

Outdoors:

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Taking the easy way up

Heli-hiking trips allow city slickers to get stunning backcountry views without actually having to climb up the mountain

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TALUS LODGE, B.C. - John Miers has no cartilage in his knees. He has no backcountry skills and rarely walks more than 20 minutes on flat ground. Yet the 58-year-old Toronto-based executive hikes among high peaks deep in the Rockies where few others have tread.

Miers is heli-hiking in the Canadian Rockies.

Hikers have a proud tradition of earning their views, but for those who can't reach the high country on their own, heli-hiking is the way to go. Helicopters do the heavy lifting by transporting outdoors enthusiasts above the bushwhacking trails to the high country with dramatic 360-degree mountain vistas.

Backcountry hiking purists would decry the pampering. Heli-hikers come for guided hikes during the day, gourmet food, a rest from decision-making and relaxing nights in a warm lodge with a comfy bed at night.

The rewards -- wildflowers, waterfalls, glaciers, hanging valleys and jagged peaks -- come easier.

"If you can walk around unaided, then you can enjoy this," says Miers, who is visiting the Rockies for the first time with his wife Mary-Lou and friends on a three-night trip.

"What's the point of doing the hard bit if you don't have to?"

Miers is three days into a recent heli-hiking trip to Talus Lodge, located just across the border in B.C. The long-time city slicker has admired stunning backcountry views most hikers will never spy.

Every heli-hiking trip into Talus Lodge starts with the 15-minute helicopter ride that skips a steep half-day hike.

The rotors beat loudly as the 407 Bell helicopter skirts the Rockies' Three Sisters, giving the five passengers a rare perspective of the famous peaks above Canmore. Cresting the peaks, the wide expanse of the Smith-Dorrien Valley is revealed. Mineral-rich lakes shimmer in the sun below evergreen forests and jagged rocky peaks.

Minutes later, the seven-seat helicopter ascends the Continental Divide to the high plateau where a new lodge sits among rock shelves, glacial lakes and a 2,804-metre unnamed peak that looks like a wizard's cap. It lands in a patch of snow at 2,300 metres above sea level by the two-storey wooden lodge. Its passengers disembark and huddle together on their knees.

Mary-Lou, a 54-year-old urban garden designer who is afraid of flying, is happy again as the helicopter swoops off to pick up another load of guests for a three-night helicopter-accessed hiking trip into the Rockies. Her husband looks out of place in a blue blazer and sandals as he walks with her to check out a nearby lake.

The couple's only hiking experience is on the soft heather of their native Scotland.

"It's so much bigger than Scotland," John says. "And so much more rugged."

Within the hour, the seven other guests in this summer's first group at Talus arrive by helicopter. Gathering in the lodge, old friends and strangers shake hands with one another and lodge co-owner Chris Espinel, 57, who will be their hiking guide. Gina Chivers, 51, will be their cook.

The group includes four couples, two brothers and myself. In addition to the Miers, there's a lawyer, a learning technology consultant, two home builders, a pilot, an interior decorator and a doctor. All the other guests are in their 40s or 50s. Some have bad knees or little stamina. Others are yoga-limber and exercise outdoors at least five times a week.

The group has opted for a catered and guided stay. Prices average \$300 a night, including helicopter and catered meals.

The catered Talus experience straddles luxurious pampering and traditional backcountry living.

Many heli-hiking lodges ferry their guests over wide swaths of similar scenery to drop them near natural highlights.

At Talus, guests only ride a helicopter to start and end their vacation.

A wide range of scenery and stunning natural features are found within minutes of walking from the lodge in any direction. To the north, rock shelves pocked with wildflower-laced heather fields lead to two large alpine lakes bordered on three sides by mountains. To the east, rock shelves lead to a pass overlooking the lush Albert River drainage. To the south, imposing mountains beckon. To the west, drier terrain descends through forest to the rim of a 300-metre waterfall over the Cross River Valley.

After a quick tour of the lodge and a briefing on reducing the lodge's impact on the environment -- don't pee in the drinking water lake, don't step on the lichens, put garbage and recycling in separate bins -- the first day's hike begins on a mild and sunny afternoon.

Talus hikes are done as a single group, so it's best to make sure your abilities match the other guests before joining a trip.

The Miers stay with their group through the first hour of the hike over limestone rock shelves that dip and bulge on the approach to the base of the wizard's cap mountain.

Alpine flowers in full bloom are pincushions of yellow, pink, white, purple, red and violet life dotting the rocky landscape.

The banks of melting snowfields are coated in pink algae. Delicate lichens that take decades to grow a few centimetres appear on large slabs.

"You've gotta keep your head up or you'll miss a lot of the views," says Dave Penner, a 46-year-old home builder from Invermere, B.C.

The group climbs a trail through steep scree to a football-field-sized shoulder high above the lodge.

When they reach the shoulder, they admire the views. A thin sheet of ice breaks like a jigsaw puzzle on an unnamed lake 150 metres below that Espinel calls Upper Jewel Lake. Beyond is the lodge, then forested valley hemmed in by mountains to the western horizon.

Lyndsay Green, a 56-year-old learning technology consultant from Toronto, does a headstand to celebrate. It's her own travel tradition she's performed at spectacular spots around the world.

The next day's hike starts out toward the east in misty rain. The group stops after two kilometres when the rain picks up. Espinel takes out a tarp and the guests huddle underneath it. Green leads the group in singing You Are My Sunshine.

When the rain eases, the group plods on for a few minutes through the fog before most of the guests decide to head back with Chivers to the warm lodge to play cards, read and sleep.

Espinel takes three of the stronger hikers another two kilometres to two unnamed lakes below 2,997-metre White Man Mountain, part of the Continental Divide. Drenched but happy, they eat their bag lunches under Espinel's tarp.

The third day's hike is the most ambitious. John Miers relies heavily on his borrowed hiking poles during the nine-kilometre loop trek, which ascends rock shelves to Ptarmigan Pass, then drops 250 metres to shallow Waterfall Lake.

Hikers hear underwater streams as they hop over fields of cracked limestone slabs with interesting swirls in the rock from wind and water erosion on their way to the pass. There, the group stops under cloudy skies to eat bagged lunches while looking out over the lush Albert River drainage toward emerald Waterfall Lake. The few dozen peaks on the other side of the drainage, including 3,406-metre Mount Sir Douglas, are among the highest in the Rockies. Shrouded in rising mists, the view is mystical.

The world travellers agree the view is among the most spectacular they have ever seen.

It's the first time Espinel, the guide, has struck out for the lake, and he needs a few tries to find a safe way through the rock bands. At the lush valley floor, the group sees moose tracks in mud, but no moose. Ptarmigans abound in the area, but large wildlife is rarely seen.

At the lake, Espinel shouts periodically to warn away bears. He then leads the way past a 10-metre waterfall to the north side of the lake, where he expects an animal trail will lead them back to the lodge.

Unable to find a bridge across the stream draining the lake, the hikers ford five metres of glacial-fed channel barefoot, grimacing and yelping all the way.

The animal trail is steep, and Miers' knees are on fire as the group nears the end of the climb to the plateau above the lodge. He never complains. If he knew beforehand the pain he would feel, he says he still would have done the hike.

"You only get one life," John says.

Espinel is right about the animal trail, which leads the group back to the pass.

"It was a wonderful day, but I'm very happy to be back at the lodge," a tender-footed Mary-Lou says.

Heli-hiking is as much about who you're with as what you see. The intimate setting can quickly turn strangers into fast friends. "Half the fun was the talk around the dinner table," says Gina's brother-in-law Spencer Chivers, a 49-year-old physician from Scottsdale, Ariz.

Guests read on the sofas in the living room or the wrap-around deck before and after dinner. Tall windows to the south and west let guests contemplatively stare at the beauty of mountains near and far without fear of cold or insects (though there are few bugs near the lodge).

After three days of hiking, some guests are too sore and tired to set out for a short hike on the morning of the fourth day. They miss out on seeing a natural limestone bridge and a stunning lookout from the rim of a 300-metre waterfall.

Happy with their trip, the Miers are glad to be heading home.

Heli-hiking isn't for everyone. But if you can walk unaided and aren't deathly afraid of flying, using the helicopter to access pristine high country is the way to go, they say.

"This was a great experience, but I'm never doing it again," says Mary-Lou, who is scared of flying.

Her husband grabs her knee and smiles at the panorama of mountains, streams and lakes below them. Before getting off the helicopter, John mentally ticks off the Rockies on his life's to-do list. "There will never be another place in the Rockies that is more stunning than this."