

# ESTRAVEL **SKI SPECIAL**

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It's not cheap, but everyone should try heliskiing once in their lives. And you don't need to be a pro

**BY ARNIE WILSON**

**U**NTIL now, the closest I'd got to the Matterhorn was scrambling up to the Hörnlihütte, the refuge at the very foot of this magnificent granite monolith that soars a further 300m to 4,478m above Zermatt.

But there is another way. It's labour-saving but expensive, and goes by the name of an Aerospatial Squirrel helicopter. And so it was that I swept so close to the south-west face I could see almost every handhold and foothold of the routes taken by climbers attempting the summit. Minutes later, our helicopter was settling on the Tête de Valpelline glacier, at 3,802m. Sébastien Devrient, our guide, unloaded the skis while we waited impatiently to leap out after him. From here the Matterhorn looked almost deformed, its huge hump pushing out towards Italy.

At Sébastien's signal, we passed out our packs, containing avalanche transceivers, shovels and probes, and huddled, harnessed together, close to the machine, which was drumming up a cacophonous storm as it prepared to leave.

Minutes later, a dramatic silence descended on the glacier as the whirly-bird floated off, nose half-dipped, across the astonishing white landscape formed by row upon row of peaks more than 4,000m tall that dominate this region of the Swiss canton of Valais.

In Switzerland and Italy — just about the only countries in the Alps where mainstream heliskiing is allowed — you get a much bigger vertical drop for your bucks than across the pond. Considerably more than 2,000m is not at all unusual — almost twice the average run you'll get in Canada.

Descents in the Alps are not only longer, but frequently more technical and need more caution, as much of the terrain is glacial. For the upper sections, it is often essential to follow almost exactly in your guide's tracks. Crevasses can be anywhere and are

## Peak performance



White mischief: the Aerospatial Squirrel helicopter hovers in the Swiss Alps

often invisible to the untrained eye. Sébastien may not be infallible, but he has a pretty good idea where they're lurking. "Never ski below me," he urged. "There may be a crevasse right in front of me or there might be avalanche danger."

It's hard to concentrate on the skiing when the scenery is so riveting. It's much easier to admire the view from the helicopter. In one epic journey, we'd flown from the resort of Verbier across one vast, giddy, sérac-encrusted glacier to another, skimming low across ridges as we went, only to reveal yet another glacier, each one seemingly more vast than the last.

At one stage, we even appeared to be flying half *inside* a wide crevasse. We clattered past a mountain called Le Parrair (The Godfather, 3,210m) and

the Pantalon Blanc, where the view was astonishing, and flew over the huge ice-and-snowbound Lac des Dix. Onwards and upwards towards Mont Blanc de Cheillon (3,869m), with its great hanging séracs, and across the vast Serpentine Glacier, before landing high on the Pigne d'Arolla (3,772m).

From here we skied all the way down to the tiny resort of Arolla for a well-earned picnic lunch in the valley below. There was still more drama when we took off again and headed for the Ober Gabelhorn before returning to civilisation at the top of Zermatt's Rothorn area, where we skied for the final hour or so of the day on groomed slopes that felt strange after a day of high-altitude off-piste.

That night we enjoyed the splendour

of one of the resort's finest hotels — the five-star Grand Hotel Zermatterhof. We dined on truffled Parmesan mousse with wild-garlic pesto, pan-fried beef fillet rolled in a pancake, and a "light ice pudding" with Grand Marnier and orange compote, before a night-cap at the legendary Elsie's Bar.

The whole idea of the helicopter tours that Swiss Ski Safari offers is to provide skiing that is not unduly difficult, but features stunning scenery and luxurious accommodation. With this in mind, we had started the tour at the Chalet d'Adrien, a delightful Relais & Châteaux hotel perched pleasantly above the lower part of Verbier, with an excellent gastro-nomic restaurant. We ended it with a flourish too — in the Ferienart Resort and Spa in Saas Fee. After a final heli-

drop on the slopes just above the Métro Alpin funicular, the helicopter rattled off into the distance, and this time it was gone for good, leaving us, mere mortals once more, on the groomed runs.

● *Arnie Wilson is editor of Ski and Board Magazine. He skied the Ultimate Journey — from Verbier to Saas-Fee via Zermatt — with Swiss Ski Safari ([www.swisskissafari.com](http://www.swisskissafari.com), 00 41 27 398 21 94); five nights' full board from £4,675pp including helicopter flights, lift passes and ski guide. Want a taste, for less? Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111) offer introductory three-night heliskiing packages in Courmayeur, etc. from £365pp, including flights and transfers. Helidrops cost £100 per drop.*