

Want to heliski without flying all the way to British Columbia? Why not try heli-skiing in Europe with swisSKIsafari.com for the ultimate European ski experience? Arnie Wilson interviewed Danielle Stynes, MD of SwisSKIsafari.com

Q. People know about heli-skiing in Canada and out of the way places - but they don't often think of heli-skiing in Europe?

Heli-skiing in Europe is very different for many reasons. The high Alpine terrain offers ski descents that are long and varied. Heli-drops offer a choice of routes from each landing spot including more than 2000 meters of vertical descent and because of runs that are so long snow conditions are constantly changing and the skiing is more technical. SwisSKIsafari.com operates in Valais, Switzerland, where Switzerland, Italy and France border each other, so in a week's heli-skiing you can find yourself crossing country borders, speaking different languages and eating different regional specialties, which makes for a more unique travel experience. That's what makes the skiing in Europe so special.

Q. Where in Europe is the best heli-skiing?

For a start, you can only heli-ski in Italy and Switzerland where there are designated landing spots. Switzerland has 48 designated drop-off zones and 19 of those are in the Valais, where SwisSKIsafari operates the majority of our trips. Each drop offers a choice of descents with varying degrees of difficulty. Snow can be good anytime between January and April but the weather patterns are more stable from Feb-April and because the Alps benefit from microclimates, when conditions are not favourable in one valley we can usually find good conditions in another. One of SwisSKIsafari's most popular trips: "Three Valleys, Three countries" takes advantage of this by heli-skiing through three countries in one trip. You heli-ski from hotel to hotel and your bags follow by road. These are 5-6 day trips which allow us the flexibility to follow the best snow throughout the week.

Q. How did your vision of travel lead to the creation of SwisSKIsafari?

SwisSKIsafari was borne out of many years of experience working in the active luxury travel industry, travelling worldwide to find unique experiences for clients. I came to the Alps with a vision to combine a passion for skiing and adventure with unique travel experiences provided by a team of incredibly skilled experts. SwisSKIsafari brings together some of the best in the business including top pilot Roland Brunner, avalanche expert Robert Bolognesi and four fully qualified mountain guides.

Roland is a helicopter flight instructor and designated flight examiner, which means he's authorised to certify pilots as private or commercial aviators. He has worked and taught his profession in the United States, Pakistan and Africa. Having flown for over 20 years, notching up over 10,000 flying hours, in the European Alps, his knowledge of the region is extensive. With SwisSKIsafari, he flies a Eurocopter Ecureuil B3, one of the world's most powerful helicopters and the only type to have landed on the summit of Mt Everest.

Roland understands the thrills SwisSKIsafari clients enjoy. "The Alps", he says, "offers the best heli-ski opportunities because with each drop off point, there are many ski options available to suit any level of skier, not just powder specialists."

Robert Bolognesi, is our snow and Avalanche expert consultant, originally from Grenoble in France he moved to Switzerland to work for the Davos-based Swiss Federal Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research and has a PhD in snow forecasting.

Robert's experience of the local region's weather and snow conditions allows SwisSKI safari the ability to find the best and safest descents so we can offer clients unforgettable heli-ski experiences, unique travel opportunities and most importantly, to do so in complete safety.

Q. What's actually involved in a SwisSKI safari?

Unlike Canada, where the helicopters mainly ferry skiers up and around wide open powder slopes, SwisSKI safari trips are dictated by the high Alpine environment of the European Alps. The skiing includes long glaciers, tree skiing and crossing national borders. Along the way we may visit a monastery inhabited by monks which is only accessible by skis on the border of Switzerland and Italy or stop for a tea in a mountain refuge in the Italian Ferret Valley. You will find yourself skiing from valley to valley through picturesque alpine villages, the helicopter meeting you at the bottom of one valley to take you to the top of the next through Switzerland, Italy and France.

We offer a combination of backcountry skiing, accessed by ski lift and helicopter. It is the perfect recipe to go further into the backcountry and access the normally inaccessible. Our safaris are tailored to each group's ski level. They can be purely heli-skiing to access remote and long runs through valleys or alternatively involve short walks with some ski touring; generally it is your budget that will determine the balance and the extent.

On one of our newest trips, based out of a private chalet in small alpine village, you can ski off-piste door to door all week without having seen a crowded lift for the whole 6 days.

Q. What happens on days that you can't take the helicopter?

This is perhaps the most important difference between heli-skiing in Europe and BC. Often when it is snowing or the conditions are not suitable to fly the snow is excellent. In Europe we can also access great skiing by ski lift and ski touring. This is where the combination of the two guarantees great skiing, we have the flexibility to deal with the changing conditions.

Q. What about accommodation and meals, are they included?

SwisSKI safari offers 5-6 day heli-ski packages, or weekend heli-skiing with a choice of accommodation to suit different budgets. All accommodation is handpicked for its quality, charm and position to access the best ski safari possibilities and ranges from beautiful historic hotels to Relais and Chateaux, Leading Small Hotels of the World and a selection of private chalets. We are always in search of unique and interesting travel, so we will often propose a private chalet in an out of the way valley that will give us access to incredible skiing. Meals can be included in the package price, in addition we offer a suggestion of local restaurants along the way. Our aim is to take you off the beaten track both on and off the mountain.

Q. What sort of skier would you have to be to join one of your safaris?

You should be a confident skier, able to ski in control on all types of terrain and in different snow conditions (it's not always powder). You should be fit, but you don't have to be a hard-as-nails ski mountaineer bearing a 40lb pack. Nor do you have to sacrifice those essential comforts. SwisSKI safari will tailor the trip to suit your group (we don't mix groups). Safety is of paramount importance.

Q. What's special about SwisSKI safari, heli-skiing and backcountry skiing?

These trips are not like ski lessons (we don't employ ski instructors) we only work with professional mountain guides. When you ski with us you have already gone to the next level, your skiing style is not important to us. What is important is that you enjoy more adventurous mountain travel and can ski the descent comfortably and in safety. These are ski trips to experience what the Alps really have to offer away from ski areas domesticated by snow machines and ski lifts. We guide you to the right places and give you the tools that you need to enjoy the experience. The helicopter allows us to get to the places where the real skiing begins and as the high Alpine landscape is so varied, the experience is always about more than just heli-skiing.

Q. Finally, how expensive is this kind of skiing?

Whenever you involve a helicopter, trips inevitably become expensive. This is true anywhere in the world. There's also a group of experts behind the scenes, in the planning and execution, guiding you to ensure an incredible experience. These are not budget trips. The package price ranges from 3,000 Euros per person for a simple long weekend in charming accommodation to 10,000 Euros per person for a luxury 5-star SwisSKI safari trip for one week. Generally when people sign up for SwisSKI safari trips it's not just about money, they are eager to get away from the crowds and enjoy a new skiing experience. These trips are very different from resort skiing, you are mixing unforgettable experiences heli-skiing three countries in one week with unique travel experience. Our customers agree that it is money well spent and definitely value for money.