



A POWDER PILGRIM

Being a woman among many men at a backcountry heliskiing lodge is a tough job, but somebody's got to do it. **BY RACHEL WALKER**



NICK DIAMOND

I GET MY FIRST VIEW of the Selkirk Mountains in the Canadian province of British Columbia on the helicopter ride to Galena Lodge. Massive peaks rumble out of the ground, their snow-covered bowls and jagged cliffs dominating the horizon. It's a dream come true for a skier like me. Elated, I jostle the stranger to my side and point out the window. He nods and then goes back to his conversation with his friend. The chopper touches down on the landing pad at the lodge and we crouch low as we disembark to avoid spinning rotors. I try once more. "It looks epic!" I say. He beams and takes in the racks full of fat skis and snowboards, the snow

tumbling from the sky. I'm about to fist bump him when he asks, "So, are you one of the cooks?"

I am not one of the cooks. I have traveled thousands of miles, leaving my sons and husband at home, for the express purpose of avoiding all things domestic for a week. Here at Galena Lodge, one of 11 backcountry British Columbia ski lodges owned and operated by CMH Heli-Skiing & Summer Adventures, I plan to replace meal- and bedtime with face shots from powder snow so light they call it "cold smoke." I'm here alone, and looking around, I reckon I am one of four women out of some 40 guests.

Before kids, my husband—also a skier—would have come with me. But these days, with two boys in elementary school, we take separate adventures. So here I am solo, and for a brief moment, I wonder how I could have thought that this was a good idea. Suddenly, I'm back at my college freshman orientation and want to flee.

Instead, I listen carefully as a guide walks us through how to use avalanche transceivers, beacons we will wear so someone can find us if we get caught and buried in a slide. I explore the lodge and settle into my modest room—two single beds, pegs for hanging clothes and a window looking out at a pyramid-shaped mountain alit with the pink and purple alpenglow of sunset.

Dinner is a four-course affair: parsnip and leek soup; a beet and arugula salad; salmon sautéed in butter and served with wilted greens; and decadent housemade chocolate cake. I might not be one of the cooks, but already I love them all.

The next day, we split into three groups and wait our turn for the first helicopter ride of the day. I'm slotted with six silver-haired Frenchmen. Their ruddy cheeks and bright eyes make them look young, but they tell me they've been coming to CMH on and off for 35 years.

More than a foot of fresh snow fell over the past few days, and the guides

take us to untracked slopes. The ambient air temperature is about 18 degrees. My toes are freezing, but the cold will preserve the quality of the snow, and that's a tradeoff I'm willing to make.

My new French friends are wonderful, but we are decidedly different. I declare each run the absolute best of my life and jump into my skis at the top of every mountain. They take their sweet time, but I don't blame them—the views are astonishing. The mountains stack up against each other, and the blue sky accentuates the jagged horizon.

At our picnic lunch in the field, I sip homemade vegetable soup and wolf down a roast beef sandwich. The lead guide pulls me aside and asks if I want to switch groups; there's room in a helicopter with some rowdy Americans. The guides have apparently noticed that "mom" is eager to charge a little harder.

Initially, the dudes eye me warily. I can read their thoughts: She better not slow us down. I'd never admit it, but I understand. Though I am an expert-level skier, there's no script for someone like me—a working mom of young kids whose idea of relaxation is not a spa trip or a yoga retreat but heliskiing in Canada.

On our first group run, I go first and drop into a steep, high alpine bowl behind the guide. The skiing is effortless. I hit a transcendent flow state where my body, the snow and the mountain are one. From the sounds of it, they, too, experience the bliss. At the bottom, our egos are gone and we're gleefully recounting the run.

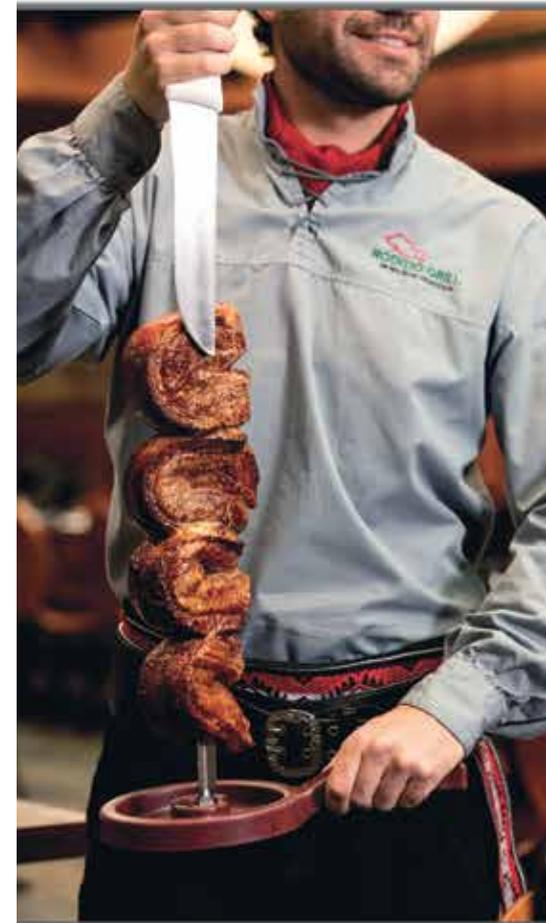
And thus goes my week. I am not an interloper. I am a skier among skiers, rooted firmly in the present moment of mountains, natural beauty and gravity.

It's such a profound experience that I'm going back—next March, in fact. This time, though, I'm bringing my husband and leaving the kids with Grandma because an adventure this sweet is too good to keep to myself. ▼



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