

On this  
helicopter-yacht adventure,  
you ski virgin mountaintops  
and fish remote rivers

# FLIGHTS OF FANCY

BY CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC BERGER



DAN KOSTRZEWSKI SNOWBOARDING  
IN THE COAST MOUNTAINS OF BRITISH  
COLUMBIA (LEFT). ABSINTHE LIGHTS UP  
DESOLATION SOUND.

## “Jonny, I think we need to stop and get some ice for drinks,”

crackles the helicopter pilot's voice over the headset to the lead ski guide. Rotors flashing overhead, we're hammering over the 11,000-foot Coast Range of British Columbia, where North America slams into the floor of the Pacific Ocean and crunches up like a poorly laid table runner. Out my windows rocky crags give me a thumbs up as we pass; glaciers below shatter and spill down into mossy, unknown Yosemites where fish-thick rivers muscle toward long saltwater fjords. There's not another human in sight.

So far, so good. As yacht charters go, this one is off to a great start. The pilot choppers up to a brief caesura in the vertical glacial icefall—aquarium-blue 10-story seracs tottering overhead—and rests one skid on the ice, the other hovering over the void. The blades whump. While I eye the glacier above, laughing and terrified, guide Jonny Morgan dives out and wrangles a shard of 50-year-old ice that must weigh 60 pounds into the backseat. For the rest of the trip on the megayacht *Absinthe*, the steward, Simon, will carve off chips of that ice, made dense by untold pressure, to chill our 30-year-old Irish whiskey for hours.

When your vacation is a James Bond movie of sexy excess—helicopter-skiing from the rump of a 201-foot megayacht that's bobbing off the spectacularly splintered coast of British Columbia, drinking immoderate portions of 1996 Dom Perignon—even the ice cubes are never simply ice cubes.

Serious adventure of which 007 would approve, and an equally serious commitment to service, were the hallmarks of a trip aboard the *Absinthe* during this inaugural season of yacht-based skiing. While at least two other outfits in British Columbia and Alaska offer yacht-based helicopter skiing, at prices of up to \$48,000 per day the swanky *Absinthe*, named after the infamous—even dangerous to your sanity—drink of the Belle Epoque, is in a class of its own.

In fact, given its crackerjack staff and a whirlybird, it's possible for *Absinthe* to claim to be the world's only ultra-deluxe heli-skiing megayacht. In the process, she's redefined how charter clients schedule their seasons.

“There are always going to be people who want to go to St. Tropez, but destinations like British Columbia and Alaska are growing in popularity,” explains Marc Des Rosiers, the owners' representative. “What people are looking for more and more when they are chartering or yachting or going on vacations

### LUXE IN THE WILDERNESS

*Absinthe* is a glorious yacht, but it's the staff and can-do attitude that makes the experience indelible. The ship is licensed to accommodate up to 12 guests in up to 10 staterooms, including a 452-square-foot owner's suite. The private charter rate is \$36,000 per day, which includes use of the helicopter, 40-foot sportfisher and attention of all guides and staff. Running expenses—fuel for the ship and chopper, maritime pilot fees, food and drink, etc.—are additional. An all-inclusive rate, which includes running expenses of \$12,000 per day, is \$48,000 per day. *Absinthe* is managed by Sea to Sky Helisports & MegaYacht Adventures, (604) 935-3228; [www.motoryachtabsinthe.com](http://www.motoryachtabsinthe.com), but can also be booked through high-end charter brokers.

Heli-skiing trips are offered from late February through the first week of April. From late spring through the summer, the yacht moves up the coast and offers intimate custom charters along the coast of southeast Alaska.

Guests can meet the ship where they'd like—flying into Vancouver, B.C., say, and chartering a floatplane. But the charters have one restriction: The law requires every charter to be an international trip; any sailing that begins in Canadian waters must end in the U.S. (ours ended at Port Angeles, Wash., across the Strait of Juan de Fuca from Victoria and about a 30-minute's flight from Seattle) or vice versa.



JEFF MECHURA AND CHRIS SOLOMON BREAK FOR LUNCH ON A DAY OF HELI-SKIING (ABOVE). SOLOMON STEPPING OUT OF A HELICOPTER IN THE COAST MOUNTAINS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA (BELOW).





✦ SUMMER CHARTER SPECIAL

is an experience." In this case, the experience includes *Absinthe's* heli-skiing forays along the British Columbia coast from late February through early April, after which the yacht cruises up the coast to offer intimate explorations of southeastern Alaskan waters from June through September.

According to Des Rosiers, the area is not now served by a charter yacht of *Absinthe's* size and grandeur. The Swiss family that chartered the ship in the summer of 2005 showed off the possibilities. "They wanted to do a bit of everything—heli-hiking, heli-fishing," says Des Rosiers. "We even flew them to a place where they could do some ice climbing."

Handsome and traditional in her lines, with a high flared bow suitable for North Atlantic swells, *Absinthe* originally was built in 1973 for the inventor of the Styrofoam cup, mostly to sail the Mediterranean. To prepare for its new life as an expedition yacht on the West Coast, it needed more than replacement of its lime-and-shell-pink décor; a multimillion-dollar three-year refit was completed in June 2005 under its new owners, a group of investors.

In the living areas, opulence is to be expected, but this yacht doesn't shout it out in marble and gold or even whisper it in hues of West Palm Beach coral. Instead the décor generally reflects a more restrained Northwest aesthetic. The soles are dark smoked oak. Prints from First Nations (what we in the Lower 48 call Native American) artists adorn many walls, and indigenous art influences the patterns stamped around the pewter sink in each of the 10 staterooms as well as on the plates at the dinner table.

Restraint doesn't equal austere—or low-tech. Every stateroom is tricked out with a satellite phone and flat-screen TV with satellite connection (and computerized DVD library). The dining room has a climate-controlled 400-bottle wine cellar and a grand piano, which tinkles automatically while we eat.

Then there are the toys. When it comes to outdoor recreation, *Absinthe* is a floating Swiss Army knife. Want to fish for salmon or halibut? A 40-foot sportfisher tags along like a pilotfish to satisfy your whims. A couple of 17-foot tenders stand ready to take you diving, water-skiing, wakeboarding or ashore for a hike. The

**ABSINTHE IN DESOLATION SOUND, BRITISH COLUMBIA. THE CHEF PAMPERS THE GUESTS WITH LOCALLY SOURCED SEAFOOD APPETIZERS.**



deck and hold hide mountain bikes, 10 sea kayaks and two PWCs. And there's the helicopter for Type A guests who like to move.

On the morning after we'd flown to meet the yacht, the sky is an old gym sock above Toba Inlet—not so unusual in early spring in the Coast Range, when the jet stream trains its fire hose on North America. Still, we ratchet ski buckles and pile into the A-Star helicopter. Rotors spin. The bull's-eye of the deck becomes small. It's like a scene out of *Goldfinger*.

The pilot, Steve, looks for a break in the clouds above. There are none. We're going to be blanked. Then it comes: a teaser patch of sky framed by what mountain folk call a sucker hole.

And then Steve pulls back the stick and we're charging into the blue. He drops us on a mountaintop more than 6,000 feet above the unseen *Absinthe*. "Ever been here before?" someone asks Jonny.

"First time," our guide replies. Our first untracked powder run of the day will be down a mountain face that's likely not been skied before, ever. Not bad.

A drop cloth of clouds lowers permanently by noon, but not before we squeeze in a half-dozen runs. Steve sets us down on a sandbar of the Toba River for a picnic lunch. (Sand feels good under ski boots. Who knew?) Back at the ship, my boots are barely off my feet and, thanks to a steward, en route to the boot dryers when Pete, the other pilot-cum-fishing guide, holds out a pair of waders. Pete's t-shirt says, "Canadian fishing kicks ass." We pile back into the A-Star.

Pete lands on a gravel bar of the Toba. When the fishing proves to not live up to his t-shirt, Pete packs up the table of Dom Perignon, the tablecloth and champagne flutes and flies us over the 7,000-foot mountains and up the 47-mile-long Bute Inlet to the Southgate River. Pete reconns for fish by flying the river below the treetops at 140 miles an hour, then settles on one of his favorite holes. We stand to our navels in the cold river, and with cast after cast pull 20-inch bull trout from the water. They are big silvery arrows, these fish, and our hoots answer themselves off the great walls of cedar and hemlock that rise into the mist.

During our charter, poor weather pushes in to the south, so we stay anchored at Jervis Inlet for much of the trip. It's no sacrifice; we're surrounded by some of the area's best skiing and fishing. Our days become a happy blur of ski-when-possible, fish-when-can't—and get pampered at all times. For all its amenities, *Absinthe* truly shines for its staff, which carries off its high professionalism without a starched stiffness—in fact, with a smiling complaisance. One afternoon after I've swapped fishing for the gifted vice-like hands of Siobhan, the staff massage therapist, I ooze into the lounge in my robe to be confronted by our Quebecois



AFTER A DAY OF SKIING AT 8,000 FEET, GUESTS ENJOY A HOT DIP AND CHAMPAGNE (ABOVE). DROPPING IN ON THE SOUTHGATE RIVER (BELOW) FOR FLYFISHING.





FROM EXTREME SKIING BY DAY (ABOVE), TO ELEGANT DINING BY EVENING ABOARD ABSINTHE (TOP).

## LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

This isn't your usual port-to-port charter. You may see more bears than people as *Absinthe* motors around western British Columbia's ultra-remote inlets and fjords.

The only constant about the weather is its fickleness, so be prepared not to ski every day. Even when clouds sock in the mountains, however, the helicopter can still fly to some of the best fishing you'll ever see. Beg, plead and demand to fish the Southgate or Homathko rivers—and clean up your cast before arriving. *Absinthe* is fully accoutered, so pack light (but do bring a rain slicker and hat).

steward, Simon. "You have not yet tried the hot tub?" he asks, seemingly aghast. As I poach outside in the jetted tub, Simon delivers champagne unbidden, then sniffs at the air. "This music—I will put on something less loud for you." Banished are the Red Hot Chili Peppers, replaced by atmospheric Enya. I sink down to my nose and try not to spill the bubbly into the bubbles.

Chef Steve Ridley—formerly of Whistler's well-regarded Bearfoot Bistro—is similarly professional and approachable. Evening after evening he places before diners British Columbia-inflected fare, such as caribou tenderloin, or a Dungeness crab cake and braised leek. But after we joke (too often) that we're going to give him an afternoon off while we cook a redneck specialty ("beer-can chicken") on the barbie, Ridley turns the tables. One day while we ski, the chef flies a dozen crewmembers—plus the ship's barbecue grill—up to the snout of a yawning glacial ice cave. While some carve settees of snow for us to sit on, Ridley conjures a feast of grilled, aged N.Y. strip, salad, wine—and, of course, chicken. Lunch ends with snowball fights. "Whatever the customer wants, we're going to do it," Capt. Roy tells me later, "as long as it's safe and legal."

On our final night, we sit in the hot tub too late, as if remaining there could forestall the end of something. Simon delivers drinks. The slow-quivering yolk of the northern lights appears over the Strait of Georgia behind our heads—an eerie, phantasmagoric greenish color that's hard to describe but that somehow seems a fitting coda to a week that's seemed unreal. The color, I realize, is absinthe green. □

Contact: *Sea to Sky Helisports & MegaYacht Adventures*, (604) 935-3228; [www.motoryachtabsinthe.com](http://www.motoryachtabsinthe.com)

