



Sunday, December 21, 2014

## Heli-skiing

The lift, though costly, provides a different slant for a skier's bucket list.



JOE ROYER • Ruby Mountains Heli-Experience

The Ruby Mountains Heli-Experience near Elko (population 18,000) in northeastern Nevada. The Rubys are a small group of peaks sitting near the Middle of the Great Basin, about 290 miles east of Reno, Nev., and 230 miles west of Salt Lake City.

BY BRIAN CLARK

Special to the Post-Dispatch

### PANORAMA, BRITISH COLUMBIA

• With the steady sound of whup, whup, whup keeping us company, the helicopter lifted higher into the jagged peaks and cathedral-like cirques of the Purcell Mountain Range.

As the bright sun glinted off hanging glaciers and cliffs, I turned to photographer Mark Lorenzen and asked, "Where the heck will we land, let alone ski?"

Then RK Heliski ([rkheliski.com](http://rkheliski.com)) pilot Duncan McNabb hopped a ridge, banked right and set the chopper down on a broad snowfield. Keeping our heads low to avoid decapitation,

our group carefully clambered out, unloaded our skis and snowboards and set off for our pickup spot several thousand vertical feet below.

Along the way, guide Jeremy MacKenzie led us down open bowls, through glades of big trees, off a few (optional) cliffs and into more than a few stashes of light, fluffy snow. It was just another very special day far above the Powder Highway in eastern British Columbia, home to eight top ski and snowboard resorts — including Revelstoke, which has a vertical descent of 5,620 feet.

All over North America, from Wyoming's Teton Range ([srsporingclub.com](http://srsporingclub.com)) to Alaska ([alaska-heliskiing.com](http://alaska-heliskiing.com)) to British Columbia

([canadianmountainholidays.com](http://canadianmountainholidays.com)), heli-ski operators are gearing up for another season. They offer untracked powder skiing and snowboarding far from lift lines, crowds and clanking chair lifts. Many have deluxe accommodations, hot tubs, massage therapists and top chefs who cater to guests' culinary tastes.

I've gone heli-skiing above Whistler Resort near Vancouver, British Columbia, ([whistlerheliskiing.com](http://whistlerheliskiing.com)) in the North Cascades of Washington State ([heli-ski.com](http://heli-ski.com)) and in the Swiss Alps ([swisskissafari.com](http://swisskissafari.com)). And while this activity isn't cheap, it should be

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## HOME AWAY YOUR TRAVELS

### HELI-SKI • FROM HI

Typical vertical descent can be 1,500 to 2,000 feet

on every serious skier or snowboarder's bucket list.

If I close my eyes, I can feel the sensation of carving turns down untouched and challenging slopes through stands of big trees where the snow is so deep that it fluffs up to my chest and over my head as I float down the mountainside, bouncing from turn to turn. Even the falls can be a delight. I once did a complete, slow-motion summersault and ended up back on my feet heading downslope.

Skiing like this — when you and your small group are the only chussers for miles around — makes you feel downright claustrophobic when you venture back on a run at a conventional ski resort, even during a week-day. And on a weekend, forget about it.

In the Bugaboo Range a few years back on a Canadian Mountain Holidays adventure, I met retired Minnesota schoolteacher Tom Fontana, who said he was more than happy to drive a Subaru with 200,000 miles so he could make annual five-day, all-inclusive heli-ski trips that cost him around \$6,000.

"I can't get enough of it," said Fontana, who had been on six "once-in-a-lifetime" CMH trips in British Columbia and Alberta. "It's expensive, but it's a priority for me. And I really don't need a new car."

Heli-ski operations tend to be run by guys like Joe Royer, a rugged Northern California surfer and former ski patroller at the Snowbird Resort in Utah. Royer runs the Ruby Mountains Heli-Experience near Elko (population 18,000) in northeastern Nevada. He first saw these mountains in the early 1970s, when he was driving home to Marin County in his VW Bug from skiing in the Wasatch Range. He'd done some guiding with Wasatch Mountain Guides, and the wheels began to spin.

The Rubys are a small group of peaks sitting in about the Middle of the Great Basin, about 290 miles east of Reno, Nev., and 230 miles west of Salt Lake City. They get more than 300 inches of snow each winter. In

the 1950s, two men tried to start a resort with a couple of rope tows, but it failed because it was so remote.

"Nevada is the most mountainous state in the lower 48 with more than 400 different ranges," he said. "The Rubys just happen to be the most spectacular. Moreover, they get the most snow because they are in the northern part of the state."

Though Royer has been operating in the Rubys for more than 35 years, his outfit is still relatively unknown because the range is so isolated out in Nevada's Humboldt National Forest. He once ran four choppers out of his base at Red's Ranch but cut back to offer a higher-quality experience.

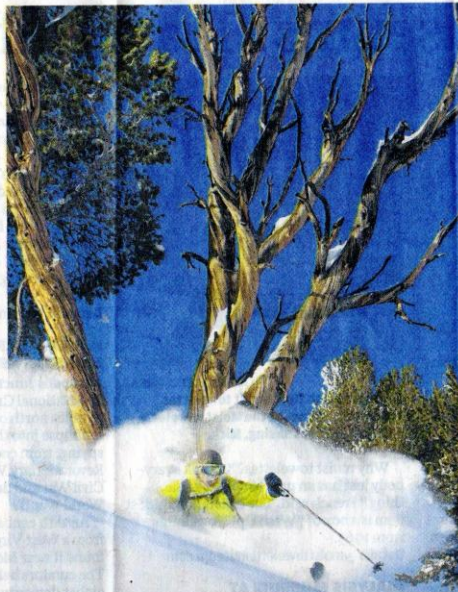
"We found out that bigger was not necessarily better," he said. "We cut back, so now we really get to know all our guests. During a given week, we usually have about 16 skiers and snowboarders participating in our three-day packages."

Royer caters to skiers and boarders from the intermediate level up to experts. "But people should be at least strong intermediates to enjoy themselves," he said. "We put them on fat (wide) Rossignol skis that allow them to ride up over the super-dry snow and participate at a good level."

While many of the visitors to the Rubys come from places like Lake Tahoe, Salt Lake City and Colorado, he said skiers and riders from the Midwest can have a great time in the Rubys. But he advises them to get a lot of laps under their skis and try to get in good shape before heading west.

"If you can go to a big resort before coming here, I'd suggest starting out on the groomers and then get off the trails and try to find the worst snow and skiing you can," he said. "That'll help prepare you."

On the first day, skiers and snowboarders rise early for breakfast and then go through helicopter drills and learn how to use an avalanche beacon, just in case. With nearly a dozen peaks and hundreds of runs from which to choose, Royer said guides can



PHOTOS BY JOE ROYER • Ruby Mountains Heli-Experience  
The Ruby Mountains get more than 300 inches of snow each winter.



A helicopter delivers skiers in the Ruby Mountains.

#### IF YOU GO

**The Scoop** • Contact Ruby Heli Mountains Heli-Experience at 1-775-753-6867 or see its website at [helicopterskiing.com](http://helicopterskiing.com). A three-night stay at Red's Ranch includes meals, guide service, skis and 20 chopper rides. The price is \$4,650 for three days. A single-day option costs \$1,475.

**Getting there** • Delta Skywest serves the Elko airport, which is about 30 miles from Red's Ranch. Amtrak also stops in Elko, which is on Interstate 80.

**More info** • For details on other heli-ski-and-snowboard operators in the United States, including Alaska, see [helskius.org](http://helskius.org). In British Columbia, see [helicatcanada.com](http://helicatcanada.com); and for Alberta, Canada, see [travelalberta.com](http://travelalberta.com).

pick the best conditions for the groups and the weather conditions. That could mean anything from aspen tree skiing or glaciated, open bowls.

The six-person helicopter Royer uses carries four skiers/snowboarders and one guide, who can choose the level of difficulty based on the ability and experience of the clients, he said. A light lunch, which often includes a hot soup and sandwich, is served on the mountain. He advises against any heavy food because it will slow you down and make you want to nap.

A lot of the runs in a typical day have a vertical descent of 1,500 to 2,000 feet, which Royer said is fairly standard for American heli-skiing. Over the course of three days, he said skiers and riders will get in an average of 20 runs. Which, in my experience, should leave you plenty tired.

But Royer said the skiing and snowboarding are only part of the experience. Participants stay at the cozy Red's Ranch lodge, where you can have an in-room massage after a hard day of skiing or riding. The food is prepared by Royer's wife, Francy, whom he calls a "gifted" chef. Dinners can include pan-roasted Idaho trout, basil-marinated elk and a seven-layer opera cake dessert.

"We want people to have a good time," he said. "And that includes taking care of them after they get off the mountain, too."

[http://www.stltoday.com/travel/heli-skiing-the-ultimate-snow-experience/article\\_b64a4631-cbdd-58c6-bbc2-166ece13de74.htm](http://www.stltoday.com/travel/heli-skiing-the-ultimate-snow-experience/article_b64a4631-cbdd-58c6-bbc2-166ece13de74.htm)