

OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

It's all downhill after the helicopter

Multi-day heli-running tours are the latest way to explore the Bugaboos in B.C.

SUZANNE MORPHET
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

From a rocky ridge high above the Columbia River wetlands, I survey my surroundings. It's mid-July, but deep snow lingers on the slopes of British Columbia's Bugaboo mountains.

On the slope above us, layers of sharp shale protrude from the ground, often at odd angles. "If you fall, protect your face," says James Madden, one of our trail running guides from CMH — Canadian Mountain Holidays. "It's better to cut your hands up a little bit than your face."

For a moment, I wonder at the wisdom of starting to run — especially on backcountry trails, at my age.

I'm a COVID runner, one of thousands who've taken up the sport since the start of the pandemic. Many, like me, were motivated for health reasons. Now 63, I know running is good for my bones, but my GP worries about other issues.

"People who start running when they're older usually get injured," he told me.

Still, when I heard that CMH was starting to offer three-day heli-running tours in the Bugaboos, I couldn't be dissuaded.

This is the company that pioneered heli-skiing in the 1960s and heli-hiking in the 1970s, and today operates 12 lodges in the Columbia Mountains, just west of the Rockies.

I'd been to their Bugaboos lodge, a two-hour drive southwest of Banff, 10 years earlier with my father on a heli-hiking trip, and we were blown away by the beauty — the granite spires, the hanging glaciers, the turquoise lakes. Getting flown to a different alpine location every morning was fabulous fun. I longed to do it all again.

So here I am, along with the three other women in CMH's inaugural heli-running tour in the Bugaboos: my daughter, Alanna Spence, 28; Anne Morgenstern from Penticton, B.C., 53; and Darcy Cuff from North Vancouver, also 63. They've all been running for many years, if not decades. Naturally, I'm worried I won't be able to keep up.

"It's not a race," James assured us all earlier. "We're about having fun up here. We'll be swimming, having lunch, taking photos and just having a lovely time."

We warmed up at the lodge before the helicopter dropped us off, but starting a run on an uphill is tough, especially with the change in altitude. Alanna and I had flown in from sea level (Victoria, B.C.), and now we're at 2,000 metres.

"If I'm going a little bit too fast, just slow down and enjoy," says James as he sets off up Groovy Ridge, a spine with numerous peaks and saddles.

Soon, we're enjoying expansive views in all directions. Often, we need to slow the pace to pick our way over the uneven terrain or punch steps through the snowpack, but it gives us time to catch our breath.

By early afternoon, we look down on a bowl-shaped valley that's still lined with snow. "We had a private group up here a week ago," says James, "and we were skiing!"

The snow is streaked with red "watermelon" algae, and it looks like an enormous bowl of raspberry-swirl ice cream. Far below, a frozen lake is rimmed with blue meltwater.

We slide part way down on our bums, laughing and screaming. Later, we dip our feet into the lake, but the water is painfully cold.

We end our day in a fragrant forest of spruce and pine trees, where we hear the squeaks of pikas — small, furry mammals that live at high altitude.

"Nice work, ladies," says Andy Owens, our other guide, giving us high fives as we await our helicopter back to the lodge.



SUZANNE MORPHET

Trail runners follow guide James Madden down a steep slope.

"How are you feeling?" Andy asks the next morning.

"Tired," I reply. I was popping painkillers for a headache at 2 a.m. and don't know if I can run today. But after a breakfast of overnight oats, my energy returns.

"We're looking at probably 50

different glaciers," says James when we get dropped off on Grizzly Ridge at 2,731 metres high, with 360-degree views.

"Holy moly, this is beautiful," exclaims Anne when we stop running to gaze toward the famous Bugaboo spires, granite massifs encased in ice. "That's

JUST THE FACTS

CMH Bugaboos is offering one more trail running tour this summer, from Aug. 10 to 13. Prices start at \$3,890 per person and include accommodation, food, hiking guides, helicopter flights and ground transportation from/to Calgary International Airport. Dates for 2023 tours will be posted soon at cmhsummer.com.

the northeast ridge," James points out, "one of the 50 classic climbs of North America."

"People come from all over the world for it," he adds.

When we reach a pole with prayer flags blowing in the breeze, we stop again. I've been carrying some of my father's ashes, waiting for a particularly pretty spot where my daughter and I can spread them.

Earlier, James suggested this place, where CMH guides

erected a stone cairn along with the flags, to remember their colleague and longtime guide Thierry Cardon, who died in 2011. My dad died in 2019. Like Thierry, he would like this spot.

From here, the going gets easier. A long, gentle slope widens into a broad plateau covered in yellow-flowering heather and white-petalled anemones. We spread out and run.

I feel like a kid again and I'm reminded of something Darcy said earlier, that trail running is "lighter and more freeing than hiking." Not being weighed down with heavy hiking boots and poles, I have to agree.

In fact, trail running has me hooked, but will I ever find another place as gorgeous as this? It may all be downhill from here.

WRITER SUZANNE MORPHET TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF CMH — CANADIAN MOUNTAIN HOLIDAYS, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.

OCEANIA
CRUISES®



Explore the ocean in luxury with Oceania!

FREE Airfare*, FREE Airport Transfers* & book with CruisePlus to receive a minimum \$100 US onboard credit per person! PLUS, receive one FREE Olife Choice Amenity: Onboard Credit, Beverage Package or Shore Excursions!

30 Day Journey Past Patagonia

January 8, 2023 | Marina | Rio de Janeiro to Santiago de Chile

» FREE roundtrip Toronto economy airfare, FREE airport transfers & \$300 US pp onboard credit

» OLife Choice, choose 1 - FREE \$700 US pp Onboard Credit, FREE House Select Beverage Package or 7 FREE Shore Excursions

VERANDA
\$14,749
taxes included pp CAD

15 Day Southeast Asia Array

May 18, 2023 | Insignia | Singapore to Hong Kong

» FREE roundtrip Toronto economy airfare, FREE airport transfers & \$275 US pp onboard credit

» OLife Choice, choose 1 - FREE \$400 US pp Onboard Credit, FREE House Select Beverage Package or 4 FREE Shore Excursions

VERANDA
\$12,049
taxes included pp CAD

17 Day Latin & Island Flavours

February 11, 2024 | Vista | Roundtrip Miami

» FREE roundtrip Toronto economy airfare, FREE airport transfers & \$150 US pp onboard credit

» OLife Choice, choose 1 - FREE \$500 US pp Onboard Credit, FREE House Select Beverage Package or 5 FREE Shore Excursions

VERANDA
\$8,999
taxes included pp CAD



CruisePlus
TRAVEL & TOURS

1-800-854-9664

Sign up to receive our emails at CruisePlus.ca

 info@cruiseplus.ca  cruiseplus.ca

New bookings only. Fares are per person in currency noted, based on double occupancy. *both cruise and hotel are capacity controlled, subject to availability at the time of booking, offer may be withdrawn without notice, includes room and federal & provincial government taxes only. Optional & locally payable supplier charges may apply and are not included. Any amenities are available for the first two in stateroom only & based on double occupancy. Before you book, be aware of Covid-19 restrictions and clearly understand insurance terms and conditions. Future Cruise Credits may not be combinable and cruise line insurance may not be available to purchase on advertised offer. Terms of the travel suppliers apply - see their websites. CruisePlus reserves the right to correct any human or electronic errors. Ship's Registry: Marshall Islands, CruisePlus Management Ltd. Consumer Protection BC License # 3325.