

THE AIR UP THERE

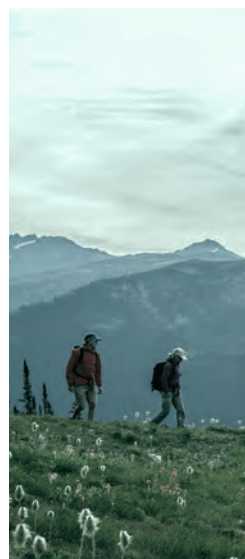
WRITTEN
by
HALEY SHAPLEY

Adventures in heli-hiking

A small overhang stands between me and the summit of Mount Nimbus. They don't tell you about this charming little feature that comes once you're 99 percent into your journey. That's because they know once you've made it this far, you'll find a way to eke out that last 1 percent.

My first attempt to clear it fails, and I slip back to the small ledge I was standing on just seconds before. After rearranging my hands, I heave myself up and over the dreaded overhang, high-fiving the summiters ahead of me and cheering on those who follow. From the top, the snow-dotted peaks of southeastern British Columbia rise all around. I've gained a bruise or two, but it's worth it for these views.

After a snack break and celebrations, we climb down a ways (always arguably tougher than climbing up), then rappel another 180 feet until we're back on solid ground. While we've done most of this on our own two feet, it's time to transition to our secondary form of transportation: a helicopter.





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02.

01. JOHN ENTWISTLE, CMH SUMMER
02. RYAN BAVIN, CMH SUMMER

Because we climbed faster than most groups normally do, the day is still young, and our helicopter flies us around for a few minutes before depositing us into a nearby landscape that's totally different: grassy, with trees and large rocks, mostly flat. If we'd hiked here from where we started, it would've taken untold hours, if we could've made it at all. Such are the joys of heli-hiking—all the rewards of a productive day in the mountains, none of the logistical hassles.

I'm with Canadian Mountain Holidays, better known as CMH, the company that pioneered heli-skiing more than 50 years ago. In the summers, they offer heli-hiking, a kinder, gentler version of the wintertime adventures. Whereas you need to be an experienced skier to float through the deep powder when the mountains are covered in snow, any hiking level is welcome. You can scurry your way up an almost vertical rock face or stroll on flat ground through wildflowers—the choice is up to you.

I chose some of the more adventurous routes, including Mount Nimbus. The course is a via ferrata (Italian for “iron road”), a series of iron rungs and cables that makes this kind of experience accessible to the non-expert rock climbers of the world. The cables run along the steep and exposed sections; hikers clip into them with two carabiners attached to a harness worn around the waist.

As we ascend, the pattern of unclip, clip, lock, unclip, clip, lock becomes routine. So do the soaring views, in a way, but I fight to remain in awe of just how beautiful—and relatively untouched—this terrain is.



After lunch, the part I know is coming but have pushed out of my mind arrives: the suspension bridge. Nearly 2,000 feet in the air, the bridge runs between two towering spires. I decide the only way to cross it is steadily but quickly, so I set out at a brisk pace, one plank at a time. Looking down is asking to be completely and utterly terrified, but you have to do it at least once to remind yourself of just what you're accomplishing.

Back at Bobbie Burns Lodge, I make a beeline for the pitchers filled with fresh fruit smoothies and then head for a soak in the hot tub to soothe my muscles. I'm really just biding my time until dinner. Another benefit of heli-hiking versus traditional backpacking is that there's no freeze-dried chili or instant oatmeal. A nice buffet of snacks for lunch is set out every morning, including sandwiches, pretzels, carrot sticks, chocolate bars, orange slices, granola and fruit leather. Breakfast and dinner are downright sumptuous. Gathering around long wooden tables, we excitedly fill each other in on the day's activities over bites of halibut and scoops of strawberry sorbet.



IF YOU GO

The heli-hiking season runs from August to early September. Trips leave from Banff, Alberta; the closest airport is Calgary. There are a few themed trips, including ones geared toward families, although kids are welcome on regular trips as well. Some of the adventures, such as the via ferrata courses, are subject to age limitations. Prices start at about \$2,350 for a three-day trip. For more information, visit CanadianMountainHolidays.com.

After three days of skirting pretty lakes, crossing rivers via tightrope, and walking among fields dotted with bursts of pink and orange and yellow, I crouch down on the ground one last time as the helicopter lifts off. I realize that I am blown away—not literally by the helicopter, thank goodness (although it is quite powerful!), but metaphorically by the experience. The mountains are so peaceful, the vistas so stunning, the camaraderie so instant. If only I had my own helicopter to bring along on my future hiking expeditions. ■

03. JOHN ENTWISTLE, CMH SUMMER
04. CARL TRESCHER, CMH SUMMER