

# Getting high on heli-hiking

Devotees compare the experience to an all-natural drug

LISA MONFORTON  
THE CALGARY HERALD

This all happened on a weekend trip lasting less than 72 hours: a marriage proposal overlooking a breathtaking valley in front of a group of strangers, a hiker overcoming her fear of vertigo and another climbing a rock face no wider than a five-foot coffee table using her bare hands.

Most remarkable of all though was the discovery of a new "drug" that delivers sheer happiness, with no side-effects. Such is the powerful seduction of heli-hiking.

We were an eclectic group of like-minded strangers on this adventure — a three-day heli-hiking trip to Bugaboo Lodge with Canadian Mountain Holidays. We first-timers knew little of what to expect, only that each morning we'd pull on our hiking boots and put one foot in front of the other in places few humans had ever trod. For those of us new to hiking closer to heaven, there were plenty of other surprises in store: that we'd traverse valleys you might imagine could only exist in a fantasy novel, or that it is possible to scramble up the side of a mountain covered in boulders the size of Mini Coopers.

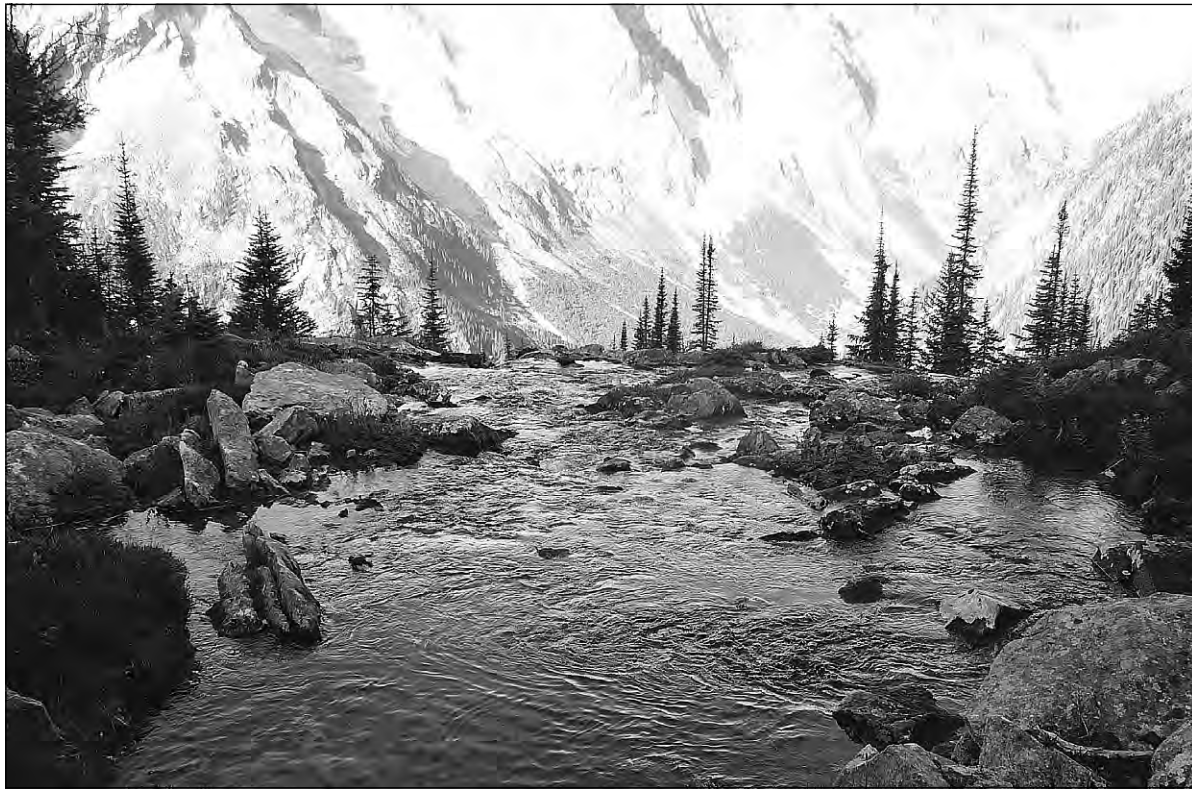
Two in our group were hardcore climbers and hikers, and there would be no holding them back. After the first hike on Day 1, we were divided into groups based on physical ability. We'd all get a chance to hike in our comfort zone and, if we felt like it, push beyond that.

That's what Dave Cochrane, the folksy and likable general manager of the Bugaboo Lodge told us upon our arrival along with our affable helicopter pilot, Don Wederfort, who'd just effortlessly threaded the chopper between two rocky pinnacles on our way from the heli-pad in Radium to the lodge in the Columbia Mountains. It would be the first of a dozen of his helicoptering feats in the Bell 212 that weekend that would earn our respect. We also envied him his "office," atop random peaks while waiting to pick us up for the next stop.

Over a hearty, family style lunch in our first hour at Bugaboo Lodge, we had our introduction to the weekend and more of Wederfort's laid-back humour.

"It's my responsibility to get your guides high," he said, garnering boisterous laughter — and likely the odd nervous titter.

He wasn't kidding about the heady buzz that comes with a one-two punch of gob-smacking scenery above 2,500 metres. It felt like we were on our very



Heli-hiking takes you to places you'd never get to see and where few people have trod, such as this spectacular sky-high stream that appears to drop off the side of a mountain or a pool created by a melting ice cave, the perfect spot for cooling off tired feet.



own planet — nothing but mountains and valleys for miles in all directions.

On our introductory drop-off, we landed in a wide valley, where the remains of the summer's wildflowers swayed in the breeze and a squiggly stream meandered as far as the eye could see.

Up and over and into yet another valley, we put down our hiking poles and rested in the grass, conversation stilled as we looked across the valley in awe of hanging glaciers and hidden lakes beneath a deep blue sky.

Suddenly, a young man from our group got down on bended knee in front of his girlfriend, pulled a tiny box from his pocket and asked the question. There were tears — and applause from the rest of us. It set a celebratory mood for the rest of the weekend that included a series of individual victorious feats.

None of these mountain moments would be possible, though, if not for an Austrian guide named Hans Gmoser, who created heli-skiing in Western Canada in 1965. The Bugaboo

Lodge became the base of his first winter operation. Today, lifelong skier and hiker Dave Cochrane, an experienced mountain man, who decades earlier had come west for a holi-

Photos, Lisa Monforton, Calgary Herald

day from Eastern Canada and never returned home, hosts skiers and hikers from around the world.

CMH hosts each year about 5,800 skiers seeking acres of untouched champagne powder on remote mountain bowls. From mid-December to the end of April, a dozen lodges operated by CMH accommodate these thrill-seekers. (Nine are back-country lodges, while three others are based in small B.C. towns).

The heli-hiking operation sees about one-fifth of those numbers from early July to mid-September out of two lodges — Bugaboo and Bobbie Burns — about a day's hike distance from each other.

The Bugaboo Lodge was our aerie-like retreat for the weekend in a setting at 1,500 metres at the foot of the glacier of the same name.

No longer can the 44-room lodge be called rustic, having

gone through four renovations since its modest roots more than four decades ago. Hikers and skiers can rest their weary bodies in the rooftop whirlpool, practise moves on a climbing wall, sit before a roaring fire in the cosy games room, get a massage and even check on their e-mail if they just can't leave the busy world behind.

When the bell clangs for the morning stretch class followed by an epic buffet breakfast befitting champion hikers, it might be tempting to pull up an Adirondack chair and read a book. But this isn't what a heli-hiking trip is all about.

It's about getting out there and seeing your reflection in an alpine lake or cooling your feet in another one after a morning of scrambling around in the scree.

The rigorously trained guides are good-natured, practised in patience, taking up whatever pace the group desires. They also love to tell a good anecdote about a harrowing rescue or riffing on the flora and fauna. Inexperienced hikers will learn helpful insights into preserving energy while climbing and how best to strategize the path of least resistance up the side of a mountain.

Getting to the top has its rewards, too. Like the day we were greeted by a melting ice cave that had created a frosty pool of water, perfect for cooling down our sweaty feet.

There we sat speechless, yet again, taking in the immense beauty of it all.

I instantly understood why Charlie, the one octogenarian in our group, had done this trip eight times, even though he lives close to the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California.

"I love it. It's hard to explain why you'd go to the mountains when I live in the mountains. It's like coming home to me."

He's right in a spiritual sense, too. It's as close to heaven as you'll get on earth.

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Our chopper takes off after dropping us at a desolate boulder-filled ridge in the Columbia Mountains.

## If You Go

**What it costs:** Heli-hiking is a pricey weekend holiday for most travellers. But when I added up the dozen helicopter rides, the outstanding breakfasts, lunches made daily for hikes, dinners, comfy accommodations, personal touch and camaraderie, it seemed like a fair price. Week-ends in summer start around \$2,000 and around \$1,800 in September.

**What to bring:** You might want to bring your own hiking gear, but CMH will provide everything: hiking boots, poles, rain gear, water bottles and daypacks.

**Summer outings:** CMH offers a host of special event weekends that include heli-yoga, painting in the mountains or hiking with specialists such as Roberta Bondar. Go to [canadianmountainholidays.com](http://canadianmountainholidays.com) for details.

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