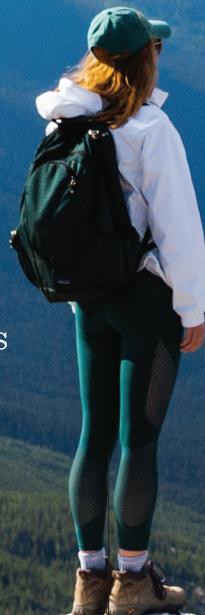


THE MILD SIDE OF WILD

If you've ever dreamed about trying an extreme sport, but were afraid to (hey no judgment, we hear ya), you might want to consider heli-hiking. As writer *Lisa Kadane* discovered, it offers physical rewards and adrenaline thrills — without the risk.



TAYLOR BURK; LYLE GRISEDALE

BESS MACCARTHY, ONE OF THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED FEMALE mountaineers in North America a century ago, cut her climbing teeth in the Purcell Mountains of British Columbia. She accompanied legendary climber Conrad Kain on 19 of his first ascents and, according to her husband Albert, “never once lost her cheerful smile” as she traversed summits and climbed through glacial crevasses wearing hobnail boots and itchy woolens.

Clearly, I'm no Bess.

Rather than trekking for days to reach the toe of Vowell Glacier, which spills between two rocky peaks like an icy tongue, I've been helicoptered in to the BC backcountry inside a Bell chopper. Instead of roughing it in a canvas tent high in the alpine air, I'm staying at CMH Bugaboos Lodge. At this luxurious retreat, the food is almost as sublime as the views of the famous Bugaboos, a subset of the Purcells whose iconic granite monoliths were formed underground and have been thrust up over the millennia into dramatic spires. Finally, unlike my mountaineering muse, I'm not pioneering routes up cliff faces, hanging by a hemp rope; I'm following an Association of Canadian Mountain Guides-certified guide, my hiking boots firmly treading on solid, if unmarked, ground.

But Bess and I have one thing in common: a cheerful smile that grows from pushing myself physically in a remote and beautiful place. Though it's been a hundred years, I'm pretty sure these views never get old.

I've signed on for a two-day heli-hiking adventure with CMH Heli-Skiing & Summer Adventures, the same company that invented heli-skiing over 50 years ago. As outdoor adventures go, taking a helicopter to go hiking isn't as well-known or glamorous as flying in a whirly bird to access virgin powder, but this summer activity has been around for four decades, and it's gaining in popularity.

As urban dwellers seek out wild places and pursue ever more extreme sports, they're looking for physical rewards and adrenaline thrills without the risk, and heli-hiking fits the bill — if they can get their head around what it is.

First, a helicopter flies our group in from a helipad off of Highway 95 near Spillimacheen, BC (90 minutes west of Banff) to a backcountry lodge, which will be our base for the weekend. We're split into groups according to hiking ability, kitted out with hiking boots and day packs, and then flown higher — up to alpine meadows and a massive glacier that would normally take days to reach on foot. After touching down, we hike to mountaintops and glacial lakes, accompanied by trained guides, all the while dwarfed by the rock towers that modern-day mountain climbers still dream of conquering. When our legs tire and our thirst for something stronger than water becomes insatiable, the helicopter takes us back to the lodge.

Heli-hiking in the Bugaboos isn't mountaineering — not by a long shot — but, while traversing an alpine ridge or picking a route through a meadow scarred with grizzly bear diggings, hikers can feel like hard-core explorers by day and make it back to the lodge's rooftop hot tub for happy hour by night. They dine family-style on hearty roast beef and potatoes, or ginger-spiced salmon and broccoli, and then retire to the bar to sip cocktails or two fingers of scotch.





HIKING TIPS

Whether you're heading off heli-hiking or just hitting the local trails, try these hiking pointers.

1. Always break in hiking boots before a trip. This has the added bonus of simultaneously helping you train for the trail. Choose waterproof, above-the-ankle boots.
2. To prevent blisters, wear wool or synthetic-blend socks and listen to your feet — attend to hot spots immediately and remember to trim your toenails before a hike.
3. With each step, fully extend your leg so your skeleton — not your quad muscles — takes your full weight.
4. Take small, flat-footed steps rather than large strides to ground your body, prevent muscle strain and maintain better balance, on both uphill and downhill sections.
5. Drink water via a bladder or water bottle to stay hydrated, and bring high-energy snacks.
6. Bring extra, breathable clothing layers to put on or take off as necessary to regulate body temperature. In the high country, it just might snow in July!

Tips courtesy Hahn Vincent and Ryan Bavin, CMH guides

If all that sounds a little too soft-adventure for the wilderness, guests can ratchet up the extreme a notch: CMH offers glacier trekking, as well as Via Ferrata experiences for those who want a real taste of scaling cliffs.

For many of the guests, more than half of them women, heli-hiking is exciting enough. While it's mostly true that anyone who can walk can hike (which makes it sound rather boring), it's also true that backcountry hiking poses more risks and it demands that participants be relatively in shape since they'll be hiking between five and 10 kilometres a day. And, as soon as the helicopter zooms away, hikers are at the mercy of fickle mountain weather, rough terrain at altitude and their personal levels of fitness.

"Watch your step," CMH guide Ryan Bavin instructs as our group of hikers hurries out of the helicopter, hunched over, hands holding on to hats and sunglasses as the whirling rotors try to blow them asunder.

We've landed high on a rocky promontory below the impressive Howser Spire, and the land falls away dramatically mere feet from the machine. One misstep and I'll be tumbling down a cliff instead of hiking up a mountain.

My day pack is stuffed with a three-litre bladder of water, an egg salad sandwich, high-energy snacks and lots of extra layers — even though it's July, I might need a rain jacket, fleece or even a toque and mitts at elevations that can be as high as 2,900 metres. The two guides are equipped with bear spray in case we run into any bruins, though in such a large group it's unlikely. They also are trained in Wilderness First Response, are equipped with first aid kits and two-way radios for keeping in contact with the pilot. (If something should happen, help really is just a helicopter ride away.)

I immediately start taking pictures, agog over the unreal mountain scenery: in the foreground the multiple pinnacles of the Bugaboos steal the show; in the distance, the jagged peaks of the Selkirk Mountains ravage the sky. Once I realize the scenery isn't going anywhere, I stow my camera and focus on setting my feet safely on the uneven ground, using hiking poles for stability and balance — these aren't the wide, maintained trails of a national park. Instead, our group of 10 intermediate hikers follows narrow

game routes and breaks trail over meadows spongy with green grass and new blooms, or scrambles up loose scree in alpine bowls that look like a giant's rock repository.

"If I can do this, anyone can do it," Judi Cohen says as we pick our way over rocky moraine toward Vowell Glacier, walking along the edge of a green-grey lake bobbing with icebergs. Cohen, a moderately fit 62-year-old who works for Tully Luxury Travel in Toronto, stays active by walking, golfing and swimming, but she admits the altitude took her by surprise. "You can go at your own pace — there's no judgment — and with the support of very experienced and supportive guides."

CMH prides itself on customizing trips to guests' interests and abilities, and the company can play with the excitement level, depending on the group.

"We're down in our office and we're talking about all of these things — how to mitigate risks, how to work with the weather forecast, how to keep our guests safe," explains Hahn Vincent, another CMH guide. Additionally, the guides are always sizing up the hikers, making sure they're in the right group for their ability.

Vincent has hiked with women who worried it would be too hard, or feared they would hold back the group, only to come away feeling — literally — on top of the world.

"Women, unfortunately, we doubt ourselves a lot. We lowball our abilities," says Vincent. "Heli-hiking can be a really empowering experience for women."

Kim Klein doesn't use the word empowering to describe her time hiking and completing CMH Bugaboos' Skyladder Via Ferrata; the 30-year-old talks about it as life-changing.

"This is going to stay with me forever," says Klein, a New Yorker who wasn't sure she'd be able to conquer the Via Ferrata, but tried and succeeded. "Now that I've done it, I'm hooked. I realize the mountains are something I need to seek out more often."

Standing at the foot of Vowell Glacier and, later, walking along a ridge next to a field of snow that's streaked pink from algae, I feel the same way. Like mountaineer Bess MacCarthy, I'll keep seeking out high places in the mountains, and smiling cheerfully because I feel like I'm on top of the world. *✍*