

THE WAITING GAME

PATIENCE AND
DELIVERANCE
IN BELLA COOLA

Historic Tweedsmuir Park Lodge, located up-valley from Bella Coola in Stuie, BC, once served as a fishing lodge for anglers chasing legendary Atnarko River steelhead. Those runs are no longer as robust, but it's still a comfortable resting place for keen heli skiers waiting for storms to lift.
Photo: Grant Gunderson



The bigness of Bella Coola is hard to imagine until you are staring directly at 9,000 vertical feet of relief from tidewater to gnarled, glaciated peaks. Heli pilots often score the best seat in the house for the peak show.
Photo: Blake Jorgenson



Matty Richard airing it out above the valley fog in the Big Snow Zone, an orographic miracle where Arctic air consistently collides with intense Pacific flows channeling moisture up the fjords—a forecasting phenomenon that equals surprisingly light-density snow in sight of the sea.
Photo: Blake Jorgenson

Words and Captions DAN KOSTRZEWSKI

STARING out a charter plane window at British Columbia's Coast Mountains was equally reflective and surreal. Whistler was merely the gateway to these gnarled, snow-caked peaks stacking from saltwater all the way north to Alaska. Moving north, they commanded awe with powerful coastal glaciers and icefields of unimaginable scale. Even the access was rugged, with few signs of humanity for hundreds of miles at a stretch, save for a logging camp, a fly-in fishing lodge or a rare depopulating resource town.

Scando-style fjords carved fingers through the glaciated peaks. Coastal forests, either in a stage of harvest or impossible to reach, flanked mountaintops shrouded in cloud and mystery. The skiable lines were overwhelming—more than any human could check off in a lifetime. Too much for even John Baldwin, the patron sage and author of *Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis*, who wrote the guidebook for this 1,000-mile expanse. For those with less time, thankfully, it's also home to 3.5 million acres of heli-ski tenure—all of it accessed by a single, legendary operation.

Bella Coola Heli Sports has achieved almost mythical status as a big mountain venue in the two decades since film crews like MSP and TGR first started migrating there. In its relatively short 20-year history, the massive venue has hosted Cody Townsend and Dave Treadway, Chris Davenport and Doug Coombs. It's where Shane McConkey brainstormed the first spatulas, big-buttering his edgeless water skis down a spine to prove a point and forever changing powder skiing in the process. It is the place

where Seth Morrison turned the spines of "Morrison Hotel" into hallowed ground, where Hugo Harrison earned the *Powder Awards* Line of the Year accolades then returned a year later, barely escaping a brush with trauma in "Harrison Hop-i-tal" and learning that the bigness of this place is not to be taken lightly.

I was forever sold on the legend of Bella Coola after sitting in Seattle's old King Cat Theater, mind-surfing through the 2013 Sherpas premiere of *Into the Mind*. For those 82 minutes Callum Pettit, Kye Peterson and JP Auclair showed me all the transcendence possible there. Years later it was more than enough to break me from the Seattle routine at the drop of a text message and point the compass north.

Jarringly, we banked hard right up North Bentinck Arm, the Beechcraft 1900 descending into a fjord that revealed a single runway shouldered between giant granite cliffs. The tiny community below, once driven by fishing and forestry, now trended toward tourism—especially our two-planked, adrenaline-fueled variety.



Sam Cohen on his last day in paradise and finally floating. He's several feet deep, but high above the reach of the South Bentinck Arm in the Boat Zone, named for the early aughts heli explorations of the MV Ocean Explorer, a 110-foot ship serving as Bella Coola's floating heli-base.
Photo: Grant Gunderson



TOP TO BOTTOM

Welcome to the Valley of the Outsiders, on the unceded territory of the Nuxalk. A thriving First Nation of 30,000 before contact with European explorers, the numbers of the local Nuxalk Nation plummeted due to events the Canadian federal government is only beginning to reckon with. Yet the Nuxalk, their culture and their reassertion of traditional territorial rights are on the rise recently.
Photo: Grant Gunderson

Blower above, Bella Coola valley below, with stormclouds stacking in from the Central BC coast—Matty Richard finds his place in the vortex. The fog is a regular winter occurrence that shrouds the towering valley and its daytime-only airport runway in low vis. But this place can also be high reward for those who make it in.
Photo: Blake Jorgenson



WHILE THE HELI TENURE for Bella Coola Heli Sports is bigger than the Swiss Alps, Bella Coola Airport is a one-counter, one-employee operation. Still, it's the key link for BCHS—a piece of critical infrastructure that facilitates the flow of as many as five Saturday charter flights from Vancouver's South Terminal in peak heli-ski season.

Skiing upon arrival is rare, but minutes after our charter flight landed, we were shuttled over to the operation's on-site hangar. Behind the massive sliding doors, a gear tornado had exploded on the concrete floor as mostly mid-adult men swapped to dark goggle lenses and dreams of bliss.

Steve Whittall, one of BCHS' head guides, made sense of the chaos, shouting over the bluebird energy from a slightly elevated picnic-table perch. With a week of skiing ahead, the rush seemed too much, too soon. But the weather in Bella Coola is fickle. It had been 13 midwinter days since the valley saw full sun. A storm had just lifted and an approaching front was about to turn the coastal firehose back on. There was no time to waste.

Alongside photographer Grant Gunderson and skiers McKenna Peterson and Sam Cohen, I rounded out a media crew on a favorable heli hours budget, affording us the last bump south. From the heli, the vertical relief of the place was heart-stopping, with mountains rising 7,000 feet vertically straight from the valley floor.

The entire 2,500-resident valley of Bella Coola runs upstream from saltwater to the margins of Tweedsmuir Provincial Park, one of the largest in British Columbia, preserving more than 2.2 million acres of wilderness. This corridor was the historical route taken by Alexander Mackenzie, the first European to complete an overland journey to the Pacific

Ocean. He arrived not to emptiness, but to a thriving Nuxalk Nation living off the land, rivers and ocean in 10 distinct valley villages. Today that indigenous influence is still ever present in the region. The Nuxalk Reserve makes up one half of present day Bella Coola. Many of the town's street signs still read in traditional Nuxalk and, thanks to a 2018 reconciliation agreement signed by the Canadian government, the Nation is one of 14 now receiving federal investment to increase its commercial fishing operation and preserve its local economy.

We landed high on a commanding ridge to a dramatic panorama—the Bella Coola River below winding its way to the sea. As the sun slipped away, we clicked in and Peterson made one smooth, dusk-lit turn. The rest of us quickly followed suit, dropping into the shadows, flowing through chilled perfection and a sunset flight to the front meadow of BCHS' Tweedsmuir Lodge.

AS QUICKLY AS IT CAME, our luck dissipated into thick Bella Coola fog. The storm hit hard, slamming in from the Pacific, but this time bringing more wind than accumulation. Gusts registered up to 60 mph, a death knell for the stable snowpack and a lingering red flag for the rest of the week.

The next four days were a mixture of whiteouts, failed scouting flights, unstructured downtime and all of the doubts and frustrations that come with it. We tried everything, from drinking it blue (which only added hangovers to our list of complaints), to morning stretch and workout classes, to early season flyfishing (another epic, and quite cold, fail). As our window waned, so too did our hopes of scoring iconic Bella Coola bounty. And we weren't the only ones. A potpourri of international clientele had descended on this slice of heli heaven, and all wondered if they would get a shot at 10,000-foot peaks and the lines that inspired their heroes not so long ago. We hot-tubbed with the Kiwis, hit the sauna with the Finns (who complained of its low temperature) and talked ice skating on the canals with the Dutch, learning the waterways no longer freeze over due to climate change.

Many had already buried sorrows beneath deep, safe forest laps. Even so, the frustration was palpable. BCHS guide Steve Konik knew the feeling. "You don't come to Bella Coola to ski trees," he told us one afternoon.

ASK ANY SKIER that has spent time in this part of British Columbia and they'll tell you the same thing: The Bella Coola juice is worth the wait. Turns out, steep spines, 4,000-foot couloirs and over 65 feet of snow per season in one of the most stunning geographic settings in North America all have a way of sticking with you.

They certainly did for Beat Steiner, Christian Begin and Peter "Swede" Mattson—filmmakers that stumbled upon the zone in the late '90s in search of escape from the oversaturated Whistler scene. In Bella Coola, they'd found their playground—more scale, more drama and way more snow.

The trio started bringing film groups such as Standard Films, Head Skis, and TGR. Realizing the potential of the newfound stash, they applied for heli tenure as a way to keep their zone protected from rival operations looking to get in on the action. In 2002, BCHS officially secured commercial

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Nuxalk carvings are renowned worldwide for their artistry, and the valley hosts galleries featuring the work of local master carvers. Linguistically and culturally distinct from the neighboring Tlingit, Haida and Coast Salish nations, the Nuxalk are now working to repatriate many of their lost cultural treasures.

Photo: Grant Gunderson

Stop is stop in any language, but also a sign of the next 18 months to come, as the valley and the Nation would soon close to tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic. A "before times" view from the Nuxalk Reserve, which sits adjacent to the Bella Coola townsite.

Photo: Grant Gunderson

The Bella Coola valley benefited from rich fishing grounds and a thriving trade in eulachon fish oil with the Nations of the plateau. Carvings still mark the ancient grease trail trade routes and traditionally productive fishing grounds.

Photo: Grant Gunderson

Nightly five-lodge guides meeting conference call after a significant wind event that unleashed 60 mph gusts in the alpine and turned every aspect to hard-packed wind crust. "Like being in the jaws of a raging dog," was the unvarnished report from the field.

Photo: Grant Gunderson



tenure, using the deposits of 40 clients to fire up their operation. They opened to guests in 2003 and quickly doubled their tenure to nearly 2,000 square miles, signed up a second lodge in town in 2005, and by 2007 had absorbed 2,000 more square miles of the defunct Pantheon Heli tenure.

Pro skiers took notice, and Bella Coola's consequential terrain became synonymous with the explosion of the freeski era in the 2000s. Yet hundreds of untapped lines still await. "As far as rugged alpine terrain [goes] there is nothing like it," says Sean "Woody" Tribe, a lead guide at BCHS who estimates he puts in 25 or so new runs a season. "Then you add to that nothing has ever been done and you can be the first person to ski there—all that exploration—you can't go wrong. It's a totally different place than the rest of mountains in North America. You just don't get vertical relief like that many places in the world—Patagonia, Chamonix, the Himalayas, Alaska—it's a rare place."

But Tribe also knows that mountains of such magnitude demand greater patience and that weather, snow and stability needed to align to access the biggest lines. He knows how to wait.

In fact, it felt like everyone aside from us knew a thing or two about the waiting game. Even our morning stretch coach, Heather, said you didn't just need a Plan B in these mountains—you need a plan for every letter of the alphabet.



Sam Cohen, unleashing 10 days of nervous waiting energy with a turn and burn on MSP, a legendary ski-filming venue named for the crew that logged historic lines with Seth Morrison, Shane McConkey and Hugo Harrison in the Bella Coola tenures during the early days of the operation.
Photo: Grant Gunderson





TOP TO BOTTOM

The wharf in Bella Coola, gateway to a town that once thrived on fishing and forestry. Now it's mountain tourism and summer BC ferry traffic landing here, turning local fortunes upward after the resource economies dried up and left town.
Photo: Grant Gunderson

Robbie Dixon ghost dancing on top of more than 20 feet of seasonal snowpack, far above a deep glacial valley that links the high plateau with the Pacific coast.
Photo: Blake Jorgenson



WE LUCKED INTO PLAN Z. A last-second cancellation opened up four more days at the end of our trip, and the potential of a historic storm and a sliver of bluebird in the five-day forecast. It was incentive that took investment: flights to switch, families to convince and father-daughter ski trips to kick down the road. But ROI looked promising for Tuesday—an alignment of precipitation, stability and visibility that comes maybe once a decade to Bella Coola.

Even with a light at the end of the tunnel, our crew was haggard at best. After a few days of bumping off rime-ridden snow in milk-white conditions, my back was surging with pain. Cohen looked like death, recovering from sickness in his room. I made a run to the mercantile for vitamin C, Voltaren and hippie remedies for the crew, but the waiting game was starting to wear on us. Even the Europeans were getting angsty.

When Tuesday finally hit, we did everything we could to just put our heads down and scramble to the pad. I wasn't feeling myself and asked our guide Monte Johnson to keep eyes on me. He immediately discovered I'd forgotten to turn on my beacon, a worrying sign and rookie mistake that left me shaken as we headed toward big terrain.

We lifted out the South Bentinck Arm, following the salt-water contours to the operation's Clayton fuel cache, buried completely from the storm. We dropped a case of Kokanee for the guests and after a few minutes of futile digging to unbury the lines, we were airborne again. We rose above the Clayton drainage, lifting to the Bayview Moraine halfway out the Arm, another massive amphitheater of lines facing east and northeast. One run in, Cohen spotted his white whaleback, a run rolling over and steepening with no-fall cliffs to skier's left, heavy pepper skier's right and little visibility to the hanging glacial terrain below the bench.

Johnson unloaded Cohen's skis from the basket then exited stage left, lifting off with the ship as the *thwap* of rotors faded over the horizon. Cohen clicked in and we watched as he flowed turn after turn, finding his rhythm, deftly avoiding a crack mid-line and ripping out to the flats below. The snow was deep and completely stable. He let out a yell, a spontaneous release after two weeks in limbo.

"I hope that felt as good as it looked," Gunderson called over the radio.

"Yeah, it's good to be back," Cohen replied.

We spun farther south in the Tzeo zone near the limit of South Bentinck Arm across from Woody's Hollow, the gateway to a promised land of giant, glaciated north-facing runs in east-to-west drainages of even more immense scale. We lapped steep shots on Family Values, then rotored back up the east side of the Arm into the Boat Zone, where our patch of terrain was fat and featured, named but not yet listed on the tenure map.

Like every one of our 14 runs on our Bella Coola Tuesday, the pitch was steep, sustained and blower. Maybe three feet deep, maybe more. We were living Bella Coola perfection, dwarfed by immensity, far from anywhere.

Peterson eyed a shoulder. Minutes later, she dropped in with aesthetic perfection, the sun setting in the west behind, glistening saltwater of South Bentinck Arm far below. The crystals rose and suspended themselves, lingering in the air, floating through space and time.

In a perfect world, we would have lapped this zone forever, or at least until the mountains went quiet for the season. But all dreams, and heli budgets, come to an end. We snaked down toward the valley on this last bottomless wave, our patience fully refunded as we chased each other's lines into the silence below. §