

World of GIORDLES

The Seven Circles of Extravagance

Words Dan Kostrzewski Photos Eric Berger



01 / Forget the bus; a TLH helicopter chauffeurs guests directly from Whistler to the deck of the Absinthe. Strait of Georgia, BC.

02 / First night's dessert. Breakfast? Fresh powder.

03 / So, you got any PBR?

04 / The Absinthe cruising north through Desolation Sound, British Columbia. Destination: Toba Inlet.



02 / Welcome aboard.

The Other One Percent

The life of a freelance writer rarely plays the way it reads. Far from glitz and glamour, the standard routine is cheap canned beer, dirty couch-surfs, and slow days spent trailing a photographer and crew. When underground scenes or anonymous characters are repeatedly favored for marketable material, the spartan lifestyle gets even grittier. An affinity for high-caliber publications ensures that the soulful scene is one of shoestring budgets and self-funded trips. But at rare times—when luck and karma perfectly align—a member of the guild gets a free pass into another world.

After ensuring that my free pass to hitch onto a heli trip was no April Fool's prank, I was told I needed to arrive at the Whistler Heliport by 3 p.m. the next day to be welcomed on board. Still shell-shocked that Galbraith had passed on this occupational windfall, I made the easy decision to drop everything and go. In one hour I guiltlessly shed all pressing responsibilities—including a looming editorial deadline—while packing frantically to get out of town. With only a few clues—the perfect British diction of the PR representative, confirmation that Eric Berger was the photographer, and word that the helicopter would be flying us to a ship—I suspected this trip would be classier than average. Yet, not even my wildest fantasies could have prepared me for the Absinthe.

Even after the scenic, 40-minute flight over the crest of BC's coastal mountains, I was speechless when the Absinthe caught my eye. The sight of a 201-foot luxury yacht floating in wait for our A-Star B2 to land was, from any angle, affluently absurd. After setting down gingerly on the ship's heli pad and filtering one-by-one to the sky lounge deck, we were cheerily told not to fret because the onboard help would take our bags to private staterooms below. Dom Pérignon was carefully served by a neatly uniformed steward.

This was not Planet Pabst. >>



03 / Refreshments.



04 / Cruising North.



05 / Dan Kostrzewski.

05 / Author Dan Kostrzewski finds ample room to draw his own line in a little visited corner of the Coast Mountains of British Columbia.

06 / The wine cellar aboard the Absinthe comes with its own sommelier, but you have to pour it down your own gullet.

07 / The Sky Lounge aboard the Absinthe.

08 / Guests relax in the upper deck hot tub.



06 / Well stocked

07 / Sky lounge



08 / Hot tub

Champagne and Caviar World

The Absinthe is a luxury mega-yacht. This became obvious as we toured around the smoked-oak floors of the vessel like kids let loose in their first hotel. The leather-couch lounge, stocked top-shelf bar, and 12-top dining room with player grand piano were our first three stops on the guided tour. Ten private cabins, each with its own satellite-fed flat-screen television and down-duveted bed, kept Berger and me in amazement of our good fortune. But it was the extras—like a private massage room, 400-bottle wine cellar, and hot tub on the aft deck—that really opened our eyes.

Smirks of disbelief turned to awe when told this adult toy chest, which also included powder skis, sea kayaks, jet skis, mountain bikes, wakeboards, and a 40-foot fishing boat, was now at our disposal. But the hook was undoubtedly the heli.

Milling between decks in a state of awe, I was concerned I'd be labeled an impostor and set adrift before dinner. As a precaution, I took a seat at the employees table with four uncomfortably uniformed guides—three for the heli-skiing and one for the heli-fishing—and Mike Watling, general manager of TLH Heli-Skiing, the operation contracted to fly us into this coastal portion of their lease. As I tasted foie gras for the first time and downed a glass of Dom, the roundtable discussion reinforced that we were about to tap virgin terrain in the morning. I never before had the pleasure of heli-skiing, but by the time I'd polished off a succulent rack of lamb, savored flawless chocolate mousse, and retired to the bar for a scotch as we cruised north toward the isolated Toba Inlet, I was convinced that this was the way to roll.

In the Same Boat

Aside from a stock safety speech and beacon lesson, every experience during day two was foreign to me. The tone was set by rising from an isolated fjord in an A-Star through a single, sunny portal to set down on a pristine ridge 6,000 feet above. As the guides herded mixed-ability groups down untracked 38-degree aprons, I slowly learned to keep the governor on my 64 to avoid overshooting the group. With each successive run, a taunting panoramic glimpse of unnamed peaks and unriden lines fueled a desire for more.

Lunching on an isolated gravel riverbank at a lower elevation helped to reduce the sting when clouds put an early end to the session. As an eager group lifted off that afternoon to sample heli-fishing on the Southgate River, I reasoned this was how it was done in heli-land. But the incident that really put me off guard was returning to my cabin to find my worn Carhartts and Banked Slalom hoodie laundered and neatly hung in the wardrobe closet. Living in luxury would require adjustment.

At dinner—this time feeling comfortable around the big table with the other guests—I realized I was not the only one visiting an unfamiliar tax bracket. In addition to three freelance writers, the guest list also included K2 Brand Director Jeff Mechura and Intrawest hardgoods buyer David Steers, who had both lucked into the trip with last-minute sponsor invites. After a few bottles of wine, conversation revealed that most of the attendees were relative amateurs in this highbrow world. Even the guides, pilots and TLH employees—no strangers to unbridled heli-excess—conceded that not one of them had ever seen a trip quite like this one.



09 / Heli-fishing.

09 / If the riding goes bad, there is always heli-fishing. Peter Norie shows off a native bull trout on the Southgate River at the head of Bute Inlet.

10 / Craving beer-butt chicken? The crew of the Absinthe takes the barbeque to their glacial backyard in the mountains around Toba Inlet.

11-12 / Gourmet meals are the norm on a ship equipped with two acclaimed chefs and a state of the art kitchen.



11-12 / The kitchen.

Put it on the Tab

The next afternoon Marc Des Rosiers, Director of Operations for Absinthe's silent-partner owners, explained that ultimate luxury does not come cheap. Booking the whole ship costs \$36K per day plus another 12 large for food, drink, and jet fuel—effectively putting this trip out of reach for my entire contact list. As he described why this adventure-meets-luxury concept appealed to an ultimately privileged class—and illustrated his point with tales of heli-hiking in Alaska, heli-fishing in British Columbia, and leisurely two-month cruises to Patagonia—I silently calculated how many stories I would need to sell to earn one extra day on this floating paradise.

This irrational thinking was a direct result of making peace with extravagance on day three. After tracking down boots that had been removed from my cabin and thoughtfully placed in the drying room, each consecutive event introduced me to another circle of opulence. Morning runs through lifting fog. Gourmet lunch at a sunny alpine pick-up. They all fit perfectly into my newfound lifestyle.

As expected, another fly-fishing mission was being launched as we removed our boots back on the Absinthe. This time I climbed into the shotgun seat of the A-Star and we lifted off equipped with fly rods, waders, and two Canadian guides keen to stalk some native trout. Unlike Galbraith—who will kick himself ad infinitum at this missed opportunity—I am a novice angler. But before the rotors went quiet, a bottomless glass of Dom, misty in-flight recon through high-mountain passes, and Jedi flying to find fish had me addicted to red-carpet angling.

To celebrate the escalating absurdity, we gorged on roast caribou tenderloin upon return. After dinner, whiskey was served over glacial ice which had been freshly chipped from a boulder-sized chunk collected during the morning's last run. A slide show of Berger's best photos ran on the big screen. Life has a nicer sheen when permanently trailed by an accomplished professional photographer. Of course, the evening ended late with a documentary video of Kiwi heli deer wrestling (which defies description), glimpses of flying fish off the stern (almost on cue), and enough free drinks to make this fantasy setting seem a little more believable.

Flight of the Beer Can Chicken

By day four I thought I had seen it all. I realized something new was in the works, however, when Steve Flynn, founder of Blackcomb Helicopters and the pilot for the trip, started scouting ice caves on the way back from the morning's session. As Johnny, our Kiwi guide, was clinging to gear baskets for security while tiptoeing around massive cornices, normal operational procedure appeared to have been suspended for the sake of fun. But scouting ice caves after the window closed seemed strange, even in context.

The recon, I later discovered, was to allow executive chef Steve Ridley and the entire Absinthe staff plus a disassembled, industrial grade gas barbeque to be transported to an aesthetically pleasing location for high-altitude grilling. A response to Jeff Mechura's persistent in-jest requests for beer-can chicken—a Washington backyard delicacy—the barbeque mission was greenlighted by Des Rosiers to provide definitive over-the-top flair. By the time we arrived, Ridley had prepared a spread that included prime-cut steak, bountiful side dishes, and, of course, the aforementioned chicken, which were all happily consumed while sitting on benches carved from snow. The meal ended with a tour of the ice cave and a spirited snowball fight that escalated when Absinthe staff members, some of whom had never before seen snow, got involved.

Fat from alpine barbeque, a final taste of fly-fishing was on tap for dessert. This time six passengers—including our Canadian flight-and-fly-certified guide Pete—shuttled 40 minutes up neighboring Bute Inlet to reach the mouth of the Homathko River near the base of Mt. Waddington. Here, many miles removed from reality, we drank Dom on the bank, spotted fresh wolf tracks, and I landed my first Dolly Varden trout on a fly as the A-Star waited patiently on the bank. When the sun dipped low over the walls of Bute, Steve fired up the helicopter and lifted us over the most spectacular alpine zone I have ever seen. Staring out the window as glaciers unrolled below, it was clear that few could grasp where I had been or what I had seen. And, to be honest, after time and distance buffered me from this alternate reality, neither could I.



10 / Glacial barbeque.

13-14 / Most of the terrain that can be accessed by the Absinthe is in a remote corner of TLH Heli Skiing's lease. This means perfect, untouched slopes in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia.

15 / A 200-foot yacht, private helicopter, and fresh snow on the mountains. Van Halen concert not included.



The Come-Down

Sadly, the heli would soon leave as we cruised south through the idyllic islands of the Strait of Georgia. In the comfort of the ship's bar we'd attempt a download of the four-day binge. We compared our next destinations and I finally opted for a free massage (after no small amount of peer pressure). For the final crescendo, we lingered over a brilliant, five-course meal, took in another Berger slide show and, to further convince us that it was only a dream, sipped absinthe, which had been methodically prepared by ship steward Simon for maximum hallucinatory effect. Buzzing well past midnight, I stood solo atop the vacant heli deck as we slid into Vancouver beneath the Lion's Gate Bridge. The ship waited to swap pilots, and as downtown lights danced in the periphery I tried to imagine which rabbit hole I would tumble down next. It was strangely easy to feel both denial at being home and disbelief at ever being party to such a potlatch.

Readjustment after this voyage would prove tougher than anticipated. An early chair, complimentary lift ticket, or free meal at a brewpub pales in comparison when the pinnacle of extravagance becomes the measuring stick. Yet, as our bottomless glass of Dom ran dry in a limo on its way to Whistler, it started to seep in that tasting only the cream may have spoiled us all for good. ▲



A Ship is not a Boat

After suffering our green vocabulary through one mistake too many, Captain Ray Cooper informed us that the 201-foot Absinthe was a "ship," not a boat. It was built in 1973 for Mediterranean jaunts and purchased in 2003 by a group of avid skiers after a two-year search for the ideal heli-equipable ship. A two-year remodel modernized the vessel for more adventurous travel and transformed the interior from tacky into tasteful with a subtle First Nations theme. The ship accommodates as many as 12 guests in nine cabins, which are all equipped with plasma screen televisions, individual thermostats, en-suite bathroom, and fancy French L'Occitane toiletries. A satellite uplink allows for on-board internet and unlimited channel surfing. Common areas include the fully stocked and continually staffed bar, formal dining area with a player grand piano, plush leather-couch lounge, and multiple nooks for reading or relaxation. The layout is topped off with a private massage room and a Jacuzzi on the upper deck.

The bridge—overseen by Captain Cooper with classic British cheer—features state-of-the-art technology including an echo sounder, advanced navigational system, and air-to-ground radio. For extra safety, a rescue

boat is launched each time the helicopter lifts off or lands, because, according to Cooper, skiers in boots would sink like stones. The modernized galley—where Steve Ridley, formerly of Whistler's Bearfoot Bistro reigns—features a walk-in freezer, espresso machine, fish smoker, and convection oven, and also self-seals in the event of a fire. The international staff of 26—which includes a Scottish masseuse and French-Canadian steward in addition to a sommelier, naturalist, and helicopter mechanic—caters expertly to every whim without suffocating the guests. The one catch is that, due to labor regulations, all voyages must be made internationally, which is why our trip ended just across the border in Port Townsend, Alaska.

Rising from Fjords

Few mountain ranges can turn the fantasy of heliskiing from a mega yacht into a reality. But in the Toba and Bute inlets—where we spent the bulk of our time—the peaks of the Coast Range shoot skyward from deeply carved fjords. Mt Waddington—BC's highest peak at 13,176 feet—stands watch over stacked 10,000-foot pinnacles and endless glaciers, including

the Homathko Icefield, one of the largest of its kind south of the Arctic Circle. Other than a few isolated fishing cabins and logging camps, the area is roadless and unpopulated by humans.

This massive reach falls under the tenure of TLH Heli Skiing, which is based far over the Coastal Mountain crest at Tyax Lodge. Yet, a mix of remote location and unpredictable weather has rendered it almost entirely unriden. Our group was only one of two to hit this Westside portion of TLH's 1300-square mile fiefdom this season, and even our guides had difficulty pinpointing the different peaks on the topographical map. However with a yacht, an A-Star helicopter, a 10,000-liter tank of jet fuel, and enough Dom to wait out fickle weather in high style, the vertical potential of this stretch of coast is virtually infinite.

Getting on Board

Chartering the Absinthe with unlimited heli time costs \$360,000 US per week. To arrange your own private cruise phone 1-866-935-3228 within North America or email info@SeatoSkyHelisports.com. See www.motoryachtabsinthe.com for additional information.