## **ADVENTURE**





nicorns and glitter were the last things I expected to find at Tsaina Lodge, the birthplace of the Alaskan free-skiing scene. I'd come to this legendary heli-skiing base on Thompson Pass in the Chugach Mountains—the snowiest place in Alaska-to test my limits on some of the most formidable terrain on the planet. Based on the many ski-porn films I've watched, I anticipated ample amounts of testosterone. Instead, my guides were two blondes wearing unicorn horns strapped to their beanies. Kirsten Kremer is the operation's resident badass. Brooke Edwards, her prodigy, wore heart-shaped sunglasses, and reached into a sparkly unicorn-shaped purse for a pot of glitter to dab on my cheeks. I doubt the dust had magical powers to protect me from dangers like crevasses and avalanches, but the moment did calm my nerves before I stepped into our Eurocopter AS350 B2, the Bugatti of choppers.

Tsaina Lodge is the base camp for Valdez Heli Ski Guides (VHSG), a storied operation with some of the most experienced guides in the industry. In 2011, it was purchased and restored by Jeff Fraser, a former tech exec and longtime VHSG client who went on to buy the operation itself in 2018. The once-decrepit inn, a former oil-trucker roadhouse, now has 24 comfortable rooms with a fantastic lounge and bar, appealing to a new generation of skiers-like me. As a lifelong snowboarder who has ridden throughout Europe and North America, I was looking for a new challenge. I'd always considered the Chugach out of my league, but when Jeff bought the operation he ditched the "experts only" warnings and started to promote powder bowls and mellow glacier runs that had never been publicized. The first time we spoke, I confessed that I was worried I wasn't good enough. "You won't just be fine," Jeff told me. "You'll have the trip of your life."

To prepare for the tight chutes, couloirs, and narrow gorges Alaska is famous for, I attended the Steep & Deep Ski Camp at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort and hired a trainer to get my legs superstrong. Still, no matter how much you prepare, you get butterflies before your first run. And trust me, the moment the chopper sinks its skids into a knife-edge

ridge and your guide signals that it's go time, you will be terrified.

I was with three fellow guests: Yuv, an obsessive snowboarder from Israel who turns on his GoPro before each run, and Max and Josh, 30-something brothers from Vail, Colorado, on their first bigmountain ski trip. When Kirsten gave the thumbsup, we slowly climbed out and crawled a few feet out along the mountaintop as the helicopter took off, causing a small hurricane. Kirsten went down first, then radioed us from the bottom to follow one at a time. Guides are in constant radio communication with guests, navigating them away from terrain hazards and toward the most epic descents. I was the last to go; when I heard my name crackle through the speaker, I realized I'd been holding my breath. I exhaled deeply and took in the vast wilderness that surrounded me. Then I dropped into the steepest run of my life. Instantly, I felt powder drunk, surfing fluffy light snow for 3,000 vertical feet. At the base, everyone's nervousness had evaporated and we boarded the helicopter again, eager for another drop to keep the rush.

Like at a ski resort, many heli-skiing operations have designated runs that the teams decide each day whether to open, depending on conditions. VHSG's program remains exploratory. "You could be sending a line no one on Earth has ever skied," Jeff said one night at dinner. "Most operations are like Disney. We're more like Africa." Throughout the week in April that I spent with VHSG, Brooke and Kirsten slowly dialed up the difficulty, rarely repeating a line. Several days in, the weather gods gifted us a bluebird day and perfect snow, allowing us to lap runs from 10 a.m. to sunset, which in Alaska in early spring means close to nine o'clock at night.

When the helicopter returned us home each night, my legs felt like Jell-O, and I was grateful that the lodge, with its hot tub and massage room, was just a few hundred feet away. It was a far cry from its previous incarnation; in the 1990s, the Tsaina was a clubhouse for contestants of the World Extreme Skiing Championships, and the parties were as extreme as the skiing. "People would crash on the floor or build snow caves in the parking →

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lot," Jeff recalled. If you wanted comfort, you would stay in the Best Western or Totem Hotel and Suites, a harrowing 40-minute drive down the pass in the unremarkable port town of Valdez. Remnants of those wilder times remain, in the form of weekly theme parties. It was Woodstock Revival night during my stay, and between the Tsaina costume yurt and Brooke's personal collection of bell-bottoms, every guest, from Silicon Valley tech execs to an Olympic skier, was properly attired. Over multicourse dinners of Wagyu filet and salmon with spinach orzo and king crab, our guides told us stories of the old days—and the more bottles of Caymus Vineyards Cabernet that were opened, the more outrageous they got.

At a certain hour, the conversation would turn to the lines that groups would ski the next day. One night, Kirsten talked about her plans for a group of four seriously talented skiers from Aspen. She had her eye on Meteorite, a no-mistakes peak that no one had skied yet this season. Earlier that day, my group had descended the Ivory Tusk, a classic 3,000-foot-tall Chugach slope. I thought that would be enough for me to go home with the snowboarding entry on my bucket list checked off. But watching Kirsten's eyes light up as she talked to her crew, I realized that what I thought was a once-in-a-lifetime trip was going to become a habit. More than half of VHSG's clients book a trip for the next season before they leave. They become addicted, Jeff tells me. It's not just the thrill or the bragging rights that draw them back—it's more personal. When you step out of your comfort zone and scare yourself just a little bit, you truly feel alive.

Seven-day trips range from \$5,900 per person for 4.2 hours of flight time, excluding meals and lodging, to \$112,000 for a party of eight, including lodging and meals at Tsaina, plus two guides and 10 hours of flight time; valdezheliskiguides.com

### HELI-SKIING AROUND THE WORLD

#### ➤ Niehku Mountain Villa, Lapland, Sweden

This 14-room lodge on the border between Sweden and Norway was cofounded by mountain guide Jossi Lindblom. Choppers can access 60 skiable peaks, and if the weather doesn't allow flying, you can ski out the door down to the fjords. niehku.com

#### ➤ Mystery Mountain Ranch, British Columbia, Canada

Of the five bases operated by Bella Coola Heli Sports throughout British Columbia, this is the most exclusive, hosting just five guests at a time. Its location deep in the Coast Range lets guests access some of the longest vertical descents in Canada. bellacoolaheliskiing.com

#### ➤ Rio Palena Lodge, Patagonia, Chile

Adventure experts Eleven
Experience recently added this
seven-room lodge in a remote
corner of Chilean Patagonia
to their portfolio. Guests are
typically able to take six to 10
runs, ranging from open bowls to
steep couloirs, each day. Asado
dinners and wood-fired hot tubs
help them recharge each night.
elevenexperience.com

#### > SwisSkiSafari, European Alps

When you can heli-hop between Switzerland, France, and Italy, you're guaranteed to find crowdfree runs to match all abilities. Every trip is custom—choose between private chalets and luxe lodges; dine at Michelin-starred restaurants or in rustic huts. swisskisafari.com JM