



To heli and back

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IT IS Justin, the rookie guide at the front desk, who finally gets me in. "If you really didn't want to do it you would have been out the door five minutes ago," he quietly points out.

I have been standing in Southern Lakes Heliski's Queenstown shop for 20 minutes, um-ing and ah-ing over the company's generous offer of a heli-skiing trip *on the house*.

Yes, I know, there are skiers who would give up their children for this opportunity, but I'm not so sure.

Egging me on are giant pictures of happy heli skiers on what looks to be relatively flat terrain.

Stopping me is the fact that though I am a competent intermediate skier, my experiences on powder snow have been limited and traumatic.

And powder snow is pretty much what heli skiing was invented for.

But Justin casts his spell and before I know it I am in the mini van with my new extra-fat rental skis en route to conquer the back country behind the popular ski resort of Treble Cone.

Along for the ride is Phil, whose heli-skiing trip is a 60th birthday present, and a group of tough-talking Canadian ER doctors in Queenstown for an emergency medicine conference.

Southern Lakes Heliski operates around Queenstown and Wanaka in New Zealand's South Island.

They have exclusive access to about 5500sq km of terrain on which you can fulfil dreams of gliding from the top of a pristine mountain to the little creek that trickles in the valley below.

Any half-decent skier who's battled a day on the same over-used runs, avoiding children, ice chunks and wedge-turning ski-schoolers, will understand the appeal.

And a half-decent skier can do it.

provided they don't mind eating some humble pie (with a side of snow) along the way.

As our van pulls into the car park, we get a serious safety briefing.

Guide Scott issues us with avalanche transponders (heaven forbid) and teaches us the "heli-huddle" position that will minimise the risk of anyone losing a limb.

It's wind and chaos 'Nam style as we bundle into the chopper, then scramble out on to the snow.

Then there's nothing but peace and acres of the white fluffy stuff.

Our group of five pushes off slowly down the cloud-like face (no one in front of the guide) and I am surprised to find the terrain isn't that steep.

In fact it would be easy were it not, as I predicted, for the powder snow.

I'm struggling to turn and my big fat skis keep sinking under my weight.

When I fall over on almost flat terrain I'm like a hot, panicky sheep that's stuck on its back.

A patient guide trundles back and pulls me up, again.

After the first run, I want to ask the chopper pilot to take me back to the car park, but I can't face the shame.

Just as well, because after one more I start to get the knack.

I am still cautious, but moving quicker by the time we stop for lunch.

By our fourth and final run I am not even the slowest, though by now I want to take my time to savour skiing where no one has made tracks before.

I've conquered the powder, conquered the fear, conquered my first heli-skiing trip and — my God — I even want to do it again.

"I think I even saw you smile," one of the guides tells me later.

Yes, well, maybe at the very end.

The writer was a guest of Southern Lakes Heliski and the Wanaka Winter Marketing Group.



Fresh snow: savour skiing where no one has made tracks before.
Picture: Southern Lakes Heliski