

## Get the hang of it

DESTINATION CANADA: Heli-mountaineering is the latest thrill in the Rocky Mountains, reports Suzanne Morphet | July 19, 2008

**I AM standing on a ledge not much bigger than my size eight boots and praying that the guide who got me into this mess several hundred metres above ground will get me safely out.**



Heli-mountaineering in the Canadian Rockies using the via ferrata network of cables and ropes

After laughing and joking about our first rappel earlier, Glen and Steve, my partners in this mission, have suddenly turned serious and silent, making me realise I am not alone in thinking this is crazy. We don't know anything about mountain climbing. What was Luke thinking to bring us up here?

Luke Griffith is our 27-year-old guide with Canadian Mountain Holidays, the company that claims to have invented heli-skiing and heli-hiking and now offers heli-mountaineering to a growing clientele of thrillseekers. It's comforting to know that Luke's father, also a CMH guide, set a record for climbing the highest peak on each continent in 2006. Dan Griffith bagged seven summits in seven months. Luke climbed with him on three of those expeditions, so we know he's inherited some of his father's prowess. We are depending on him to get us off this mountain in one piece.

Water is dripping from the rock wall above us, making the ledge slippery and giving us more reason to be afraid of falling off. Yet with every carefully planted step in my special climbing boots, I experience not just trepidation but a giddy exhilaration. I am loving and hating it at the same time.

The three of us -- Glen, Steve and I -- are attached to each other and to a steel cable bolted to the side of the sheer rock face on Mt Syphax in the Purcell mountain range near Golden, British Columbia, a few hours by bus and helicopter from Banff, where our journey began yesterday.

Luke is somewhere up ahead, also attached to us but out of sight, throwing back words of encouragement. "You need to work as a team." And don't we know it? When Glen moves too quickly I feel an unwelcome yank. Likewise, if I move too fast I risk pulling Steve offbalance.

All we need to do is sidestep along the ledge, watching for gaps as we go unclipping and reclipping our harnesses as one section of steel cable ends and a new one begins. Physically, it's a breeze, but mentally the hardest thing I've done in a long time. Look down and feel sick. Look up and I am dizzy-headed as clouds speed high above.

We learn to focus on two things: our hands and our feet. I have just one question; if one of us slips off, will he or she pull the other two off as well? As the lightweight among us, I don't want to find out the hardway.

Heli-mountaineering is the latest -- some might say greatest -- product of the heli-recreation industry. First there was heli-skiing, introduced by CMH in the mid-1960s. Then in the 1970s the company decided to put its lodges to use in the summer and embraced heli-hiking.

No one knows when heli-mountaineering officially began; it simply grew out of the hiking program but is now offered at all six of CMH's summer lodges and makes up about 15 per cent of summer business.

The downside of heli-mountaineering is the expense, an extra \$C780 (\$804) a day, on top of the cost of heli-hiking, which is already a couple of thousand dollars for three nights. That's due to the smaller group size: three guests a guide, compared with up to a dozen guests a guide for hiking.

Often, however, the company will offer a day of mountaineering as a teaser for heli-hiking guests, at no additional cost. So, if you're lucky, you could find yourself on top of the world.

We certainly count ourselves lucky. Earlier this morning a dozen of us are flown by helicopter from our mountain lodge to the glacier near the top of Mt Syphax. As we rope up into smaller groups, we are dazzled as much by the stunning mountain scenery as the sunlight reflecting off the snow.

The scramble up to the rocky summit is a bit of a grunt, especially for Glen, an ex-smoker in his mid-50s, who needs to stop and catch his breath a few times. But once we make it to the highest point, at 9400m, we celebrate, thinking the hard part is over. Luke hasn't thought to tell us it is just beginning.

"You, young lady," he says, pointing to me. "You are going first." He points to the edge of a cliff. "Lean back, let go and enjoy the ride," are Luke's definitive instructions, which might be fine if we were in a climbing gym where you can see the bottom and you've already come up the same way you're going down. But outdoors, with the sun in your eyes and the ground out of sight, it's a much scarier proposition. A run of questions later -- Where do I hold on? Should my legs be straight or bent? What if I flip backwards? -- I will myself to let go and, yes, enjoy the 25m ride.

But now we come to the ledge and our confidence, which has soared after a second successful rappel, quickly evaporates into the thin mountain air. Not Luke's. "Via ferrata," he says knowingly, which is Italian for iron way.

It refers to a system of fixed cables, steps and bridges that allows people with no mountaineering experience to climb otherwise inaccessible mountains.

The first via ferratas were built in the Dolomites in Italy during World War I to help soldiers cross steep and dangerous mountain faces.

The guides at CMH have installed a similar system of steel cables and rebar rungs on Mt Syphax.

Luke tosses out some mountain rating numbers to assure us that, contrary to what our eyes are telling us, this is not really considered a particularly difficult or dangerous mountain.

"If my wife were here she'd never let me do this," says Glen. Steve and I nod in agreement. Yet here we are on one side of a mountain face and our helicopter will be landing to pick us up in a few hours on the other side. Ever so carefully, we inch our way to the far end of the ledge, looking down as seldom as possible.

Finally, with the ledge behind us, the worst part is over. Another climb, two more rappels and we are back on the glacier where we started six hours earlier, mentally spent but ecstatic. The only damage is a sliver of rock in one finger.

Back at the lodge, I want to find out more about my new passion. Heli-hiking is wonderful but now it seems a little too tame. Carl Trescher, one of the guides responsible for developing the via ferrata, tells me I'm not the first convert to mountaineering.

"I remember this one guy, we came back to the lobby and he asks if he has to hike or can't he just do this the whole trip, go climbing. I say, yeah, you could go climbing the whole trip. He says, so, I never have to hike again?"

Trescher smiles, remembering the conversation. "He wasn't a big hiker but he was really good (at climbing). He was a natural at it and he was sold, so he was going climbing every time."

I would never give up hiking but I can see mountaineering in my future. "It's a bit like riding a rollercoaster," I tell my envious husband a few days later. "Once you're on, you wish you could change your mind and get off but as soon as you're off, you know you'll be back for more."

#### **Checklist**

Canadian Mountain Holidays offers several heli-mountaineering trips every summer season (July and August). Departures are from the Bobbie Burns Lodge, which has 24 rooms, outdoor whirlpool, sauna, swimming pond and gourmet meals. The company can also arrange private guides at any of its six lodges.

More: [www.canadianmountainholidays.com](http://www.canadianmountainholidays.com).

Trips with Canadian Mountain Holidays begin and end in Banff, Alberta, where the best place to stay is the grand dame of Canadian railway hotels, the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel. Resembling a Scottish castle, the hotel has been impressing guests since the late 1800s. To ease aching mountaineering muscles, check out the hotel's recently refurbished Willow Stream Spa. More: [www.fairmont.com](http://www.fairmont.com).