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# BELLA COOLA HELI SPORTS

ONE OF B.C.'S MOST ACCESSIBLE HELI OPS LORDS OVER A  
WHITE WILDERNESS HALF THE SIZE OF NEW JERSEY.

By Andrew Findlay

» With an area 325 times the size of Whistler Blackcomb pretty much to yourself—BCHS specializes in small-group heli skiing—there's no need to spoon your tracks. Though it does look awfully pretty.

**Pete "Swede" Mattsson doesn't talk so much as shout, like a courtroom barrister with a wicked sense of humor that's hard to ignore.** In some ways, it's no surprise that this gregarious longtime Whistlerite, guide, and chef gravitated to a mountain range as huge as the Coast Mountains of British Columbia when he and partners Beat Steiner and Christian Begin decided to launch a heli-skiing business in 2003.

"I was up here picking wild mushrooms one fall and I looked around at the mountains and thought, 'Hey, this looks pretty good,'" he says over breakfast at Bella Coola Heli Sports' main base, Tweedsmuir Park Lodge, tucked in a forest of giant firs and cedars next to the Atnarko River.

Understatement of the week. Half an hour postbreakfast we're soaring high above the Bella Coola Valley in an A-Star, prepared to plunge through a weather window after storms that dumped close to three feet of snow in the past five days. Far below, sun sparkles on the Bella Coola River and the roofs of farmhouses and homesteads, and around us glaciated wilderness unfolds in a tasty panorama.

All of it belongs to Bella Coola Heli Sports, the company with exclusive heli-skiing rights to a region so vast that, a decade later, guides are still

bagging first descents. Between the company's two heli-skiing tenures—the first accessed from the Bella Coola Valley, the second from a satellite operation at Bluff Lake, within striking distance of magnificent Mount Waddington (the highest peak in the Coast Mountains)—Mattsson and his team lord over one of the largest powder-skiing empires in the world, a mountain wilderness half the size of New Jersey.

The company has wisely designed its programs to match the terrain's epic potential. The Big Mountain Challenge

targets experts wanting steep virgin lines and a mountaineering experience that might call for bootpacking to a summit or rappelling down a couloir—conditions permitting.

Today, however, first descents aren't in the cards; with the huge volumes of snow has come increased instability. We land on the northwest ridge of Mount Saugstad, a chiseled peak in the heart of an area the guides refer to enticingly as the Big Snow Zone, a mountainous triangle flanked on two sides by the north and south arms of the Bentinck inlet. Then the chopper dis-

appears over the ridge and silence returns. Our guide, Wade Bashaw, kicks into his bindings and instructs us to stay right of his tracks. Last night's cold has sucked coastal moisture from the snow. Drifting clouds clinging to the surrounding peaks have made flying and run choices difficult, but this route's a winner. The visibility is perfect as we get to work on the Munday Glacier, ripping turns on a gorgeous line that meanders for 4,500 vertical feet down the mountain's west face. It rarely tops 30 degrees, and we weave among rock outcrops and pop pillows of boot-top fresh until the terrain eases near the pick-up zone.

In minutes we're whisked a few drainages north of Saugstad to the top of something a little spicier, Glory Couloir, which plunges at a consistent 40 degrees to a shallow alpine valley. Contrails of

**Contrails of powder billow from Bashaw's skis as he smears a turn and drops in. I can take a little more of this, I think. Until our vert racks up to 30,000.**

powder billow from Bashaw's skis as he smears a turn and drops in. I can take a little more of this, I think—until our vert in the Big Snow Zone racks up to 30,000. And then my leg muscles beg for the outdoor Jacuzzi.

Back at Tweedsmuir Park Lodge, Mattsson, a hockey fanatic, is parked in front of the big screen watching the Vancouver Canucks get trounced while other guests cool down with a game of eight ball. The wall is like a quilt, covered in topographic maps of Bella Coola Heli Sports' prodigious powder empire.

"You're only scratching the surface, man," Mattsson says when he spots me ogling the map. Indeed. ♦

» BCHS is so close to Vancouver, clients can ski peaks like this the day they arrive.



Permit area  
(millions of acres)

**2.64**

Longest run  
(vertical feet)

**6,000**

Price (per day)

**\$1,380**

Seven-night packages, with 100,000 vertical feet, average around \$10,000. The seven-night Steep Skiing Challenge package, for experts only, costs roughly \$11,340.

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