

Helicopter Rides Are the Five-Star Shortcut to the World's Most Remote Hiking Trails



Adventurers of all abilities are using choppers to shortcut their way to the mountaintops. Here's why it's not cheating.

I'm 5,000 feet up in New Zealand's Southern Alps when I realize I'm surrounded by clouds. Delicate wisps float up from the valley below, curling around craggy peaks that stretch almost 2 miles high. Through the streaky veil, I can spot snow-crowned summits and alpine lakes in shades of silty gray and sapphire. Waterfalls pour down rock faces.

This stunning section of the Shotover Saddle Route marks the beginning of my hike. Some people arrive here as part of a 10.5-mile trek that requires a 4,000-foot elevation gain and at least seven hours of strenuous effort. I've come by helicopter. It feels a little bit like cheating.

If hiking tends to be more about the journey than the destination, it's easy to write off heli-hiking, a mechanical shortcut that puts almost any epic vantage point within reach. But it's an established way to take on an adventure in New Zealand, where dramatically foreboding landscapes can preclude other means of transportation, and in Canada, where the popularity of heli-skiing gave way to a summer equivalent in the 1980s. And as a means of exploring, it's gaining in popularity globally: From the Himalayas to the Italian and Swiss Alps, travelers are climbing aboard choppers to experience breathtaking places.

The concept makes hiking – and nature itself – accessible to people across a wide variety of ages and abilities. And it's especially appealing to the cash-rich, time-poor set. With consumers seeking to pack more adventure into a tighter schedule, travel companies have started employing helicopters for all sorts of pursuits. [Pelorus Travel](#) and [Tropicsurf](#) use them for heli-surfing in Chile and Indonesia, respectively. [Tordrillo Mountain Lodge](#) in Judd Lake, Alaska, flies mountain bikers to the top of nearby summits. Add new and soon-to-come treks from [Natural Habitat Adventures](#), [SwisSkiSafari](#) and [Eleven](#), and you'll find a heli-hiking option on almost every continent.

Prices range tremendously. Half-day heli-hiking jaunts into the [Talkeetna Mountains of Alaska](#) to ogle views of Denali, for example, run as little as \$550 for two or more people. At [Minaret Station](#), my hotel on the western shores of Lake Wānaka in New Zealand, it's NZ\$8,950 (\$5,114) for the signature half-day heli-charter, which can accommodate four people. It's a real five-star service here: Trained naturalists serve as guides, and chefs prepare gourmet picnics to enjoy in the wilderness.

As an experienced hiker – I've trekked in the Alps and Bhutan, and to the base camp of Mount Everest in Nepal – I'm drawn to the way hiking pushes my physical limits, gets me into quiet places and lets me glimpse nature in action.

Heli-hiking seems at odds with all of this: the loud helicopter rotor shattering the silence, the gallons of fuel a chopper can burn, the leaned-back experience of sitting down during the main ascent. But it also seems efficient, time-wise. In my 20s, I could afford to spend two weeks getting lost along the way to an off-the-grid cabin. Now in my 40s, I'd need to take a sabbatical for that kind of luxury. The option of surveying vastly different terrain over multiple hikes and returning each night to a cushy lodge with Wi-Fi felt like a happy medium. Perhaps adventure and exploration don't have to be synonymous with suffering.

I test that theory in New Zealand. Helicopters are the only way to arrive at Minaret Station: You either land at the hotel's front door or midmountain, on the property's 50,000 acres, if you want to make a more scenic arrival on foot. I opt for the latter and pick a three-hour-long route.

New Zealand and its wildly diverse topography are deeply associated with hiking. The country's many official "great walks" are its most-famed attractions; government figures show that almost three-quarters of international visitors participate in some sort of hiking during their trip. Most of its celebrated routes, such as the rainforested Milford or fjord-lined Kepler Tracks, take three to four days to complete and require serious fitness and outdoors skills, passing glacier-carved valleys or cresting along slippery alpine ridgelines.

But I have five days here total. Not only can a helicopter provide a highlight reel of the South Island's most stunning terrain, but it can also even the playing field, allowing multigenerational families or friends with different ability levels or altitude tolerances to share the experience.



Taking the long track down from Minaret Station *Photographer: Camilla Rutherford for Bloomberg Businessweek*

Unlike heli-skiing, heli-hiking isn't about thrills. (Unless you are scared of choppers themselves, which are technically safer than other small aircraft.) It started as a way to widen access to nature for people whose age or physical fitness prevented them from taking on a multiday trek and to circumvent crowds.

The practice originated in British Columbia, where Canadian Mountain Holidays began shuttling travelers on heli-ski trips in the 1970s. Eventually, CMH client Arthur Tauck Jr. approached founder Hans Gmoser about using the same helicopters throughout the summer season for his own namesake travel company. Banff National Park, in neighboring Alberta, was becoming busier, and they could get clients to quiet spots more easily. Guests from their teens into their 80s could take in the grandeur of, say, Bugaboo Provincial Park's protruding granite spires, even for just a mountaintop picnic if that's all their legs could handle; others could enjoy the gentle descent on foot from an 8,600-foot summit through fields of wildflowers and along glacial lakes.



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Today, CMH runs its helicopter trips year-round, landing for hikes at the base of the Howser Towers – the tallest of the Bugaboo granite spires – or atop Vowell Glacier. They’re places even I couldn’t hike to myself. To get to the two lodges CMH uses for heli-hiking adventures in British Columbia from the nearest town, you have to drive 50-plus miles over remote interior roads, then another 50 miles on rough forest service tracks, followed by one or two full days of bushwhacking through the dense mountain forest.

I ask Craig McGee, the director of guiding operations, how CMH justifies the environmental costs of flying. “I have questioned this myself,” he says, conceding that helicopters aren’t the most fuel-efficient machines. But if a helicopter services 30 people for about two hours per day, as his do in the summertime, he says, the total fuel used is on par with what each of those passengers would burn driving a gas-powered car to a trailhead from the nearest big city.

Hovering above New Zealand, I’m astounded by the scale and scope of the *Survivor*-style wilderness around me. The country is about the size of the UK, yet almost 80% of its land mass is too geologically isolated to permit much human development. Large swaths of it are simply unreachable or require advanced mountaineering skills to access.

The Shotover Saddle Route is one such place; it’s only advised for expert hikers adept in navigation. While I’d rate my hiking skills a 9 out of 10, I’d give my navigating a 2. Yet here I am, following Ellie Nesbit, Minaret Station’s 31-year-old biodiversity manager, along the saddle – a precarious dip in the ridgeline – to view the Rob Roy Glacier, which most people see from a highly trafficked 6-mile trail.

We hike for 40 minutes before the “Squirrel,” our AS350B2 helicopter, comes into view, ready to take us on a 15-minute ride over impenetrable mountains and thick rainforest. When we land, we’re at a dreamy 3-mile stretch of talcum sand called Big Bay. No one else is there. Getting here any other way, Nesbit tells me, would take three or four full days of hiking and packrafting, which involves hauling an inflatable boat to cross small bodies of water. So few people take this route, there are no official visitor counts. Minaret Station brings only 50 people here each year.

Big Bay is one of the prettiest slices of beach I’ve ever set foot on. I can’t find any trace of human encroachment – no footprints in the sand, not a single piece of trash, not even the plastic bits I often see mixed in with driftwood and seashells in Maui or at the Jersey Shore.

“Travelers aren’t just asking about undiscovered destinations. They want experiences and access that simply aren’t available, or known, to anyone else,” says Tom Marchant, co-founder of luxury trip planner [Black Tomato](#). “The volume of clients actively leading with it has grown significantly in the last couple of years.”

A new trip announced in January by [Remote Lands](#) cuts the 40-mile trek to Everest base camp in half, all with the help of helicopters that also let guests stop in little-visited monasteries. The once-per-year experience runs about \$29,000 per person. (Longer Everest trips done entirely on foot, with some degree of creature comfort, can run more than \$40,000.)

“Where most tour groups turn right, we turn left,” says co-founder and Chief Executive Officer Catherine Heald, explaining how Remote Lands designs routes to “bypass the infamous ‘Everest Highways’ ” and give high-net-worth travelers a more expedient means to tick one of the world’s wonders off their list.

Big Bay may not be on that checklist, but I do wish more people could see how an untouched place like this truly looks – if only so they can understand the need to protect it. I make doubly sure to leave no trace, stuffing tissues and a power bar wrapper tightly in my pocket.

By now the wind has picked up. Rather than get sand-blasted on the 3-mile walk to the helicopter, Nesbit radios pilot Cody Sarginson to scoop us up. He detours us inland to find shelter. From the air, we see a half-dozen seal pups sunning on the rocks of Martins Bay. Sarginson zips around old-growth beech forests and limestone formations, depositing us on the rocky shores of emerald-hued Lake Speden for a picnic of freshly grilled lamb chop lollipops, heaping salads and barbecued shrimp.

The silence is profound – so quiet I can hear the soft rumble of a waterfall somewhere far beyond my view. The high-pitched cry of a kea, echoing off the surrounding cliffs, breaks my reverie. This endangered high-alpine parrot is infamously intelligent and aggressive. “That’s our sign to wrap up lunch,” Nesbit jokes. “We call them picnic robbers. They’ll take the food right off your plate.”



A lake picnic arranged by Minaret Station as part of a heli-hiking excursion *Photographer: Camilla Rutherford for Bloomberg Businessweek*

“I have seen grown men cry – they become so overwhelmed with the quietude”

The following day my legs feel a bit too fresh, so Nesbit and I embark on a more ambitious heli-hike within the bounds of Minaret Station. After the sweeping flight-seeing and mellow uphill that characterized my first day, the aim now is to challenge ourselves. We head to Twin Peaks, a ridgeline trek that’s only 2.5 miles yet takes almost two hours to traverse because of its pocketed, rocky terrain and steep dips and rises. “I don’t take many guests up here,” Nesbit says, noting it would have taken two days on foot to reach from the lodge. “You have to be sure on your feet.” My calves are burning on a 40-degree descent. Heli-hiking doesn’t have to be pure luxury after all.

On the trail, Nesbit stops every few hundred feet to check small wooden traps that catch possums, stoats and other invasive predators. Minaret Station has placed more than 400 of them on its grounds as part of a large-scale conservation project. The hotel works with the New Zealand Department of Conservation, the Southern Lakes Sanctuary and other organizations on initiatives that include invasive predator control and threatened species recovery.

Herd of sheep run through the hills, and waterfalls tumble from cliffs. Most people stare up at these mountains or see them pierce a wide horizon, but I get to feel the mountain mist on my cheeks and smell the subtle honey scent of high alpine flowers, such as the fuzzy South Island edelweiss. It makes me appreciate the grandiosity of the landscape, but also the small treasures we often overlook.

The lodge is in sight when Nesbit finds a kill: a stoat. The animal looks like a cross between a skunk and a weasel, and I’m glad we haven’t run into any live ones. She logs her find on [Trap.NZ](#), a free app that helps the government monitor the issue of invasive species – a little something to offset our helicopter flights.

I spend my final two nights in New Zealand at [Flockhill Station](#), a seven-villa, 36,000-acre high-country sheep station less than 90 minutes from the Christchurch airport. Its grounds are laced with marked trails for hiking and mountain biking, but two-hour heli-hiking trips to farther-flung spots are also on offer for around NZ\$9,800. By now, I can’t say no.

When I step off the chopper on Broken Hill, at 4,875 feet in the Craigieburn Basin, it feels as if I’m on the moon. All afternoon, I don’t see another soul besides my pilot and guide, Tim Murdoch. He tells me that on many days, he drops off hikers and then, in the downtime between pickups, transports Department of Conservation staff to secluded valleys. He also assists with predator control and transporting birds for release from captivity.

Back home, I think more about the knock-on effects of minting unlikely new wildlife stewards by bringing people to untouched places. “I have seen grown men cry,” CMH’s McGee told me. “They become so overwhelmed with the quietude.” Waxing philosophical, he said Gmoser, his predecessor, taught him to think about the helicopter as “a novel addition to the adventure, not a way around it.” The goal for them both, he said, has always been to send people home with a great respect for nature. “If we can do that, I think it’s worth the helicopter transfer.”

Ultimately, I agree. In less than a week, I saw more of New Zealand than most New Zealanders. I took home not only an appreciation of the country’s natural beauty but also some comprehension of its fragile ecological balance.

In an era when everything feels discovered, heli-hiking seems like one of the last viable ways to truly get off the grid – to experience corners of the world without power lines, roads or other humans. But because it’s more costly than anything I can justify on the regular, I’ll keep driving to most trailheads and seeking out lesser-known paths that lead me to the kind of peaceful seclusion I felt in New Zealand. As for my next helicopter assist, I’ll reserve that for an experience only a chopper could allow – like hiking a ridgeline through the clouds alongside my 69-year-old mom.

