

Nine exercises for supple skiing

October 1995

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# SNOW COUNTRY

Our expert testers  
reveal 1996's

# Super Skis

**Atlin: Canada's  
secret powder cache**



In the land of Jack London,

# White Gold

a new heli-skiing outfit unveils towering

# in the

peaks and endless slopes that have

# Klondike

never seen a fat-boy ski.



By Mark Sullivan ■ Photography by Paul Morrison

**A**s the helicopter throbbed away, we arced downhill one by one. Five skiers, five snowboarders and a mountain guide carving pioneer tracks down the snowfield. The rich dust burst around our knees, crawled at our waists, lazed crystalline behind us in the subarctic air.

One of the skiers screamed. A snowboarder yodeled. And soon we all howled with delight.

When we stopped, rubber-thighed, Leo Steiner, the rangy Austrian who led us to the treasure, pointed north toward a crescent of icy spires.



Author Mark Sullivan struck a rich powder vein, and his heli-skiing group named the run Mother Lode.





**With spectacular mountains, dry snow and vast glaciers, Atlin rightfully bills itself as the Switzerland of the North.**



The single-engine Otter, with ski-equipped landing gear, flies to slopes a helicopter cannot reach.



Heli-skiers duck to avoid an unkind haircut. On a summit, the Austrians line up for a team photo.

"Beyond those peaks is the Chilkoote Pass, where prospectors hauled gear on their way to the Klondike Gold Rush almost 100 years ago," Steiner said. "Look all around you. No one, except maybe a prospector or two on old wooden skis, has ever skied any of this."

We all grinned wildly, then turned to face the run, a series of steep pitches dropping toward Tagish Lake in extreme northwestern British Columbia.

Here in the Chilkoote, the boy met the wolf in Jack London's classic novel *White Fang*. The land retains the rugged splendor of that time: pristine spruce forests, huge lakes, towering peaks and vast ice fields stretching from Alaska. The Chilkoote are home to gyrfalcon and willow ptarmigan, to moose, mountain goat and stone sheep. And now, for a few months each year, to a handful of lucky skiers.

Steiner pushed off and we followed, ripping one pitch after another until we reached the landing zone—a creek bottom above Tagish Lake, where we saw the distinctive three-print tracks of a wolverine.

We flopped new-mother exhausted in the brilliant sunshine, some babbling in an Austrian dialect, others in English, and everyone understanding each other perfectly. We all were speaking the common language of adrenaline and adventure. We were heli-prospectors in the Klondike, hysterical with the discovery of white gold.

**W**e hadn't been so elated four days earlier when our jet landed in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, amid a driving snowstorm and sub-zero temperatures. The three doctors and five computer engineers from Austria, as well as a photographer from Whistler and myself, were downright apprehensive at such bitter conditions.

But the driver from Klondike Heliskiing Ltd. assured us of improving temperatures and weather all week. During the two-hour ride south to Atlin, British Columbia, a Yukon moose jumped the road in front of the truck.

And Klaus Schweinberger, one of the Austrians, told us he'd been here during the winter of 1994, when Steiner first explored the Chilkoote as a possible site for a heliskiing operation. Schweinberger got dreamy-eyed talking about the glacial peaks outside Atlin, an area that bills itself as the "Switzerland of the North" because of its spectacular alpine scenery.

It was snowing even harder when we made Atlin. Before prospectors discovered gold on nearby Pine Creek in 1898, the area was home to Tlingit Indians and a few trappers. Within two years of the strike, it boasted a population of 10,000.

After gold fever died, Atlin became a brief attraction for travelers eager to see the area's spectacular mountains, lakes and glaciers. Tourism all but vanished in the 1920s, and today, fewer than 500 people live in the town on the shores of Atlin Lake, British Columbia's largest natural body of fresh water.

Nearly a century after gold was discovered, Atlin retains its frontier quality. Dozens of single-story clapboard buildings of the Klondike era are peppered throughout the community. A shop near the general store boasts carvings of woolly-mammoth ivory. People still prospect outside of town. Bush planes mounted with skis are parked on the ice below the public dock.

Our quarters for the week were rustic, yet comfortable, spruce log cabins hard by the frozen water's edge. After training with avalanche transceivers out on the lake, I fell asleep praying the storm would lift.

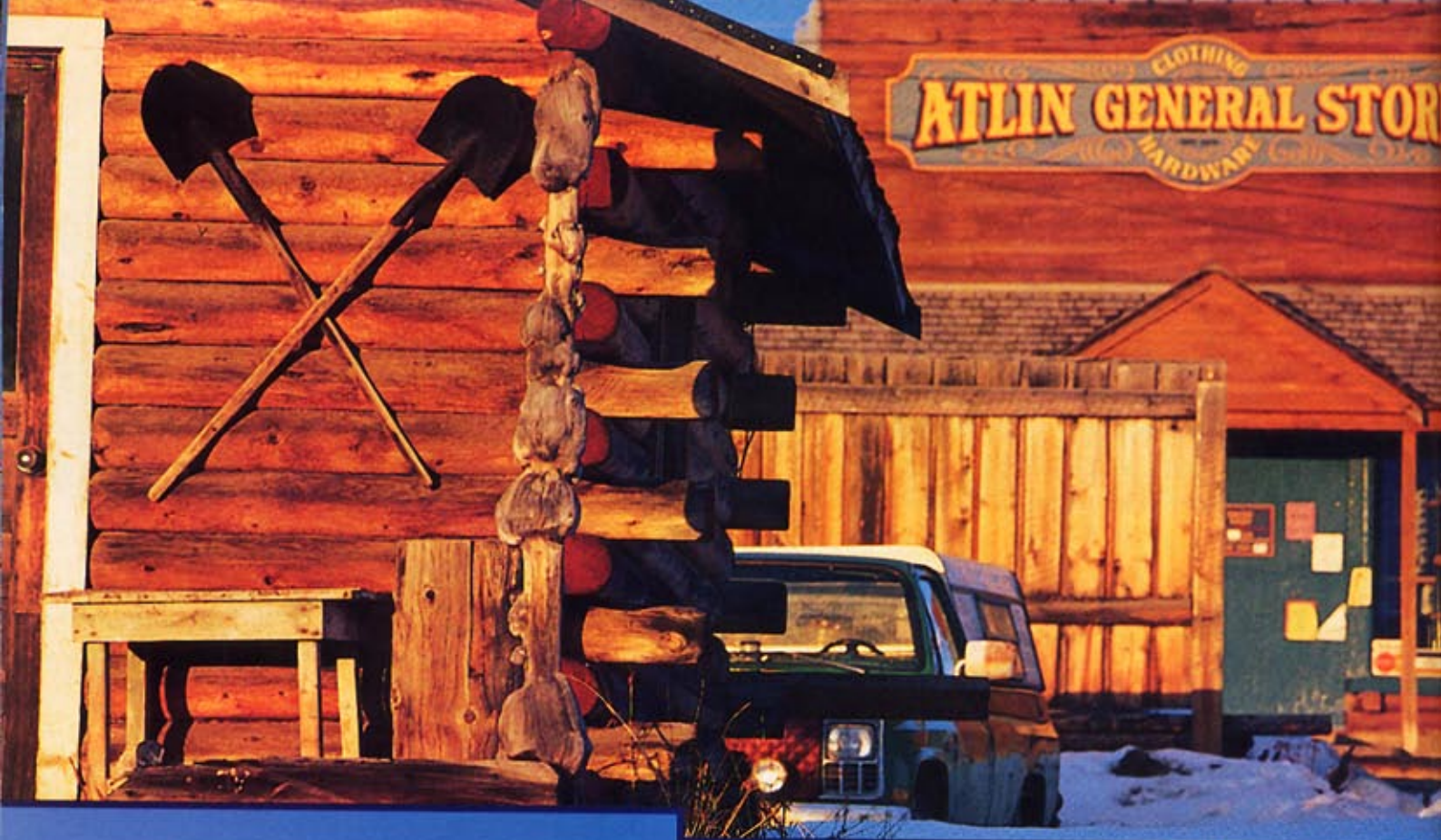
At dawn, I heard someone yodeling and looked out the window. Markus Meixner, one of the Austrian engineers, was standing on the dock pointing out across the ice. The cloud ceiling had risen to reveal stunning Alp-like mountains lurching out the far side of the lake.

An hour later, pilot Bill Karman, wearing a beaver-skin cap, picked us up and flew us in search of white gold fields.

Under cloudy skies, the Chilkoote are a moody range, an old photograph printed in



The group appreciated Steiner's guidance, but refused to kiss him.



**Clockwise from top:** Vestiges of the gold rush era pervade this town of fewer than 500 residents. Befitting the Klondike, accommodations are in rustic, yet comfortable, spruce-log cabins. The outfit's permit area is the size of Vermont and Rhode Island combined. Now a restoration project, the Tarahne stern-wheeler cruised Roaring '20s tourists around Atlin Lake, British Columbia's largest natural body of fresh water.



silvertone. I felt embarrassed to be clad in Gore-Tex, polypropylene and plastic boots. Better baggy knickers, a thick wool sweater and hobnail boots.

But we skied the 18 inches of new powder with modern gear and were glad for it. And each run the clouds rose higher and higher, opening up vistas of fjord-like lakes, crags and endless forest. It was Norway, Zermatt and Banff woven in a single tapestry.

By noon we had worked above Edgar Lake to an area that Steiner calls Beaver. Sixty turns above tree-line gave way to 1,500 vertical feet of shoulder-high, perfectly spaced spruce saplings. After one trip down the ultimate slalom run, Steiner declared the place safe from avalanche and told us to pick our own lines.

We whooped at the freedom and barreled in, carving race turns through the trees, faster and faster, over knobs and rolls that launched us into the next set until it didn't seem like skiing could ever get any better.

On the third run I stopped, gasping for air, and looked back at my tracks, wanting to savor the mental and muscle memory of their formation.

Behind me, Ernst Blank turned his snowboard in a tight arc through a stand of trees. Suddenly the powder before his board boiled furious under wing beats. A dozen white willow ptarmigan, subarctic grouse that burrow in the snow, flushed and serenaded us with a cackling symphony. They floated over the ridge, leaving contrails of settling powder in the warming air.

At dinner that night, a delicious shrimp fondue, we overheard the locals talk of wolf sightings. The conversation at our table was all about Steiner, his love affair with mountains and how he came to find this last great unexplored Canadian heli-skiing range.

Steiner, 54, is a lean, affable man with a quarter-century of experience as a certified mountain guide. He came to British Columbia from Europe in 1976 to work for Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing in powder-rich Blue River. He fell in love with the province's high peaks and phenomenal snow conditions, and worked for Wiegele for 12 years, half of those as lead heli-guide. He returned to Austria in 1991 to lead a slower life and pursue his hobby of bee-keeping.

But Steiner's clients wouldn't let him fade into a quiet retirement. Soon he was back leading hut-to-hut skiers on Europe's famous Haute Route. The following summer, he returned to British Columbia for a climbing vacation. There he met Karman, a helicopter pilot with 15 years' experience flying for Canadian Mountain Holidays and Wiegele.



**Atlin's first skiers were prospectors and residents on old wooden boards.**

In the fall of 1993, Karman called Steiner to tell him he'd applied for a heli-skiing permit on vast terrain that included Atlin Provincial Park. Was Steiner interested in exploring the steeps that had once challenged the Klondike prospectors?

"It was a new range, you know? I had to have a look," Steiner said, grinning.

On the third day of his exploration around Atlin, Steiner and a group of friends found themselves skiing perfect corn off southern faces and fresh powder off the north ridges.

"I knew right then this was a great area," Steiner said. "Good snow and scenery you can't believe. With most other heli-operations you ski close to logging operations. There's no logging here. It's more like Banff National Park."

Steiner cautioned, however, that the Chilkoots don't get as much annual snowfall as other areas. If you're only interested in chest-deep powder and setting vertical-foot records, you're better

off elsewhere. Klondike specializes in adventure skiing on fabulous terrain under sunny skies in intimate groups. And, for the next few years at least, pioneering new lines.

"We have permits for about 30,000 square kilometers of skiing, and we haven't even flown over half the terrain yet," Steiner said. "I imagine we'll be skiing brand-new areas with our clients every week for the next several years. And because we use the ski plane, we can go to places most heli-skiing operations would never dream of flying to in a single day."

Ski plane?

**A**t the end of our second day—in which we heli-skied glacier and glade hard and fast like startled ptarmigan—Karman set us down on Edgar Lake before a nine-passenger, 1956 Otter mounted with huge metal skis. The Otter is a smooth-flying single-engine plane that helped open the Canadian north by flying prospectors, trappers and homesteaders into the outback.

The pilot, Derrick Drennan, loaded our gear into the hold, then invited me to sit in the co-pilot's seat. We banked smooth out of the lake basin, rising high past cliffs and avalanche chutes. Late-day sunshine turned the Chilkoot from silvertone to ivory, a hundred filigreed carvings in polished woolly-mammoth tusk.

Drennan nudged me from my reverie to ask if I wanted to take the controls. For one apprehensive moment I stared off into space, remembering a story I'd read the night before about a local bush pilot who crash-landed his plane on one of the lakes up here in the 1930s. The locals back in Atlin gave him up for dead. But with little more

than tin cans and moose hide, he managed to repair his plane and fly out.

The Klondike has a way of making people wonder what they're made of.

I nodded and Drennan took his hands away from the controls, leaving me for a few moments soaring like a gyrfalcon. I left the plane 20 minutes later with a weird, manic smile on my face.

Christian Kassowitz, one of the doctors, looked at me, smiled and proclaimed: "Es Affengeil!" Austrians use the phrase for "That was crazy!" But the literal translation is, "That was monkey horny!" which comes closer to describing the exhilarating madness I tasted and which the prospectors must have felt when first entering this land.

**T**he thick clouds returned on our third day, grounding us. Bad weather at Klondike doesn't mean a day spent reading in the lodge. The outfit offers snowmobile rentals, ice-fishing excursions and dog-sled driving lessons.

The doctors and I went mushing near the home of Hans Gatt, an expatriate Austrian and former world dog-sled sprint champion. More than 50 dogs barked greetings at our arrival.

After we received sled training, the dogs were led to the traces and pandemonium broke out: Their brethren let loose insane howls, begging to run. For a full 10 minutes, my dogs raced flat out through the lodgepole pine and spruce glens. Then their pace slowed and they fell into a gentle rhythm, and the only sound was their breath and my breath in the quiet of the Klondike forest. It was a serene counterpoint to the frantic emotion of heli-skiing.

By the fourth day the Klondike had invaded our language. We nicknamed Markus "The Claim Jumper" because of his penchant for cutting first into fresh powder fields. And we named the bowl above Tagish Lake where we saw wolverine tracks "Bonanza," in honor of the creek where gold was first found up at Dawson City.

On the fifth and last day, the Otter flew us 30 miles south to the Willison Arm of Atlin Lake. Then Karman's helicopter lifted us up Hobo Creek to its source at Llewellyn Glacier. We landed high above the massive ice field, stunned by the towering mountains that spring from its miles of pale, rippling surface. We skied thousands of feet that morning, and my senses were torn between the fine corn snow and the eerie peripheral view of Llewellyn's iridescent ice and jagged peaks, half-shrouded by loitering fog.

In the late afternoon, the last clouds lifted and we were able to land high on



the north-facing peaks above Hobo Creek. The snow there was still wintry, silken and cold.

Just before the Otter was scheduled to return, Karman dropped us off at the top of a broad, long chute crowned with snow and rimmed by narrow spires of granite. We had to pole to build speed at first. The snow—the best of the week—hissed around us.

Then the slope steepened and the walls flanking us rose to create the confines of a grand opera house with no roof save the subarctic sky. Ribbons of fog lingered in the chute, a moving prism of mist refracting sunlight, pink and purplish. We slashed through the ribbons, blinking in wonder.

I floated 50, 60, 70 turns, snow bursting all around me. I hugged the right rock face and broke east. The rock face abruptly ended, revealing miles of Atlin Lake and forest and distant opalescent peaks.

I was almost knocked down by the synergy of vista, pristine snow and radical pitch, but managed to keep turning. When we reached the bottom we stood as one, staring slack-jawed at what we'd just experienced. We were prospectors who'd just panned a 25-ounce nugget.

Karman picked us up and dropped us next to the Otter. A frozen table had been built of ice and someone was cooking fresh salmon on a barbecue. But all eyes were still up the mountain, toward that chute. We toasted and named it "The Mother Lode," the richest vein struck so far in the Klondike white gold rush. △△

Frequent contributor Mark T. Sullivan wrote *The Fall Line*, a mystery novel set in Utah's Wasatch Mountains.

## TO TAKE OFF

**K**londike Heliskiing offers 10 weeklong trips, 15 skiers per week, February 10 through April 22. Best powder weeks are February to early March. Sunny days and moderate temperatures are more likely in March and April. Cost is about \$2,700 (U.S.) for 100,000 vertical feet of skiing, lodging, meals and transfers. Air Canada offers one flight a week to Whitehorse from Vancouver each Saturday. Contact Helene Steiner, Box 929, Whistler, BC V0N-1B0; (604) 938-0727. —M.S.



**The long, powder-filled slopes rekindle the exhilarating madness prospectors must have felt when first entering the Klondike.**