



These aren't powder puffs

Heli-skiing isn't just for the experts. Mere mortals can now make tracks down a mountain side, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.

In *The World Is Not Enough*, Elektra King and James Bond strapped on skis, jumped five metres from a hovering helicopter and then hot-tailed each other down some serious slopes. It did a lot for the box office but not much for the average snow joe considering a turn in a chopper.

For most folk, heli-skiing is a dream. They believe helicopters that take you to virgin snow are only for Bond and his pals and that heli-skiing is an advanced sport for experts. They're wrong.

If you can get down a high intermediate groomed run without seriously hurting yourself then you can step into the chopper for a ride to powder heaven. But be warned, it's addictive and may cost you your mortgage.

Heli-skiing is believed to have been founded in Canada by Hans Gmoser, who ran the first commercial heli-ski week in 1965 in the Bugaboo Mountains in British Columbia. He went on to create one of the world's most successful heli-ski businesses, Canadian Mountain Holidays.

It's now possible to heli-ski in Canada, Alaska, Russia, Chile, India and most parts of Europe (though it's illegal in France). Most trips involve a remote mountain lodge and the same crew for a week of heli-touring. The pilot picks up a guide and skiers each morning, scoping the terrain for safety and conditions before depositing the passengers and flying off.

Heli-skiing is remote wilderness skiing. One can stand on a mountain in the middle of nowhere and breathe in the history of alpine skiing. This is how it was done long before chairlifts gave people a ride to the top.

Of course, pioneers trekked to the mountain peaks without the aid of a helicopter, but you get the drift.

These weeks can cost anything from \$5000 upwards. Guides must be highly trained in safety and avalanche awareness and it is recommended skiers embark upon a fitness program two months before, especially as most heli-skiing is done at a higher altitude. For a fraction of the cost, and the altitude, Australians on ski holidays in New Zealand can experience heli-skiing in a day.

Powder is big business in the ski and board industry with snow addicts constantly in search of the stuff. Planeloads of Aussies embark upon pilgrimage journeys to the deep powder slopes of Hokkaido in northern Japan, the Steamboat resort in Colorado tags it "Champagne Powder", and ski companies such as K2 make a ski called Phat Luv that are extra wide to glide over the top.

It's not easy to ski powder - at first. The technique is different to that on groomed piste or even off piste within commercial ski boundaries of Australia and New Zealand. Skiers must create a platform with their skis by bringing their feet closer together; weight is evenly placed over both skis and heels are used to slow turns on steeper powder.

But don't listen to me, get a powder instructor as techniques vary. I have been told to ski like a dolphin, up and down through the ocean, to lean back not forward, to pick up speed and trust I won't hurtle to my death. Some have worked, some not. Eventually you'll find a style that works for you.

The beauty is that falling in powder is like falling on air. It's a weird sensa-

Slopes of genius ... clockwise from top left, a daredevil takes on Mt Potts; skiers prepare to leave a chopper; and where better to, ahem, chill at the end of the day than the mountain chalets at Whare Kea.

Main photo: Rachael Oakes-Ash

tion when you are used to hard-packed snow that cutting, but once you realise that doesn't hurt it's a lot easier. New Zealand's South Island extends for 550 kilometres. Heli-ski operators have access to thousands of square metres of varied terrain based on Mt Cook, Methven, Queenstown, Wanaka in the South Island. A good place to develop your style before taking on the best of North America.



■ GETTING THERE

Air New Zealand fly daily from Sydney to Christchurch with connecting flights to Queenstown. They also offer twice weekly direct flights from Sydney to Queenstown.
www.airnewzealand.com.au or 13 24 76

■ WHERE TO GO

Harris Mountain Heli
www.heliski.co.nz
Southern Lakes Heli
www.southernlakesheliski.co.nz
Mt Potts
www.mtpotts.co.nz
Whare Kea lodge and mountain chalet
www.wharekea.co.nz
South Island Guides
www.southislandguides.com

an avalanche in Alaska last year, but it was a close call with the deadliest of slides, a slab avalanche, pushing her along for more than a kilometre.

Ensure whoever you go out with has the relevant safety qualifications. Guests are always given avalanche beacons and taken through a dummy avalanche scenario to make sure they know how to use them. If they don't do this, don't get in the chopper.

Those with their own gear may ski with a backpack, an avalanche shovel, probe and beacon. Most guides ski with "avalungs" that inflate when in an avalanche - they're the most experienced in avalanche rescue and if they go under you're toast.

It's highly unlikely you'll be caught in an avalanche: guides dig pits to read the snow and pilots are well trained in spotting unstable conditions. Skiers are told to ski down one at a time to reduce the chance of sliding snow.

Kiwis love a chopper and mix it up further north with snowcat skiing at Mt Potts near Christchurch. Fly from Mt Potts day lodge to the private ski mountain and then take a snowcat up the slope for heli-ski conditions at half the price. Boarders and skiers head down through open bowls and narrow chutes to the waiting snowcat below before doing it all again. There's less transport time without a chopper so there are double the runs. Ten to 12 runs, lunch and heli transfer costs \$NZ399 for the day.

South Island Guides offer exceptional experiences. If you have the cash, they have the trip, with a private guide, a personal photographer to capture everything, a driver with a swanky four-wheel-drive and a helicopter pilot at your command.

The seriously cashed-up book in to Whare Kea lodge's mountain chalet with personal guide, chef and housekeeper. The chalet is only accessible by chopper and the helicopter picks up guests daily to ski-tour the surrounding peaks. If you have to ask the price then you can't afford it.

Oh, and don't worry about jumping out of the chopper a la James Bond. That only happens in the movies. Choppers land on a safe slope, skiers alight and crouch low on the ground away from the helicopter. The guide removes the skis and boards and when everyone is huddled together, the chopper takes off.

Click your skis in and let the smiles begin.

Falling in powder is like falling on air. It's a weird sensation when you are used to falling on hard snow.

Harris Mountain Heli has access to more than 3000 sq km incorporating 200 peaks in seven mountain areas including the Buchanans, Harris and Mt Cook ranges. Other operators such as Southern Lakes Heli-Ski provide a similar service. With this much terrain it's possible to offer heli-skiing to most abilities and ages. It will set you back from \$NZ745 for three runs to \$NZ975 for seven runs, with extra runs costing \$NZ90 each.

There is some waiting involved, though. When your phone rings in the morning it's to tell you to be ready in 20 minutes or wait until the next day, depending on weather conditions.

Because heli-skiing tends to be a half-day or full-day tour in NZ, your fitness level doesn't have to be that high, but it is important to be reasonably fit. Three runs on powder snow can be more exhausting than an entire day on the groomed stuff, especially if you have a hangover. I was so nervous about my first heli-ski

experience that I tried to drown my fears with martinis in Queenstown. A mistake I didn't make twice.

It is suggested that if you are an intermediate skier that you have a little powder experience, even if it's on the side of the groomed runs. Hire some fat powder skis or a board for your heli experience and it will make it a lot easier. Guides double as instructors with powder tips when you're on the mountain.

New Zealand has enough gentle rolling terrain to make first-timers feel like James Bond. For the serious skier, then, the sky is literally the limit. Either way there's nothing like cutting your own fresh lines on untracked snow under a blue sky. One thing guaranteed is a smile, aching facial muscles and frozen teeth.

For all this fun it's important to remember that avalanches do happen. Even the experienced can get in trouble; Australian extreme-ski champion Andrea Binning survived



When you are used to falling on groomed snow that causes bruising you realise that powder snow is a lot easier to let go. Harris Mountain Heli is located in the Southern Alps, about 550 kilometres from Christchurch. A variety of heli-ski operators have exclusive access to thousands of square kilometres of varied terrain based around the Mt Potts area in the South Island. It's a good idea to develop your powder skills on the big guns of the Southern Alps.