

Flying through the snow

An Ontario psychiatrist boards a chopper for fresh powder and thrills at Panorama Mountain Village

BY *Dr Brad Bowins*

Brad Bowins is a Toronto-based psychiatrist who works in private practice, runs the Centre For Theoretical Research in Psychiatry & Clinical Psychology, and publishes theoretical articles in peer-reviewed journals. He has contributed several times to DOCTOR'S REVIEW, on topics such as skiing, the CN Tower EdgeWalk and scuba-diving.

Located in the interior of British Columbia, Panorama Mountain Village stands out amongst ski resorts. For one thing, it tends to have amazing snow

conditions. That's thanks due to the high elevation of the base (1029 metres) and the peak itself (2370 metres), and location in a region with plenty of powder snow. There are nicely groomed runs designed to make everyone feel confident, challenging bowls for experts, moguls galore, countless tree runs, and to top it off a heli-skiing option!

For a ski resort it helps to make a good first impression, and Panorama doesn't disappoint. From Invermere, the road winds along a beautiful creek with the scenery



Dr Bowins posing in front of the chopper and mountains that made his experience so memorable.

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The Taynton bowl is dynamited for avalanches, but there is still a slight risk as well as natural obstacles such as trees and drops

building anticipation for what lies ahead. The check-in is just past the only bridge and is hassle-free.

After warming up at the base, you'll feel ready to hit the more challenging runs. For expert skiers the destination of choice is the summit, which provides a very impressive range of options, including the Extreme Dream Zone and Taynton Bowl. Facing downhill from the summit, the Extreme Dream Zone lies to the right. Run likes Trigger, Gun-Barrel, and Zone 2 aggressively descend through trees to mogul-covered lower runs taking skiers to Champagne Express. Descending Gun-Barrel I turned near a small cliff and almost ran into a group of what appeared to be five- and six-year-old kids led by an instructor. Showing no fear these experienced little tikes navigated moguls almost as tall as themselves.

Years ago an experienced skier told me that Panorama, while a great family resort, did not offer enough challenge for experts. But that was before the section of Taynton Bowl formerly reserved for heli-skiing was made inbounds. The bowl is dynamited for avalanches and supervised by ski patrol, but there is still a slight risk and you have to manage natural obstacles such as trees and drops. Access is by Outback Ridge, a trail starting past Summit Hut. This trail is very easy to hike and offers impressive views on both sides.

Many visitors stop at the first run, Heli-Face, but I've found the snow conditions even a few minutes further along at B-1st and B-2nd to be superior. There are at least 10 drop-in sections on Taynton Bowl so no one need get bored. While there I watched some

young skiers and snowboarders going over small rock faces, landing in powder snow. The long Taynton Trail ski-out offers amazing views and the invigorating scent of pine trees. One of my most amazing experiences occurred on this trail when I almost skied into a full-grown moose. As startled as we were, the moose hesitated before running further down the trail. Naturally it was the day that I neglected to bring the camera.

One of the drawbacks to bowl skiing, at least at many resorts, is that bowls are commonly open and treeless, making for very flat light and poor definition in the absence of sunlight. A rule in skiing is that when there is flat light head to the trees as they provide much needed contrast. Panorama is fully treed, even on Taynton Bowl, which is a major plus as fresh falling powder snow can be enjoyed without sacrificing vision and safety. It is also a

Panorama's heli-skiing option allows you to carve your own path down pristine runs.



plus in that there are countless exciting glade and tree runs, and even ones such as Hide-Away, where a person can seek solitude away from other skiers while getting closer to nature.

Unlike many resorts that require a stay of several days at a lodge for heliskiing, RK Heliski has been operating from Panorama since the 1970s, providing the opportunity for single-day excursions. The group I went with had a very international flavour, not uncommon for heliskiing.

Following breakfast, the guide explained the experience and took everyone out to the parking lot for avalanche transceiver training. Extra avalanche gear is not required, although it is wise to be careful and avoid sections that look unstable, particularly after a recent snowfall.

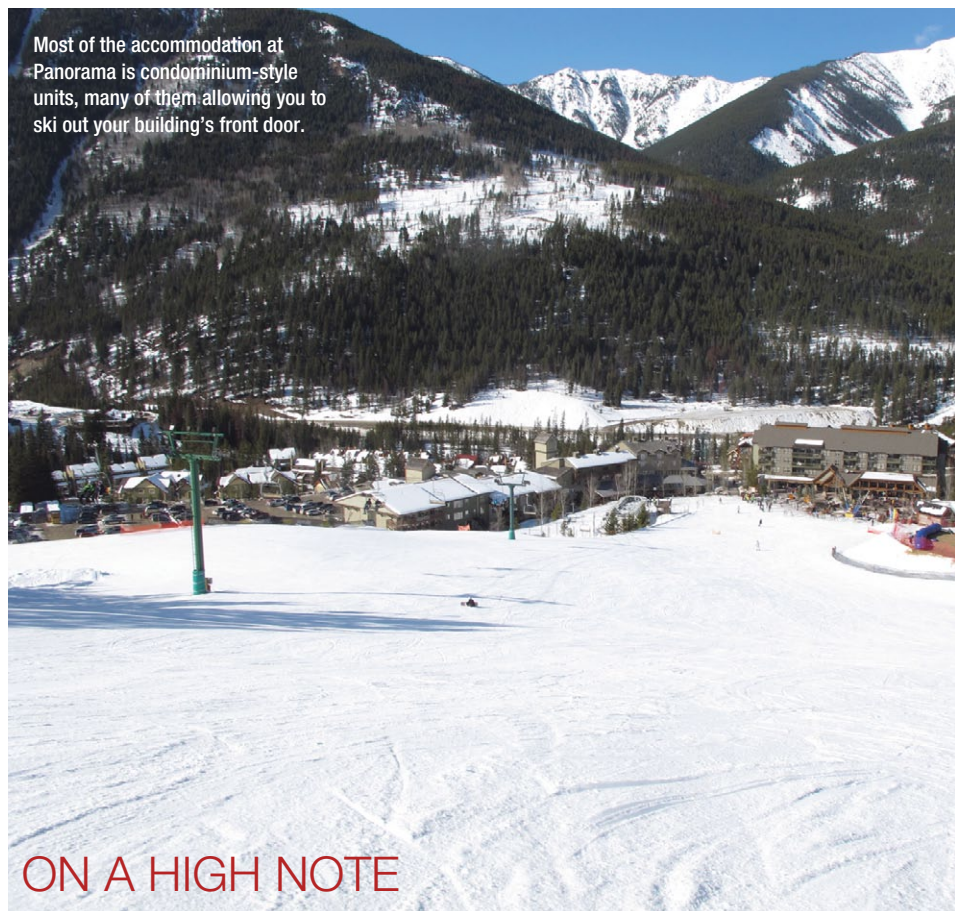
I am fairly unique amongst back-country skiers in that I have actually encountered an avalanche. There is no other feeling equivalent to suddenly feeling the ground sink. In my case, realizing what was happening, I maintained my balance and skied the wave out at a 45-degree angle to avoid becoming trapped in the relatively small avalanche. Even if overcome by the avalanche, my transceiver would have enabled the guide and other guests to locate me. But most guides I have skied with have never been in an avalanche testifying to both their skill and how unlikely most skiers are to have this experience.

Avalanche training completed, we boarded the helicopter and departed around 10AM. We were fortunate given that we had the helicopter exclusively to our group of 12, enabling a 20- to 25-minute commute to a glacier next to Purcell Wilderness Provincial Conservancy. Peak elevation was about 3500 metres with fine champagne-powder snow, clear skies and perfect views of the mountains.

With runs descending almost 1000 metres there was ample opportunity to warm up — in the most exhilarating way imaginable. With powder skiing you get into an up and down rhythm, the down part sending fine snow flying

from your skis, creating the so-called powder shot or cold smoke. One advantage of powder snow skiing is that if you fall it is difficult to get hurt given the cushioning effect. On this outing I didn't fall in the snow, but did slip and land hard on ice in the heli-ski parking lot, demonstrating how you can find danger in the safest of places and safety in the most dangerous!

After the last of our five runs we were given the option of further runs for \$85 each. Half of us took them up on the offer, agreeing to one additional run, and what an experience that was. With a small group of skiers the guide let us fly down an untracked run without stopping for almost 1000 vertical metres at a time. It was the best \$85 I ever spent, a sentiment shared by the others. ■



Panorama Mountain Village (tel: 800-661-6060; panoramaresort.com) is about a four-hour drive from Calgary International Airport, the route consisting of a very scenic drive heading west along Highway 1 to Banff, through the mountainous Kootenay National Park on Highway 93, followed by a short drive south on Highway 95 to Invermere. Five-run heliskiing packages from **RK Heliski** (rkheliski.com) during the regular season cost \$940, while three-run packages cost \$799.

Panorama is divided into an upper and lower village with a gondola connecting the two. Accommodation is mostly condominium-style units in low-rise buildings. Upper village accommodations are ski-out while those in the lower village entail a few minutes walk to either the Toby Chair or the Village Gondola. Lift lines are virtually non-existent, even on weekends.

There are a number of good restaurants and chalets at Panorama. One of my favourites is Chopper's Landing near RK Heliski, where I returned with the family the evening of my heli-ski day. A special feature of Panorama is the **Après Ski Fondue** (summithutpanorama.com/apres_ski.html) at Summit Hut. On weekend evenings a small group takes the last run up, enjoys a fondue dinner, and then with a guide skis down using lights. This experience is so popular that it is often necessary to book months in advance.