

Mountains
seem to have been built
for the human race,
as at once their schools
and cathedrals.

JOHN RUSKIN (1819-1900)



INFINITY

With the startling precision of a great heron the helicopter touches down on a narrow snowy ridge. You and 10 other connoisseurs of skiing disembark and “heli-huddle” in the protection of an overhang. When CMH’s Bell 212 lifts, a glittery whirl of snow dances up, blocking everything from view. After it clears, it’s as if the stroke of a wizard’s wand has transformed your world. Utter silence and the 7,000-foot spires of B.C.’s Selkirks are your stage; an endless expanse of snow the royal carpet at your feet.

CMH guide and Cariboo Lodge manager Ernst Buehler gives instructions; you will ski one at a time down Morning Glory, a sweeping slope of untracked powder that disappears from view after a mile. Then with a quick smile and a whoosh he’s off, carving perfect turns with a rhythm and finesse that say “master.”

It’s your turn. You point your skis downhill and push off. This is between you, the mountain and magic. Your heart feels like it will pound through your chest as you make your first few awkward turns on the bottomless snow. The rush of adrenaline is beyond belief as your speed builds, and you find yourself linking turns as fluidly as a dolphin playing with waves. At the bottom you gasp for air – and words.

Now you understand what John Ruskin believed.

If mountains are indeed cathedrals, then the people at Canadian Mountain Holidays must be their guardians. Since 1963, when mountaineer and company founder Hans Gmoser first led a handful of heliski-ers in the Canadian Rockies, CMH has hosted more than 92,500 skier weeks in 11 pristine alpine zones that approximate the area of the Swiss Alps.

The company, now owned by Alpine Helicopters, has evolved to be the largest heli-skiing operation in the world through the simple power of loyalty.

“We build one-on-one relationships with our guests and they come back again and again,” says president Mark Kingsbury, who started as a CMH maintenance man 27 years ago. “Since visitors aren’t as ‘at home’ in the mountains as we are, the best way to share the same awe and comfort level we enjoy is to host them as safely and graciously as possible.”

The seven Canadian/Euro-styled alpine lodges, haute cuisine menus and a guarantee of skiing 100,000 vertical feet also lure guests back – more than 70 percent repeat visits, most booking a year in advance. Some have even returned every season since the company’s founding 36 years ago.

The keystone of the comfortable atmosphere is CMH’s people and their depth of experience, professional training and dedication. Many have been with the company more than 20 years, and CMH guides are certified by the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides.

While this is the ultimate high, you don’t have to be the ultimate skier to partake. “But,” advises Mark, “you should be a confident, experienced skier with considerable experience at major downhill resorts such as Whistler/Blackcomb, and a few multi-day ski trips under your belt. If you’re heli-skiing for the first time, I’d suggest you sign up for the Powder Performance Program.”

Or you may want to try the summer version of mountain highs that CMH literally invented – heli-hiking. “Talk about off the beaten path,” says Mark. “We can take you above tree line, across spectacular ridges, through fabulous alpine meadows bursting with flowers. If you can walk, you can do it.”

And if you do, you, too, will believe. 99

An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain range. The snow is a deep, vibrant blue. A winding path of ski tracks leads from the foreground towards the horizon. In the distance, a lone figure can be seen on the slope. The sky is a clear, pale blue with a few wispy clouds. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

AND BEYOND

Into the mystic on a Canadian Mountain Holiday by Glenda Bartosh