

HELI & CAT SKIING



What is Heli & Cat Skiing?

Heli & Cat skiing is a form of guided backcountry skiing. Rather than hiking or using a chair lift, skiers and boarders are transported up the mountain in a helicopter or snowcat. Whilst guides escort riders down epic powder runs the helicopter or snowcat makes its way to the bottom to pick them up and take them up to the next run. Heli & Cat skiing companies have access to vast areas of backcountry terrain.

Step 1: IDENTIFY THE HAZARDS: Let's look at the hazards associated with Heli/Cat skiing:

- Avalanche risk is one of the primary safety concerns.
- The helicopter/snowcat itself also poses various safety risks, which are obviously dependent on the skill of the pilot/operator, the quality of the helicopter/snowcat, and the guiding in relation to safety around the chopper/cat.
- Accidents (falls, collisions)
- Weather (wind, extreme cold)
- Location (isolated forest, rocky terrain)
- Wildlife
- A good level of fitness is probably just as important as ability
- Exceeding abilities
- Other backcountry hazards include tree wells, crevasses, unmarked cliff bands, creeks, and getting lost or stranded

Step 2: ASSESS THE RISK: Then assess the impact of each hazard in terms of potential loss and severity:

- Has avalanche conditions been assessed by the company
- Injuries associated with accidents and collisions: sprains, fractures, lacerations, head injuries, contusions, etc.
- Incidents related to the weather: dehydration, hypothermia, and exposure

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- Improper equipment for conditions and type of skiing (PPE, skis, poles, gloves, outerwear)
- Animal attacks or mauling,
- Could be stranded due to mechanical issues with helo/cat
- Intoxication, impaired judgment, and reaction time

Step 3: MAKE RISK DECISIONS: Once you have identified the hazards and assessed the associated risk, you should develop risk control options. Start with the most serious risk first and select controls that will reduce the risk to a minimum consistent with mission accomplishment. Decide on some controls that can be employed to reduce or mitigate the hazards:

- Safety briefings and the use of avalanche beacons should be routine, and many companies provide guests with a backpack with a shovel and probe. It is also becoming increasingly popular to provide guests with airbags to minimize the likelihood of avalanche burial.
- The company guides are highly qualified and experienced.
- Only a minority of operations use blasting to minimize the avalanche risk, while others primarily use slope avoidance techniques.
- Most operators provide an avalanche beacon, and some also provide guests with a backpack with a shovel and probe. A couple of top notch companies may also provide avalanche air-bags or an AvaLung, equipment that increases burial survival time.
- Right equipment for this type of skiing - long snowboards and fat powder skis.
- Proper PPE for conditions and skiing (Goggles, Gloves, Boots, Poles, Outerwear, layers)

Step 4: IMPLEMENT CONTROLS: Once you select appropriate controls, implement them! A plan is only good if it is followed.

Step 5: SUPERVISE: As always, the situation is subject to change quickly. Monitor the situation and adjust as necessary to keep things under control. Winter is a great time to have fun and we all deserve a break every now and then. From now on, use risk management to make your winter excursions fun, memorable, and safe. No one wants a winter outing to turn into a tragedy!

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