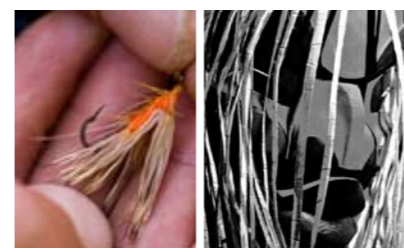


The **Bella Coola** **LURE**



2 000-metre ski descents, 200-kilo Grizzly Bears and 20-pound salmon make summer at British Columbia's legendary **Bella Coola Helisports a trip out of the ordinary. Way out of the ordinary.**

TEXT LESLIE ANTHONY :: PHOTOS PAUL MORRISON

Bella Coola lies at the head of a tortured network of islands, inlets and fjords, 150 km inland from British Columbia's Central Coast. The mountains rise directly from the sea to 3 000 metres; steep, heavily glaciated, and very snowy. A hybrid coast/interior weather pattern offers deeper, drier snow than areas closer to the Pacific Ocean, and more stability than further east. Deceptively chiseled peaks drop 2 600 metres to valley floors—much like Europe and not at all like anywhere in North America, including Alaska. It all translates to ski routes down massive powder aprons, through convoluted glacial seracs, and a bouquet of lengthy, inviting couloirs. A dozen ski and snowboard films made this place heli-skiing's new Shangri-La—ironic given that this was precisely the terminology used in both Nuxalk native legends and by white explorers to describe the lush, treed valley of meandering rivers and abundant fish and wildlife.



PHOTO: ©PAUL MORRISON



PHOTO: ©PAUL MORRISON

Grizzly Bear, Black Bear, Moose and Deer are so numerous it's like driving through a wildlife park.



PHOTO: ©PAUL MORRISON

Into The Wild

Wheeling across the Chilcotin Plateau is a savage journey through the heart of Canadian wilderness. The iconography of loneliness starts in Clinton, where travelers etch names on weathered wood tacked to a cluster of signposts, much as pioneers and explorers left evidence of their passage. After Williams Lake there's a whole lot of nothing and waypoints get weirder—occasional shoes thrown inexplicably over phone wires in the middle of nowhere (very Canadian...) and clutches of beat-up buildings like Alexis Creek where the bar boasts more animal heads than tables. Why? Because Grizzly, Black Bear, Moose and Deer are so numerous along the highway it's like driving through a wildlife park. Finally, the mountains and ice-caps that have hugged the southern skyline for hours rush towards you as the road tumbles a nightmare 1 300 metres to the Bella Coola Valley. The cliff-hugging switchback was constructed by locals: one guy started with a bulldozer from the bottom, another guy from the top. They eventually met in the middle—a marvel of dirt-bag engineering that defines the region's spirit.

What's the Buzz?

There's a mosquito in the helicopter. The pilot doesn't notice. The guide doesn't notice. Even the photographer is oblivious to the insect's spastic flight and constant buzz. Not that it's going to bite anybody through all the GoreTex and ski boots and helmets, but it's the kind of thing that can only happen when you're loading up a chopper for a twilight ski mission in June. Having ace air-jockey Richard Lapointe land the six-seat A-star 20 metres from the hot tub and 100 metres from our beds went a long way toward taking the edge off the usual heli-scramble. The mosquito thinks so, too. Within minutes, Lapointe sprinkles two groups across several unnamed peaks, and we're throwing long contrails of corn up at high speeds on slopes that bend steeply into the green idyll of the shadowy valley. Skiing a glacier in spring you are, quite literally, slicing through time, layers and eons revealing themselves as snow melts from the faces

Sir Edmund Hilary and Thor Heyerdahl attempted to unravel the mystery of local petroglyphs.

Rock Stars

Following the historic Grease Trail—a native trade-route named for the ulican oil bartered along it—explorer Alexander Mackenzie ended an epic two-year crossing of the continent in Bella Coola in 1793 only to find he'd missed Captain George Vancouver—and a ride home to England—by two weeks. Explorers Sir Edmund Hilary and Thor Heyerdahl also visited, attempting to unravel the mystery of local rock-art resembling that found in the South Pacific. Is there a Polynesian connection to the enigmatic Nuxalk culture that flourished here for thousands of years? Perhaps, though the Nuxalk now lay claim to the ancient, inelegant petroglyphs carved into smooth granite along Thorsen Creek. It took lifetimes to etch the designs with hand-held rocks, but why were bug-eyed figures of grizzlies, snakes and frogs carved here? Perhaps because when the creek is high, giant, car-sized boulders roll downriver making thunderous noises. The petroglyphs drape a promontory that would have overlooked this surreal sight, inspiring superstition, magic and reverence.



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The river floods into the surrounding Cottonwoods where bears splash through looking for stranded salmon.

Guide Book

Every morning we face a crazed camp counselor claspng a clipboard, disheveled in a hoody and track pants, dirty-blond hair escaping the confines of a soiled baseball cap, hand-rolled cigarette behind his ear. He barks news updates, weather reports and bad jokes. He looks like he should be cleaning garbage bins or fiddling under the hood of a truck, but no—he’s the owner and director of Bella Coola Helisports. Rough, rude, and remarkable, cowboy guide Peter ‘The Swede’ Mattson is synonymous with the history of big-mountain skiing in B.C.’s Coast Range. The Swede might be just another northern Euro who loves slam-dancing and Iggy Pop, but for years he was also the most in-demand guide and location coordinator for Whistler’s considerable film industry. Though celebrated for his wiry ways, when you get past The Swede’s crusty exterior and peel away the layers you find a heart of gold with more tales than you can imagine. He’s tack sharp in the mountains, scary when he’s drunk, and, more importantly, loved by all.

Fish Story

Fishing guide Leslie Koroluk was born in northern Saskatchewan and has fished all over Canada from B.C. to Labrador to the Arctic. He was a hand-logger on the B.C. coast before turning to guiding. Now 65, he lives in Bella Coola with a wife 30 years his junior and a two-year old. Propped in the bow of his drift-boat, he talks about the effects of climate change and commercial fisheries—first they destroyed the herring and ulican, salmon’s natural food, then fished the salmon mercilessly for decades. Once 20 canneries squatted in the inlet; now there are none. “Commercial fleets destroyed the fish stocks,” he says, “and native abuse is ruining what’s left.” This day the Antarko’s boiling waters are at a 35-year high, flooding into the surrounding Cottonwood forests where bears splash through looking for stranded salmon. The ripping current is so strong you can hear rocks rushing along the river bottom like glass beads. “Conditions are tough today... but we’ll find some fish,” he says. And we do.



It's almost July but the previous days' clouds have left 15 cm of welcome fresh snow.

Animal Farm

There's more to this place than ripping legendary, big-mountain runs: we also cast lines for giant Chinook Salmon on the equally legendary Antarko and Bella Coola Rivers. And the rustic scene at historic Tweedsmuir Lodge is no less legendary. Guests are an eclectic mix this week—Iceland, Scotland, New York—all game to wrestle fightin' fish from rushing waters and enjoy heli-high sunsets in spectacular mountains. A typical lodge vignette sounds like you're making it up: chowing savory seafood appetizers and sipping cocktails on the deck while a croquet game ticks away below the watchful gaze of Bald Eagles. Black and Grizzly Bears wander the grounds with impunity on their way to see what the river is serving up, sending us scrambling for cameras that only get stowed when the dinner bell summons us to another gourmet feast. The lodge occupies the site of an ancient village named Stuié. In Nuxalk, it means 'beautiful place to rest.' Word.

The Goods

We make massive, glacial runs to valley-bottom lakes in the morning, then fly over inlets to shoreline hot springs in the afternoon, where we soak, beach-comb, pick mussels, watch whales, seals, eagles. Several rainy days bring visits to native mask and totem-carvers; we hunker in dark studios listening to rain and the spirit-animal legends that drive local mythology. And then suddenly, the gloom lifts and we're out there in a half-million acres of prime ski terrain again, readying for another 1,000-metre sunset descent in silky, sun-softened corn. To our surprise, when we step from the chopper on a north-facing slope we see that the previous days' clouds have left 15 cm of fresh. It's almost July, so new snow is as welcome as the 12-kilo salmon we landed a couple hours ago, grilling on a barbecue at the lodge. The air is warm this evening but the snow is cold and dry, refrigerated from underneath by the glacier. How good is this run going to be? Even the mosquito gets out of the helicopter to see. ~

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