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C O A S T M O U N T A I N S



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Skinning up in
shangri-la

What do red wine, a helicopter and a hot tub have to do with ski touring?
Everything, if you're hanging with Bella Coola Heli Sports.



Story and Photography by Todd Lawson

There are 20 people seated around the dinner table, but judging by the volume of Peter “The Swede” Mattsson’s voice, you’d swear there were at least 100.

“Let’s drink it blue!” he shouts with gusto, peppering the short sentence with a flurry of f-bombs while hoisting a glass of Cabernet. “You guys gotta pick it up! It’s gotta be blue tomorrow, drink it *bluuuuue!*”

It’s the first night of a weeklong heli-assisted ski touring trip into the largest heli-ski tenure on earth, and the tradition of sacrificing your liver for beautiful weather is in full effect. Wine flows like water from a garden hose and the dinner-table banter bounces steadily back and forth between Bella Coola Heli Sports owners Christian Begin, Beat Steiner and Swede. Between Swede’s rants and Begin’s boisterous arm-flailing it’s difficult to get a word in... so nobody really does. But the guests eat up the entertainment as easily as the five-star meal.

“People love it here,” says Begin in his staccato French Canadian accent, “because they can be themselves here, you know? You can experience the fine dining in a t-shirt and nobody gives a sh*t.”

People also love it because Begin, Mattsson and Steiner are three ski bums turned heli-bosses, guys as humble and down-to-earth as when they first started out, despite knowing almost everyone who’s ever clicked into a pair of bindings. With numerous big ski descents under their collective belt and very solid credentials in the ski-film industry the trio had originally pegged the bounty of Bella Coola for film projects, not a heli-skiing empire.

“The original plan wasn’t even to start a heli-skiing company,” explains Beat Steiner, easily the most laid back of the partners. “The plan was to film, that’s why we applied for the tenure but then when we got it and put out the word to our contacts in the ski business we had 40 clients in only four weeks of skiing. It kind of took off on us and after a while we didn’t do any more filming.”

What they did was offer primo heli-skiing trips at an exotic Canadian wilderness outpost that features thousands of runs in never-skied zones – Bella Coola is hundreds of kilometres from the nearest civilization. After they established Tweedsmuir Park Lodge as a base, heli-skiers and boarders flocked from all over the world to eat gourmet cuisine, sip brandy by

the fireplace and escape their hectic lifestyles.

But Steiner, Mattsson and Begin also wanted to offer something for their ski-bum pals who couldn’t normally fork over \$10,000 for a week of pure, unlimited heli-heaven so they combined the best of both worlds, using a helicopter to access remote summits, then taking the rest of the day to skin up and ski down. For those who want the thrill of the chopper but still want to earn their turns – welcome to heli-touring heaven.

And heaven goes something like this: Hop in the heli with a belly full of bacon, get out five minutes later at the summit of a jagged peak, ski 50 cm of fresh powder on fresh legs then spend the rest of the day exploring the immense mountain wilderness in quiet solitude. Skin and shred as much as your legs can handle, then call in the bird for a pickup and minutes later you’re back at the lodge drinking cold beer in a hot tub, and you’ve spent a fraction of what a normal heli-ski day would cost. Dream? Yes. Reality? Also yes. And it’s not only hippies paying to play.

Just another 50cm day in the office for BCHS owners Christian Begin (left) and Beat Steiner.

Calgary's David Loucks is a gregarious, red wine-swilling, heli-touring aficionado back at the lodge to live the dream for the second time. "We're always looking for different terrain and new places to ski. Hut skiing is great, the experience of being all alone in the mountains with a good crew, but you get limited with the quantity of runs you can ski on any given day. Here, we can ski big mountain-style stuff without the hassle of packing in food and having to cook and clean at the end of the day when all we want to do is drink."

The next morning I walk up to the lodge from our cozy cabin and see Swede whistling away on the front lawn. "Look at this," he says, fanning his arms out towards the faint white peaks across the river in the distance. "This is Bella Coola. Look at this my friend, this is what it's all about, and this is *nothing*, we have more mountains here than you can imagine."

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He's not joking. On the wall next to the pool table, a chart shows the relative size of all the heli-ski tenures in British Columbia. *Bella Coola Heli Sports* is outlined in orange, and almost twice as large as the nearest one. So far, we've barely scratched the surface.

"With you we've just skied at the beginning of the tenure," Begin explains. "I hope it gets blue tomorrow. When we can go deeper and you're not gonna believe your eyes! There are just so many options it will blow your mind, really."

"I only knew of this place because of a map," says Mattsson. "Millions of acres of mountains and nobody was skiing here. It was like a wild frontier.

We came here and found our own Shangri-La really."

In the novel *Lost Horizon*, British author James Hilton describes Shangri-La as a mystical, harmonious valley enclosed somewhere in the western end of the Himalaya. The ideal has since become synonymous with any earthly paradise or utopia – a permanently happy land isolated from the outside world.

For The Swede, Steiner and Begin, their happy land consists of countless unnamed peaks in a tenure the length and breadth of the entire Swiss Alps – one and a half million acres of wilderness in the most heavily glaciated area in the world at this latitude, where the most extensive fjord system in North America snakes its way from the Pacific Ocean almost 100 kilometres inland. And because of the proximity to the sea, it's possible to ski from a summit with the waters of the Pacific sparkling far below your ski tips. There are rivers and

rainforests and a deeply rooted connection to the ancient Nuxalk First Nations. There are waterfalls and rock slides, avalanches and floods, small farms and small-town folk. And there are hundreds upon hundreds of mountains waiting to be skied.

"You spend your whole life chasing powder," says Beat Steiner, a Cheshire-cat grin smacked across his face, "and now there's so much of it you can't even ski it all."

At least we can try. We spend the next six days skinning and skiing and don't even sniff the same spot twice. Even though it's mid-April it's still very much winter, especially high in the alpine.

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Fly in, hike up – skiing's best marriage ever.





Keeping the culture alive. Nuxalt First Nations artwork, present and past.

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The temperature drops to a perfect -9 °C and lead guide Jia Condon leads us into bowls and chutes and trees and steeps, all of it in fluffy waist-deep blower pow. But there is one major problem. Despite attempts and encouragement to drink it blue every night, the sun hasn't come out to play. We have one last shot – will tonight bring us the tomorrow we want?

“Okay everybody, we have one more day here,” Swede addresses our group of 20 new friends. “Let’s stop messing around and drink it blue,” he shouts. “I’m serious, let’s get going. I want you to drink as hard as you ski!”

Of course we all oblige and do our best. Many bottles of vino are followed by special coffees, cognacs, whiskeys and shots. Glasses are clinking and clanking left, right and centre. We all get, well...drunk, and eventually stumble down to our private cabins with dreams of the elusive bluebird on our minds.

When I rise I'm not happy, and I'm hungover. I look out the door and see a low-lying fog draping itself across the river. The thought of a lazy morning gives me some solace and I saunter up to the lodge for breakfast. The first person I see is Swede, as chipper as a morning sparrow.

“Look at that,” he says, gazing out the window to the east. “You guys did good last night!”

Confused, I look out the window and see a glimmering white peak in the far distance, way above the bank of fog.

“Bluebird, bluebird, bluebird!” he sings, pretending to flap his wings.

Moments later we're in the big bad beast flying above massive jagged spires. We skin up and over long ridgelines and walk across immense glaciers. The sense of scale is so powerful it triggers thoughts of intense emotion for Mother Nature that I honestly have never felt before. My hangover is a distant memory, long wiped away by crisp shots of pure alpine air. Not a cloud shows its face in the sky all day and we get the photos we need, ski the lines we want. As the sun begins to drop behind the distant peaks Jia calls in the chopper; but instead of the pilot, we hear Swede chime in over the radio.

“How was your day over there in Shangri-La, boys?”

“Pretty amazing Swede, one of the best all year I'd say,” Jia responds.

“Okay, you remember what we did last night? Let's do it all over again tonight. I like it when it's blue!” ☑



BCHS' luxurious headquarters.



More earning – more turning.



Slash and turn. Robbing one of Bella Coola's natural snowbanks.

The three amigos

The quick story behind the largest heli-ski tenure in the world



LEFT TO RIGHT: Christian Begin, Beat Steiner and Pete "Swede" Mattsson.

BEAT STEINER – "I've known Swede since 1983 or something like that. I met him through Trevor Petersen who was washing dishes for Swede at the Rimrock. Over the years, because we were in the same scene, doing lots of touring and occasionally doing first descents, we got to know each other better."

PETE "SWEDE" MATTSSON – "Beat and I did a few ski trips together, including the first ski descent of Mount Atwell (Siberian Express). We all skied together often on Whistler and Blackcomb, including lots of backcountry hiking. We first started to work together in the early '90s – me as a safety and location coordinator, and Beat and Christian as cino. (ed. note – That means cinematographer)."

BEAT – "I first met Christian at the Banff Mountain Film Fest (I think). He was just starting to make films so my company, Adventurescope, hired him. I really liked his enthusiasm and the footage he was coming back with. Pretty soon Christian was scoring his own film work and returning the

favour by hiring me. Together with Swede we were a pretty good team – two angles and safety."

SWEDE – "After this we worked together on a lot of ski, snowboard and commercial shoots. Mostly in North America but also other parts of the world like Greenland."

BEAT – "When we did our first film projects in Bella Coola in 2000 we fell in love with the place and since it was getting more complicated to shoot in the Whistler area we figured we'd better apply for tenure."

CHRISTIAN BEGIN – "We were the three of us on a film shoot in Bella Coola and we all came back from that trip with the same feeling about the place. We then decided all together to get tenure so we could have a private playground for filming. It all came very natural, we were good friends before that. We basically found Shangri-La and just went for it...."

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