



Unpeopled slopes, pristine snow and powder bowls for days.  
*FT* travel editor *Tom Robbins* finds out why insiders are heading to  
Ayder for a heli-skiing adventure in completely the wrong direction

Photography by *Jancsi Hadik*

# COLD TURKEY





Heli-skiing in the Kackar mountains, above Ayder in eastern Turkey

It was dark when I walked across the tarmac at Trabzon airport and a warm wind was blowing at my back. Standing in the little domestic terminal, waiting for my skis to come round the carousel, I felt a bit self-conscious. Trabzon is famous, in Turkey at least, for its butter, its Black Sea coastline and its football team. It is not famous for its skiing.

As I stood among the hugging families and returning businessmen, I felt a tap on my arm and turned to see someone else with ski boots slung over his shoulder. “Hey, man,” said an American voice, sounding a bit lost. “Are you going to Ayder?”

We got chatting; it turned out that he had come from San Francisco – traversing the world for a heli-ski adventure in what many would consider completely the wrong direction. For most of the past 50 years, if you wanted to heli-ski you went to the powder-choked wildernesses of British Columbia and Alaska, where the sport was invented. Our destination, the mountain village of Ayder, lay in Turkey’s far east – closer to Baghdad than Istanbul. Finding an untouched ski paradise there seemed a thrilling, but also improbable, prospect, and there was a certain anxiety among the dozen or so skiers who landed at Trabzon that night. It was the end of January but the Alps were already unseasonably warm. In the Trois Vallées, where I’d been the previous week, everyone complained that the lakes had failed to freeze. Would we really find powder hundreds of miles further south?

Ninety minutes into what we’d been told was the two-hour drive to Ayder, our minibus was still beside the coast, the headlights illuminating stray dogs and brightly coloured plastic chairs outside kebab shops. Finally, we turned inland, following the Firtina (literally “storm water”) river up a deep wooded valley. With 20 minutes of the journey left to run, a dirty trail of slush appeared at

## A FLURRY OF ACTIVITY AND THEN WE WERE IN THE HELICOPTER, PASSING THE MOSQUE’S TALL MINARET

the edge of the road. My fellow passengers – mostly high-flyers who could easily have been in St Moritz or Aspen instead – laughed weakly.

But then the slush grew thicker. As the road climbed the temperature fell; soon we wound up the windows. And then suddenly, in the space of three or four hairpins, the world turned white. By the time we pulled up outside our hotel in Ayder – conspicuous for the two helicopters parked outside – fat flakes were falling. Waiting for us, snow settling on his shoulders, was Thierry Gasser, the Swiss guide who first dreamt up the idea of heli-skiing in Turkey. Inside, distributing room keys, was Sam Anthamatten, one of the world’s top freeride skiers, who would be our lead guide; the last time I’d seen him, he’d been on stage in a West End cinema introducing his latest movie. I felt my hopes begin to rise.

The next morning, thick cloud raised the prospect of a dreaded “down day”, when helicopters are grounded and skiers’ patience is tested. We pressed on with avalanche-training sessions, helicopter safety and using the transceivers and airbag rucksacks we were all given. Gradually the clouds began to lift. There was chatter on the guides’ radios, rumours in the hotel corridors and finally confirmation that we were going after all. A flurry of activity and a rush through the overheated hotel in full ski gear and then we were in the helicopter, lifting up over the village roofs, passing the mosque’s one tall minaret and climbing out of the steep-sided valley.

There is nothing quite like this moment – the horizon unfurling with every vertical metre gained, one valley revealing itself after another, the forests of spruce, hornbeam and rhododendron giving way to open alpine slopes, pure white and extending for miles. We touched



## WE ENCOUNTERED A SERIOUSLY FIRST- WORLD PROBLEM: TOO MUCH SNOW



Above left: a helicopter lifts off after dropping a group of skiers. Right: Tom Robbins (far right) at the Ayder helipad. Far right: pristine snow. Below: the village of Ayder. Left: a tea break with Italian climber Abele Blanc (right) and pilot Roland Brunner (centre)



down on a ridge after a couple of minutes, clambered out, then huddled on the snow as the helicopter roared off. Then silence, and a few seconds to stare down the untouched slope before us – a moment of satisfaction, charged with potential energy. And some relief too: the fantasy of an eastern Shangri-La for skiers might just be real.

In truth, we encountered a seriously first-world problem on that run: too much snow. To avoid being buried, I had to lean way back over the tails of my skis, descending in a sort of woozy slalom. We quickly moved to a slope with a slightly different orientation, where the wind had scoured some snow off, leaving powder deep enough to billow up over our heads at each turn, but light enough to give that sensation of effortless speed and motion, of intoxicating release from gravity's mundane pull.

We kept going, moving to a new mountain face for each run, sometimes floating down dazzling-white powder fields, other times dancing around small silver-birch bushes. Occasionally I caught a glimpse of Anthamatten launching himself from wind lips, flying through the air and landing in a puff of white smoke. "This is the real freeriding experience," he told me later. "If you see a line you like on the mountain, you go ski it – boom! Then you go to the next line you like and boom! That liberty is insanely interesting to me."

Dotted on plateaus here and there were *yaylas* – small villages of basic wooden chalets where farmers would bring their livestock to graze on the high pastures in summer, the same way as they do in the Alps. And always, in the distance to the north, the dark blue of the Black Sea.

Back at the hotel several hours later, the skiers hung about the helipad, grinning and clapping each other on the back, a group of holidaying ski instructors from Megève passing around flasks of homemade pear schnapps. We had managed eight runs before the clouds had come down again, skiing some 6,000 vertical metres, any doubts driven out by pure exhilaration.

If modern tourists are obsessed with escaping their own kind, then skiers are doubly so. The flipside to the intense joy of skiing fresh powder is the frustration of reaching a mountaintop to find the snow already defiled by others. Since the advent of fat skis, which make it much easier to go off-piste, skiers have ventured into the backcountry of the famous resorts in soaring numbers, prompting an exodus of the more hardcore devotees to ever tinier ski areas, which boast few facilities except the absence of others. Heli-skiers are the extreme vanguard, requiring neither lifts nor pistes, and in recent years new operations have popped up in increasingly obscure locations – northern Iceland, Siberia, Kamchatka, Albania. Covid may bring a pause to the exploration, but some heli-ski operators are hoping the relative isolation they offer, compared to visiting a resort, could even bring a boost this winter.

Gasser, who is based in Verbier, found this place almost by accident. "We were heli-skiing in central Asia and by chance on the way back the plane passed the Black Sea – at midday and in full sunshine," he says. "To the right was the Caucasus, which I knew well, to the left, the Kackar range. We said, right, we must go and look there."

Studying the maps, he saw that the Kackar mountains, part of the Pontic Alps, might be the ideal location for a heli-ski base, offering proximity to Europe (thereby avoiding the jet lag associated with trips to the western US), slopes high enough to ensure snow – the range rises to 3,937m – and proximity to the sea, which creates a more stable, safer snowpack. That summer, Gasser spent several weeks touring the region on foot, in a hire car and in a light aircraft, scoping out the best locations. "We didn't want to start heli-skiing where it already existed – we wanted to be pioneers, to do something new," he says.

Ayder is a traditional staging post between the villages in the lower valleys and *yaylas* at altitude, where families would pause to enjoy the natural hot springs. Today the mineral-rich water, which emerges at a scalding 50C, supplies the bath house beside the mosque. We went there after skiing, the heat of the water inducing a happy torpor, the steam-filled pool empty except for a couple of local men quietly debriefing on their day.

In summer this is a popular destination for Turks from Istanbul and Ankara, who come to hike, picnic and go rafting, and for tourists from the Middle East, who exchange the desert for green, wildflower-filled meadows. In winter, it's a quieter affair. I strolled up the sleepy, scruffy, slush- and mud-covered main street, where woodsmoke rose from the few cafés that remained open, and the occasional passer-by bid me *As-salamu alaykum*. From the centre of the village, though, came the shrieks of children, who were flying down a snowy slope on rubber rings, and then the wild, bouncy sound of the tulum, the local version of bagpipes. A group of young people were





dancing in a circle around the musician, hand in hand, kicking up snow with their rhythmic stamps – a scene from another age, had they not all been filming one another with their smartphones.

Change may be around the corner. In August, a convoy of black limousines arrived in town and President Erdoğan stepped out, promising a range of measures to protect the environment, including putting powerlines underground, building a subterranean car park on the edge of the village and tearing down the scrappy illegal buildings that have proliferated. A new airport at Rize, only 50km away by road, is due to open next year. “We are also working on promoting ski tourism here,” Erdogan announced.

Ayder seems an unlikely place to develop as a major ski resort – it is in too narrow a valley – but there is huge potential in the mountains all about. The Turkish Ski Federation has commissioned the Compagnie des Alpes, a French resort operator and developer, to carry out a survey identifying sites for new ski areas; Gasser has been acting as a consultant. The Compagnie compares the project to France’s 1964 “Snow Plan”, which led to the development of a swath of state-of-the-art resorts. And rapid change is possible, especially with a strongman political leader in the background: in 2005, I heli-skied in a Russian village called Krasnaya Poliana, where wild pigs and stray dogs picked at the rubbish on the muddy unmade streets. Nine years later, the Compagnie des Alpes had overseen its transformation into a sparkling modern resort that hosted the ski and snowboard events of the Sochi Olympics.

Whether or not anything like that comes to pass, the prospect offers eye-opening perspective for those

who come here. For now, the Kackar mountains are like the Alps before the advent of mass ski tourism – imagine the panorama above Zermatt or Courchevel, but with lifts, then people, then all the paraphernalia of resort infrastructure erased from the picture. To be there, sharing a 5,000sq km area with perhaps 20 other skiers in total – only four and a guide in each group – is a rare privilege.

We felt it on our third day, when we flew a little further, and the high peaks of the Kackar massif became visible, jagged and wrapped in glaciers. We skied a succession of gentle, powdery bowls, then stopped for a picnic lunch beside a deserted *yayla*, the shiny helicopter parked next to the rough sun-bleached timbers of the chalets. Many of them are apparently now occupied in summer by retirees from the coast, but some are still used by animal herders who make cheese and yoghurt in hand-cranked churns, cutting the grass with scythes, collecting honey from hives lodged among the tree branches beyond the reach of bears. There is cow-fighting here too in summer, the same as takes place in Switzerland’s Valais. Sometimes it’s easy to forget that if you kept going 200 miles or so, you would be in Iran.

In settled weather you can ski the south side of Kackar, where the terrain and vegetation change again, and visit the one *yayla* where an inn stays open all winter. We had more mixed conditions – big snows, but also clouds that would roll in suddenly from the Black Sea, billowing up one valley then pouring over the ridge into the next like an overflowing coffee cup. Those are conditions when good guides, pilots and organisation

become crucial. Though Ayder is an offbeat destination, Gasser’s operation is a model of Swiss precision. The pilots and mechanics are from Air Zermatt, the staff are leaders in their field. On the first day, I chatted to a small, bald man I assumed was some kind of caretaker but who later turned out to be Abele Blanc, a renowned Italian climber who has summited every 8,000m peak.

Late one morning, rapidly warming temperatures and wind-loaded upper slopes persuaded Anthamatten to call an early end to the day’s skiing. Instead the helicopter picked us up and flew us down the valley, the whiteness giving way to dark green forest, until we gently touched down among a sea of terraced tea plantations. In a guesthouse amid the fields, we settled in for a long lunch: fresh tea, bread and chunks of local honeycomb, platters of meat grilled over a wood fire, and then another echo of the Alps – a sort of local fondue, *muhlama*. Rather than the cheese melting slowly in a heated pot, here a brass pan of molten butter is poured on the cheese with a flourish, sending a rich-scented steam across the table.

I left early the next day with the doctors, racing to the airport ahead of an incoming storm that would drop more than a metre of fresh powder up high. They seemed more committed than ever to heading east to ski – this winter they’re off to Kyrgyzstan. ■HTSI  
*Tom Robbins travelled as a guest of Elemental Adventure (eaheliskiing.com) and Turkish Airlines (turkishairlines.com). Elemental Adventure offers a week’s heli-skiing at Ayder from €7,700. Turkish Airlines flies daily from London to Trabzon via Istanbul, from £290 return*