

Cross Country

141



CHASING THE DARK IN SIERRA VELASCO

By Felix Wölk

An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain range. The terrain is rugged and covered in deep powder. In the lower right foreground, a person is visible, partially obscured by the snow. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of blue and white, giving it a cold, high-altitude feel.

THE SKEENAS

There are no lifts, the powder is chest deep, and there's a helicopter in the front yard. What would you do? Brothers Stuart and Mike Belbas travel to the remote Skeena Mountains in Canada for some serious fun



THE SKEENAS



▲▲ TOP

The Skeenas, as seen from the helicopter.

▲ ABOVE LEFT

Sweet Canada

▲ ABOVE RIGHT

Getting ready to roll.

◀ LEFT

Chopper in, chopper out, no stress.

▶ RIGHT AND PREVIOUS PAGE

Flying down a glacier on the last day.

All photos: Mike and Stuart Belbas



WILD AND GRIZZLY

The Skeena Mountains lie in northwest British Columbia, Canada. They cover 32,000 km², and rise to 2,588m at Shedin Peak, one of the most isolated mountains in North America. There are few roads, definitely no telepheriques, and your nearest neighbour is more likely to be a grizzly bear than another human.

Pilots Mike and Stuart Belbas and Benny Abruzzo joined snowboarder Richard Crombie, plus a guide and helicopter pilot from Northern Escape Heli Ski to explore the area's potential for speed flying over a week in March this year.

"We were there for six days and did almost 65 heli drops in that time," says Stuart. "Some drops were onto peaks where no one has ever been before." In total the team skied and flew over 60,000 vertical metres.

"We stayed in a beautiful lodge on the edge of a lake with our own private helicopter parked outside to take us out over the wildest and biggest playground I've ever seen. No ski lifts out here. No trails. No sign of civilisation. Just endless white summits and blue glaciers."

BLUEBIRD DAYS

"Mike and I live in the Alps so of course we thought that we knew what good snow was, but we've never seen anything like this," says Stu. "Sometimes we would get out of the helicopter at the top and sink up to our armpits into real fairy dust powder."

"Speed flying in these snow conditions was just incredible, but also the shape of the terrain made it so much fun with natural half-pipes, big cliffs, giant rollers and big, big glaciers. Both skiing and speed flying here were hands down the best that we have done anywhere."

"Out of six days three were bluebird and three were full on snow storm. Amazingly though, even in the snow storms our awesome helicopter pilot Ryan managed to fly us every day. During the white-outs we skied in the beautiful hemlock forests and Ryan would fly the chopper from tree top to tree top."

GLACIER FLYING

"Landing on a summit about to ski or fly down knowing that no-one has been there before was pretty sublime. But the best was kept to last. Flying down a glacier on the last day was simply breathtaking and exhilarating. We had a strong tailwind so we flew at phenomenal speeds over the bright blue crevasses."

THE SKIENAS



▲▲TOP
Close to the edge on one of the 65 heli drops the team completed in a week.

▲ABOVE
The shiny red helicopter makes life easy.

▶RIGHT
Moose on the loose.



GETTING HOME

“When you have a shiny red helicopter waiting for you at the bottom of each flight, every retrieve is perfect!”

GETTING THERE

Flights from Vancouver to the small town of Terrace, BC, take two hours and are scheduled every day. Terrace is a regional hub, and offers skiing and back country skiing in the winter, and hiking, canoeing and salmon fishing in the summer.

DISCOVER MORE

The town of Terrace is at www.visitterrace.com, the Hang and Paragliding Association of Canada at www.hpac.ca and Northern Escape Heli Ski is found here www.neheliski.com. Now book a week off work and go and have some fun, you deserve it.

Stu and Mike Belbas run Verbier Summits in Switzerland and flew with Northern Escape Heli-Ski in Canada. Sponsors of the trip included Peak Performance, Armada skis, Go Pro and Kaenon sunglasses.
www.verbier-summits.com