Compton loves teaching downhill running), basin linkups with glacial travel, and scrambling—all at an elevation of 7-to-9,000 feet. The CMH helicopter for Bugaboo Lodge—which sits at 5,000 feet—serves up to 50 hikers with

ON THE LOOSE IN THE ALPINE

WHILE THE IDEA OF HELI-RUNNING MAY SEEM THE ANTITHESIS OF SUSTAINABILITY, PROponents SAY THAT IT ESCHEWS THE IMPACTS OF ROADS AND DEVELOPMENT AND GETS PEOPLE IN THE WILD WHO WILL ADVOCATE TO PROTECT IT. / PHOTOS BY LIFE OUTSIDE STUDIO

two to four flights per day in July and August. One lift can easily eliminate a 1.5-day approach by foot with mosquito-infested bushwhacking and 3,000 feet of ascent, to reach a mountain-running paradise. Two years ago, Compton and Madden began advocating for the ACMG to add trail running to its Scope of Practice, to protect certified guides and their clients through insurance, land-use permits, and a minimum duty of care. Now, mountain running is set up to replace a few CMH hike programs, with 12 runners max per group, in 2020.

"In the last five years, three trail running stores popped up in Canmore—we used to have none—which demonstrates the market growth," says Madden. "When Emily and I started brainstorming, we asked runners why they race. Many people enjoy the experience of organized events—they're not necessarily involved for the race component. I'm excited to see more fun mountain adventures for friends and family, beyond races, that are safely facilitated by guides."

Magi Scallion, owner of Retreat Golden, an adventure travel company based in Golden, B.C., also wants to make mountain running approachable and accessible through guided trips. In 2017, Scallion launched a five-day, helicopter-supported, hut-to-hut mountain running retreat along the Esplanade Range in the Selkirk Mountains, another sub-range of the Columbia Mountains, northwest of the Purcells.

After three days of running through the sun-glazed meadows, snow patches, streams and pillowy moss with CMH, I spend two days exploring Golden and jump into Scallion's camp, which includes up to a dozen runners. "This is my opportunity to share an amazing wilderness experience with people who may not otherwise get out there," says Scallion. Similar to CMH, her program integrates trekkers who are transported to-and-from a hut system. This one is owned by Golden Alpine Holidays, and it sub-contracts flights through Alpine Helicopters, a commercial operator founded in 1961. We're air-lifted twice from our endpoints, and our supplies are efficiently dropped at each hut. The run-and-hike distance between each cabin totals to about six miles and 2,500 vertical feet per day. I love the daily excitement of being delivered in a remote, high-altitude location by a CMH heli. I equally enjoy being committed to human-powered travel between each hut along the Esplanade Traverse. Both feature gorgeous alpine lake swims and summits.

Overall, the growth of heli-supported recreation is currently limited, says Scallion: "Not many helicopters are available in the summer, because of work fighting wildfires." I grapple with the irony of my travel footprint for a once-in-a-lifetime experience to run in these incredible, uninhabited peaks. A Bell 212 helicopter burns 100 gallons of fuel per hour, and all-together my B.C. flights tally 70 minutes. The carbon footprint of heli-based adventures is a dirty fact that professional athletes, especially big mountain skiers, are forced to address when they advocate for climate change activism. As I consider the big picture, I think the key solution for my climate change impact is addressing how I live at home: How often do I drive, board airplanes, carpool, vote for representatives that support environmental policies, eat meat, and buy locally-made products? As VP of Sustainability of



Aspen Snowmass, Auden Schendler, poses in a Safety Third Podcast, "Perfect is the enemy of good." Rather than culture shaming, it's more productive to establish sustainable practices that fit long-term in our personal lifestyles, which collectively create substantial change.

I stand atop the aesthetic and jagged summit of Cupola Peak, at 8,661 feet high, with the handful of trail runners in Scallion's camp, who've quickly become close friends. We're the only ones in our hut each evening, and at any moment, we're laughing or crying with sentiment. I smile and adjust my trail running pack: I'm carrying two collapsible bottles, a windbreaker, snacks, and a water filter—which I avidly use in Colorado, where the mountains are high-trafficked. I soon learn, I can drink straight from these streams. No one is here, except us. ▲

Visit cmhheli.com and retreatgolden.com to register for 2020 mountain running programs (\$1,586-\$2,715).

Entry Zone: Golden, British Columbia

This adventure Mecca at the confluence of the Columbia and Kicking Horse Rivers is the gateway for Kicking Horse Mountain Resort and sits midway between the staging areas for CMH and Retreat Golden. Get a 10,000-foot-high bird's-eye view with Extreme Yeti Adventures—the only B.C.-based skydiving operation cozied between two mountain ranges—and climb Kicking Horse's via ferrata Ascension Route for a taste of exposure. Refuel at Eleven22 (reservations recommended), Bluebird Café or Whitetooth Mountain Bistro. For the journey home (direct flights from Calgary to Denver) stay at Park Inn By Radisson for free laundry service. Your kit will need it. —M.T.