

SQUABBLES

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

A debate over guides causes a rift in the BC heli- and cat-skiing community.

I knew they skied hard at Snowwater Heli Skiing, but it didn't sink in until I got passed like I was standing still. Our four-some had been burning up vertical all morning in BC's Bonnington range. Unlike traditional heli trips, where tame terrain is the rule, ours had a guide who charged steep tree shots at a speed well beyond the normal commercial limit.

Even so, it surprised me when another group's guide cut me off and rocketed through the slide alder on his way to snake our pickup. But this wasn't some renegade guide about to be scolded; it was Patric Maloney—Snowwater's owner—showing his clients how to ski his home turf.

Maloney, a former Red Mountain patroller, is one of the new breed of owner/operators among BC's heli outfitters. Along with a half-dozen others like him, Maloney has brought drastic changes to BC's heli- and cat-skiing business since the provincial government began granting new commercial backcountry tenures in 1997. Up until then, much of the industry that Hans Gmoser founded with his first heli runs in 1965 had grown into an exclusive club of luxury hotels in the backcountry. Heli-skiing was synonymous with sushi buffets, tight turns, and massive tenures in the BC interior.

But the second backcountry land rush of 1997 more than doubled the number of heli and cat operators in BC; it also challenged the paradigms of an industry that had been skiing the same way for three decades. A schism emerged between the new operators and the old guard.

The flash point was the response to newer and younger customers who had been raised on open gates, twin tips, and TGR. The new operators recognized these customers' needs and began offering smaller groups and more aggressive line selection. They also recruited guides with a similar ski philosophy. Many of these guides were, and continue to be, certified by the Canadian Ski Guide Association, an upstart organization founded in 1989 by Mike Wiegele's heli-skiing outfit and a handful of other ops to train guides solely for mechanized skiing.

But the gold standard of Canadian guiding has long been the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides. The internationally recognized ACMG runs ski guides through an exhaustive train-

ing process that requires at least three years of ski-touring accomplishments just to be considered for its program. The ACMG is grounded in mountaineering disciplines and only recently added a mechanized component to its certification process; the CSGA emphasizes heli or cat experience and trains guides specifically for downhill guiding.

But in 2004, British Columbia's mechanized-skiing trade group, HeliCat Canada, stopped recognizing any new CSGA certifications. When HeliCat cracked down in January 2008, operators—including Snowwater and Baldface Lodge—were left with the choice of firing the longstanding CSGA guides on their rosters or leaving the HeliCat group outright.

Jeff Pensiero, the vice president of HeliCat at the time and one of Baldface's owners, took Baldface independent in support of his guides, a move that was followed by five other operators. "The problem with HeliCat is that they changed their mandate from being an organization that would represent the operators in government relations to being a marketing organization—and then became a guide-certification organization," Pensiero says.

HeliCat president and ACMG ski guide John Forrest disagrees. "We are trying to make sure our standards aren't diluted," he says. "The CSGA would have to meet the ACMG standard and demonstrate that they are capable of guiding skiers. And that's where it has to go."

While the ACMG remains neutral, many operators are keen for a black-and-white resolution to a gray-area issue that has been a source of friction for more than five years. But two seasons after the membership splintered, the biggest question remains: Will HeliCat ever unconditionally accept the CSGA guides who make up around 35 percent of all guides employed in BC? Operators who backed their CSGA guides but remained inside HeliCat due to special variances or creative staffing solutions—such as Great Canadian Heli-Skiing and Retallack—have argued strongly for official industry-wide recognition of the CSGA ticket. For now, resolution hinges on a positive audit of the CSGA Level 3 exam, scheduled for April 2010.

If the CSGA exam passes the test, HeliCat

could return as the united voice for the industry. If not, there will likely be more defections and divisions in the ranks, causing customer confusion in a roughly \$100-million-per-year industry. And skiers will be left to pick sides.

As our group got the green light to rip a steep, 2,000-foot line on our last run at Snowwater—the opposite of farming turns on a 25-degree slope with stoic German tourists—I realized where my allegiance in this debate lies.

—DAN KOSTRZEWSKI





Not a line for a stoic German tourist. Zack Giffin at Snowwater Heli in Nelson, BC.

Number of CSGA guides: **300**

Number of ACMG ski guides: **375**

Number of heli/cat operations in BC: **40**

Skier days in 1965, the first season of guided heli-skiing in BC: **126**

Heli/cat skier days in '08/09 season in BC: **116,500**

Average peak-season price for seven-day heli trip at CMH: **\$11,085**