

December 16, 2011 9:57 pm

The art of flight

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A taste of high-altitude snowboarding three miles up in the Himalayas, with nothing in sight but snow and rock

On my last morning snowboarding in the Himalayas, the Bell 407 helicopter set us down on a narrow mountain ledge at 4,800m. As it departed, huge gusts of snow stirring at its ascent, I was struck by how very far we were from any sign of civilisation. Even on remote off-piste slopes in the Alps you're never too far away from an abandoned ski pole or chocolate wrappers borne aloft in the wind. But here, at roughly three miles up in the sky – the same height as the summit of Mont Blanc – there was nothing in sight other than snow and rock. Row after row of jagged mountain peaks stretched into the distance, the world below invisible beneath layers of cloud.

By the afternoon two of our five-person group would be stricken with altitude sickness and have to go back down the mountain early. Looking to the horizon, it was already hard not to feel something similar to vertigo, a sense of slippage and disequilibrium at the extremity of our isolation. The helicopter disappeared from sight. Silence descended. We clipped on our skis and boards, shuffled to the edge of the ledge and dropped into the whiteness below.

Up on these high slopes, it had been snowing steadily for the past four days, so the powder was thigh deep as we plunged through it. In such conditions on a snowboard you start lazily, taking a couple of fat, exploratory turns to test the terrain. Then you point the board straight down the slope and lean back. With your weight on the rear, the nose rises into the air as though you're surfing. It takes very little to steer through the snow like this and the effect of such effortlessness, even as you continue to gather speed, is trancelike. You feel aware of everything around you: the flex of the board beneath your feet, the camber of the slope, and the breadth of the horizon that opens up as you momentarily crest a hill before plunging into another descent. You ride and you ride until it seems that you are at one with your surroundings. And you never want to stop.

The Himalayas were discovered by Europeans in the 1800s as the British Empire expanded east across India. The mountain range has exerted a grip on our imagination ever since. Generations of armchair adventurers have thrilled at Boy's Own stories of hidden kingdoms among its unexplored peaks, and real-life dramas such as George Mallory's doomed ascent of Everest in 1924 and Edmund Hillary's triumphant expedition three decades later.

It's a legacy that feels all the more daunting when you travel into the Himalayas yourself, as I did for the first time earlier this year on my debut heliskiing – or in my case, because I'm a committed snowboarder, heliboarding – trip.

I flew to New Delhi, then caught a propeller-driven plane 350 miles north to Kullu in the state of Himachal Pradesh. From there we drove for a couple of hours through the Kullu valley and up into the mountains along a route that traces, in reverse, the course of the river Beas, which runs through much of Himachal Pradesh. Finally we arrived at the town of Manali, which sits at an elevation of 1,950m above sea level.

The town was a famed spot on the hippie trail in the 1960s, celebrated by westerners for the quality and abundance of its marijuana. Today it is still a popular travel destination but the visitors are almost exclusively Indian. During the summer more than 1m tourists head up from New Delhi to escape the city's stifling temperatures. Manali is also the base for Himachal Helicopter Skiing, founded in 1990 by a gregarious Australian named Roddy Mackenzie. The company holds the exclusive licence for heliskiing in the state and it operates two American-made Bell 407s that carry up to six passengers at a time. The pilots are Swiss, with many years of experience flying mountain rescue missions in the Alps.

Mackenzie, a former professional mountaineer, was drawn to the region on the recommendation of a friend, Peter Hillary, son of Sir Edmund. At a latitude of 32 degrees north, Manali sits parallel to Los Angeles and enjoys low winds and good sunshine, as well as abundant snowfall – ideal conditions for heliskiing. There's one other bonus: Himachal Pradesh boasts a peaceful political climate, which is more than can be said for the ski scene further west along the Himalayas in Kashmir.

For my six days in Manali I joined a group of about 20 skiers and boarders from Europe, America and Australia. Most were experienced heliskiers, with trips already logged in Canada, New Zealand and Alaska. Now they were venturing to India in pursuit, as Ralf Buckley, an Australian academic, put it, "of potentially the best snow in the world".

Our accommodation was the spacious and comfortable Manuallya hotel, a modern development set on a hillside outside town with rooms facing across to the mountains at the front and a helipad for the two Bell 407s at the rear. Well used to catering for international as well as local holidaymakers, the hotel offers a choice of Indian and western dishes at each meal as well as facilities including a spa resort and free WiFi in each room.

Unfortunately we had more time than we had anticipated to get acquainted with its features. On the first morning after arriving I watched clouds gather dense around the mountains, obscuring them from view. A helicopter took off for an exploratory flight only to return shortly, the pilot bearing a rueful expression. With such poor visibility it was impossible to fly.

The same scene repeated itself the next morning and the following two. For four days the clouds stayed low. Snow and rain fell steadily. These were unusual conditions. On average no more than a day or two is lost to bad weather on Himachal Helicopter trips.



With the skies closed in I explored Manali and its surroundings. The town itself wore an air of dishevelment. Hotel construction has boomed in recent years to meet the surge in domestic holidaymakers but many of the new buildings stand crammed together along the road, only half-built and with little work apparently taking place in the off-season. Away from town there is good trekking, such as the route that took me up to dramatic views over the Kullu Valley, the Himalayas rising into cloud in the distance. Or the walk that winds into the hills past a house, jutting precipitously out over the valley, where Nicholas Roerich, a Russian avant-garde painter, mystic and associate of Gorky and Diaghilev, made his home in the 1920s.



The town of Manali

On another morning I followed a trail to the hot springs in the neighbouring town of Vashisht. The public baths here are split into male and female sections. They are open to the elements and decorated with ornate stone carvings of Hindu deities. I lay in the male baths, watching the snow that was falling gently that morning dissolve into vapour on contact with the steam. At that moment the world beyond the Himalayas felt impossibly distant, the idea of heliskiing itself a dreamlike absurdity.

I'm normally horribly impatient on snowboarding trips, eager to catch the first lift of the morning and get up on to the slopes. Here I experienced the opposite sensation, as if I'd stepped briefly outside time and could have stayed indefinitely, in the steam and the snow, without another minute passing.

Finally, on the penultimate day of the trip, the skies did clear and we were ready to go. As a novice to heliskiing I was excited but also apprehensive. Weighed down by a backpack heavy with safety equipment – including a shovel, a probe and an inflatable airbag designed to lift you to the surface in the event of avalanche – I scuttled across the concrete landing pad and hauled myself into the cramped cabin of the Bell. The helicopter wobbled into the air and then, abruptly graceful, it swooped towards the mountains.

As we approached the drop-off point, I could see an earlier group already out on the snow, carving lines down what looked through the window like an improbably steep slope.

In a week of good weather skiers are allowed to acclimatise to the mountains gradually, with the helicopters dropping them at ascending altitudes each day, eventually reaching a height of about 5,000m. But with only two days available to us, the pilots decided to short-cut their normal schedule and take us directly up to 4,070m for our first descent.

Once on the mountain we made swift progress. Each run descends 1,000m or more, through untrammelled powder. At

its end we rendezvoused with one of the two helicopters that were shuttling groups of skiers up and down the mountain.

The conditions – the breadth of the view, the quality of the snow – were exhilarating. But the air was thin and, without an opportunity to adapt to the altitude, I found myself getting exhausted as we hauled ourselves in and out of the Bell. More than once I lost momentum on a long flat section of powder. On skis you'd simply give yourself a boost forward with poles but on a snowboard, with no additional means of propulsion, stopping on a flat means you're stranded. Very quickly you start to sink up to the thighs in snow that's too thick to wade through but too soft to stand on. Digging yourself out to get moving again, in the thin air and under an unsparing sun, takes mental as well as physical endurance because what you really want to do when you're marooned like this is to throw yourself to the ground and roll around in howling frustration.



A skier enjoys the deep snow

By the second day, at 4,800m, I was better used to the conditions. It struck me that the secret of successful high altitude snowboarding is to put in less, not more, effort. Leaning far back on the board you exert minimal control, allowing the angle of the mountain to do the work as you skim across the snow. The way ahead is unbroken, a waking dream of infinite whiteness. And you never want to stop.

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Details

Ekow Eshun was a guest of Elemental Adventure (www.eaheliskiing.com), which offers a week's heliskiing in Manali from €6,850, including domestic flights from Delhi, accommodation, all meals, guiding and avalanche safety equipment. He flew with Emirates (www.emirates.com), which has four daily flights between Delhi and its Dubai hub and onward connections worldwide, including 15 daily flights to the UK; returns from London to Delhi cost from £486



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