

Heaven & Earth

Helicopter-assisted hiking in western Canada's specctacular back country mountains.

By Judy Alexandra DiEdwardo.

THE WHIRRING ROTOR BLADES OF THE BELL 212 slice the crisp mountain air as effortlessly as dragonfly wings, piercing the tranquility of my mountaintop perch that juts 7,000 feet skyward. Eager to board the helicopter circling 500 feet above me, I'm secretly wishing to be abandoned to the wind swept, eagle-soaring heights of these ancient mountains. It is my first afternoon of being airlifted into the back of beyond and I'm already feeling that my time here is too short.

I joined Canadian Mountain Holidays' helihiking adventure into the wilds of British Columbia after eying their brochure, which features images of gleeful, rosy-cheeked hikers of all ages perched atop colossal mountains and breathtaking glaciers, traipsing across verdant valleys, resting beside pristine alpine lakes. And now, I am finally among them.

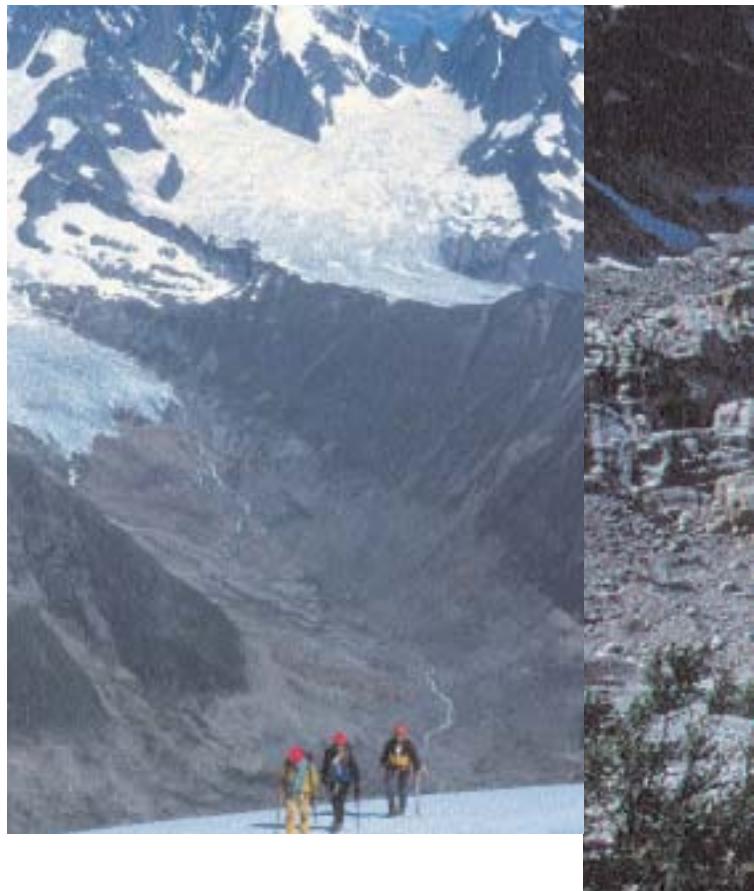
CMH pioneered helicopter-assisted travel more than 35 years ago when Austrian adventurer Hans Gmoser realized his dream of skiing western Canada's remote back country by using helicopters like chair lifts. The idea was extended more than a decade later to accommodate hiking and mountaineering from June to mid-September. Five luxurious CMH lodges each have nearly 400 square miles of spectacular terrain to explore, from glaciers, mountain lakes and streams to waterfalls and flowered meadows.

The company operates in the Columbia Mountain range just west of the Canadian Rockies, which, compared to the U.S. Rockies and the Alps, is at a relatively low altitude. But, because tree line is at 7,000 feet and the highest peak is 11,000 feet, guests are spared having to acclimate to the rarefied air of higher altitudes that are typically required for such picture-perfect views. And because all of the hiking is done outside the national and provincial parks where there are few established hiking trails, helicopter transport is a necessity. (Uh, no kidding). It would have taken two weeks of grueling uphill hiking through uncharted terrain to have reached the top of this 7,000-foot mountain range, I consider while awaiting my ride.

The approaching helicopter is a thrill unto itself. Nearing landfall, it creates a violent updraft that lifts loose ground debris from everywhere. The exact reason why I am crouched in a tight circle with a dozen other hikers, heads bowed and eyes closed for protection as this massive 11,000-pound machine lands just inches from my feet. The sound is as deafening as a tricked-out Harley at full throttle — even with ear plugs.

Amid the chaotic explosion of air and earth I scramble into the aircraft like an obedient first grader. But after repeating this procedure numerous times in the days ahead, the routine becomes more ceremonious than death defying.

Powerful and agile, the Bell is powered by twin rotors that spin at a dizzying 500 miles per hour. Its 12-foot-long skids only require a 48-square-foot area on which to land, allowing it safe and easy access into the heart of this diverse panorama of soaring peaks, sweeping valleys and snow-clad glaciers. This particular week, veteran helicopter pilot Eric Campbell has the dubious task of performing double duty. In between twice daily pick ups and drop offs of several groups of hikers and climbers joining me at CMH's Adamant Lodge, he's helping the forestry service contain hundreds of devastating wildfires that have been







ravaging British Columbia's back country for several weeks. Using a spring-loaded, 400-gallon bucket suspended from a 120-foot long cable that's attached to the helicopter, he scoops water from local lakes and streams to drop on the flames below. It's a painstaking effort that helps keep the fires at bay.

He has already made 30 runs by the time he retrieves our group from our first afternoon of hiking. Hours earlier he flew us from the lodge's helipad to a sloping 7,000-foot-high mountain pasture spread between two ridges where the guides gauged our physical prowess and mentally sorted us into groups. Some make easy work of the two-hour climb. Others, like me, trail at the end of the pack panting and sweating. It's a discouragingly slow slog up. The steepest terrain that I am accustomed to climbing is the Macy's escalator. I'm wishing I had trained more seriously, and pray that I will build stamina in the days ahead. Veteran CMH guide and naturalist, Paul Lazarski, assures me that I am doing fine. He is both brilliant and merciful, which is why, I'm guessing, he didn't see me scrambling on all fours up the mountain.

If nothing else, I am the poster child for CMH's claim to accommodate all abilities. "As long as you are able to walk and have a spirit of adventure," says the brochure, you're in. CMH

has hosted four generations of families at one time, from young children to great-grandparents. Guests create customized itineraries based on their abilities and expectations. Likewise, experienced hikers and mountain climbers are accommodated with vigorous full-day trips exploring remote regions touched by few. How high and how far is an individual choice. Further, no special equipment is required. CMH provides everything from day packs, water bottles and walking sticks to hiking boots, insulated jackets, foul weather gear, and specialty mountaineering gear. My humbling hill climb complete, I join the group at the top of the ridge where my performance anxiety is dwarfed by the stunning vista that awaits me: A rolling sea of mountains as far as the eye can see, pale grey and misty blue granite giants that are 135 millions of years my senior, fill my heart and mind with wonder and awe. As Campbell's helicopter appears on the horizon like a miniature speck against the sky, I have a compelling urge to stay right here. Forever.

After boarding the craft, we quickly rise up to 9,000 feet above the valley floor on the flight back to the Adamant. The experience of floating amid such massive mountain peaks and fissures is a thrill beyond compare. In 15 minutes I am back at the lodge for an evening of hot tub soaking, story telling and a hearty meal.

The next day's adventure takes me high into glacier territory. After a 30-minute stretch class to awaken stiffened muscles followed by a hearty breakfast, I pack a lunch, cinch the laces on

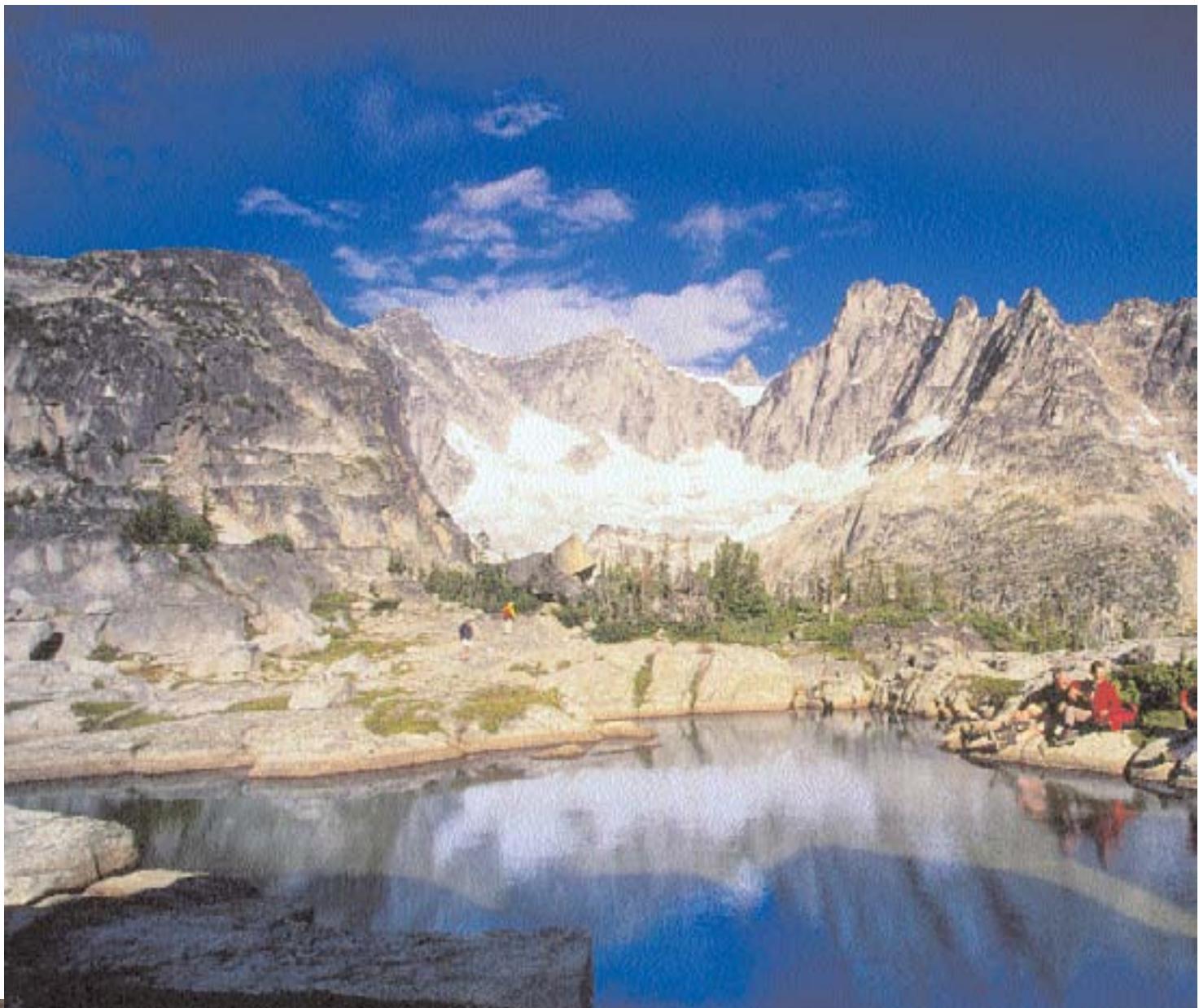
my hiking boots, and head to the helipad. Today I am being airlifted to Unicorn Meadow to bask in the white-yellow morning sun while walking among a sea of pastel-colored flowers-Indian paintbrush, alpine veronica, valerian, asters, laurel, marigold and heather. Unicorn Glacier looms in the distance like a giant, frothy tidal wave of ice-blue water that has been flash frozen.

While waiting one afternoon for Campbell to retrieve our group from a mountain ridge that faces the massive Remillard Glacier, I witnessed chunks of ice as big as houses splinter and fall from the massive snow and ice capped mountain standing miles in the distance.

The 500-plus-year-old glacial ice has a life of its own, Lazarski explained. Glaciers are in a constant state of movement-freezing and thawing and literally moving over the mountain, which I was lucky enough to witness.

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The glacier is constantly moving at a downward slope, bending to conform to the contours of the landscape underneath and accentuating and sculpting the valleys below. Deep ice remains frozen but surface ice constantly melts and refreezes.

"If there is substantially more warmth in the summer than cold, and the amount of winter snowfall has been insufficient to compensate for the melting, then the glacier appears to me receding or, moving back uphill," he said. "It's like a giant ice conveyor belt with a winter supply of snow and a summer demand for melting."

On my final afternoon, feeling stronger and more adventurous than on the previous days, I hiked for hours along Pyrite Ridge with its spectacular 360-degree panorama of snowcapped peaks. Named for the iron pyrite, or fool's gold that can be found here, the breathtaking ridge overlooks several steep passes with stomach-churning dropoffs. In the distance is a stellar collection of gleaming, frosty glaciers. Stopping to gaze at this utter magnificence I am awed by the good fortune that has delivered me here. Filling my lungs with crisp, cool air, I realize why adventurers before me hiked over heaven and earth to get here. It's worth every step!

Contact: Canadian Mountain Holidays, Box 1660, Banff, Alberta, Canada T1L 1J6. 800-661-0252. www.canadianmountainholidays.com.

Rates: From \$1,354 to \$3,171 depending on length of stay, which ranges from 3-7 nights and is inclusive of all meals, transportation and equipment.

Where to Stay En Route: Delta Calgary Airport Hotel. 800-268-1133; www.deltahotels.com. Rates: From \$139. Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel. 800-441-1414; www.fairmont.com.

Rates: October-April from \$237; June-September from \$400 ♦

