ADVENTURE ISSUE HELI-HIKING









Clockwise from main: Hlking in the Bugaboo Mountains; a mountain goat; Bugaboos Lodge; waiting to board the helicopter. Pictures by Laura Waters; Toby Harriman; Carl Trescher; Lyle Grisedale

Flying start to mountain magic

Chopper transfers take the hard slog out of this multi-day walk in Canada. By *Laura Waters*

I'M squatting on my haunches watching a roaring 4000-kilogram metal beast bear down on me, its brief 80kmh downwash sending me rolling backwards with my feet up in the air. To be fair, I was warned. "It'll be like a mini hurricane so hang onto your hats," the pilot had said during his briefing.

I'm in the Bugaboo Mountains in British Columbia's Purcell range for three days of heli-hiking with CMH Heli-Skiing and Summer Adventures, and huddling for our pick-up within a few metres of where it will land is part of the deal. It's not long though before we're loading like pros (hot tip: squat side-on), as though we've always got around by private chopper.

Hans Gmoser, founder of CMH, is credited as being the father of heli-skiing - where helicopters, not ski lifts, are used to access remote terrain - in the mid-1960s, and the Bugaboos remain world-renowned for it. But with helicopters and backcountry lodges sitting idle over summer it was suggested heli-hiking could be a thing, too. That first summer trip ran in 1978 but this is the first time it's been extended beyond summer and wildflower season through to autumn. And oh, the colours.

Our first afternoon is a little two-hour jaunt to find our feet in this enormous landscape of snow-capped rock spires, glaciers and grassy meadows. We climb gently through sparse larch woodland, starting its fall metamorphosis from green to bright gold, up to a shale ridgeline that brings us face to face with the Bugaboos' granite towers. Formed from magma intrusions that never quite made it to erupting volcano status, they were later carved by glaciers into a string of dramatic pointed peaks with walls 600 to 1000 metres high.

In the late 1800s, prospectors got all excited about the abundance of quartz here - a common indicator of gold - but all they found was iron pyrite or fool's gold. "Bugaboo" was the term used to describe a dead-end. "And good thing they didn't find anything too, otherwise it would've been an open pit mine here," says hiking guide Mark.

It's an impressive introduction but the next day we embark, lunch in backpack, on a full-day hike that shows us just how remote and rugged this country is. Steep rocky climbs lead to undulating ridges with names like Easy Roll and Chalice. The emerald waters of Chalice Tarn sparkle amid the stark grey rock. Remnant lines of snow are marked with bear footprints, swathes of mica shale glint in the sun and grassy mounds sound hollow underfoot from pika burrows. I take over a hundred photos.

The terrain and pace fit my idea of the perfect hike - moderately challenging and with decent climbs - but here everyone gets their "perfect". Walkers are split into groups with four levels of difficulty on offer. I've chosen level three.

"We once had an elderly guy from New York who wasn't very mobile," Mark says. "He just wanted to see the mountains so we flew up here and dropped him on a ridge with two camp chairs and just enjoyed the scenery. It was so cool." Once I hear that, I can't help spend the rest of my time wondering where I'd put my camp chair if I had one; there are so many epic vistas to choose from.

Another great view - seating already in place - is from the bar at Bugaboos Lodge. Behind it a tall window perfectly frames the iconic Houndstooth rock spire, rising from a glacier. When the afternoon "appies" (appetisers) appear, that's where I linger with a glass of wine and maybe some chicken wings, swapping tales with some of the other 34 guests (lodge capacity peaks at 44) who have been out exploring their own routes.

Bugaboos Lodge is classic mountain style, cosy with plenty of wood, an open fireplace, rooftop hot tub, sauna, steam room and even a four-storey indoor climbing wall. My cup is too full to feel the need for a massage but I do join the morning stretching classes in the spacious gym which loosen me up nicely for the day ahead.

On the third day our pilot drops us off on the backside of the spires for three shorter walks, the locations of each so rich and different I feel a touch discombobulated, like I've lived three days in one.

The first sees us wander tiered meadows linked by glacial streams, then climb through granite slabs scraped smooth by glaciers. One boulder is peppered with rare ice-blue aquamarine and black crystals of tourmaline. Our pilot collects us from a glacier and whisks us around the sheer rocky mountain flanks - at times they feel close enough to touch - to drop us off on another.

Temperature aside, the Vowell Glacier feels like landing in Antarctica, a surreal landscape of rock and ice and two blue-green lakes, one filled with floating icebergs. In places the ice is tinted pink from microalgae - "watermelon snow". It even smells a touch like watermelon. Then we're off to the shale-covered Black Forest Ridge, gently undulating with views across to the aptly-named Cobalt Lake and more golden larch. "Tonnes of people go to Banff and Lake Louise to see larch in autumn but here we have it all to ourselves," says Mark. And not just the larch. In three days of hiking, I spot only two walkers who aren't part of the CMH crew. It's like having our own private mountain range. At dinner I sit next to guide Ryan who captures the point of heli-hiking in a nutshell. "If we were to do what you've just done in three days [without flying] it would be two weeks of hiking through heinous terrain with bush whacking."

I take another bite of my lamb tenderloin and a sip of pinot noir, and think I'll stick with the chopper, thanks.

The writer travelled as a guest of Destination British Columbia and CMH

TRIP NOTES

Explore Verdict: A spectacular once-in-a-lifetime hiking adventure with rock star vibes that anyone can do.

Getting there: Air Canada flies to Calgary from where CMH offers coach transfers to the helipad.

How to do it: CMH's Heli Adventure Bugaboos uses short heli-flights to access remote hiking terrain, returning to a comfortable mountain lodge each afternoon. All fitness levels are catered for. A four-day trip costs $CA5520 ($5611) and includes accommodation, all meals, non-alcoholic beverages, highly-trained guides, heli-flights, hiking equipment and ground transfers from Banff, Lake Louise or Calgary to the helipad.

Explore more: SuperNaturalBC.com; cmhsummer.com