



HANG ON TO YOUR TOUQUE

An unconventional route to an ice cave is just one adventure for these mountain-loving cottagers. They're always ready to rip, drop, or ride

by MASA TAKEI
photography BEE CHALMERS



IT'S 8 A.M., SATURDAY, AND OUR WEEKEND BEGINS with a helicopter ride. We snap together harness buckles and don headsets as the engine of the Airbus EC130 whines to life. The rotors accelerate, catch, and push the ground away at a startling rate. We huck into a rare February bluebird sky. It's easy to imagine that this is just a typical weekend out for Jacynthe (JC) Leroux and Scot Keith, the well-swaddled couple in the back seat. As it turns out, they have gone heli-hiking before, but this is their first trip out to an ice cave. We're taking off from the decidedly upscale municipality of Whistler, B.C., only a 20-minute drive—maybe a five-minute helicopter hop—away from their Pemberton retreat in the mountains. We might have even seen their place but for all the peaks in the way.

The Whistler heliport turns into a model train-set-sized version of itself, and we tilt around to thump up a forested valley. We're soon out above the white expanse of an immense ice cap. The terrain is vast and otherworldly. Below us sprawls 250 sq. km of the Pemberton Icefield, some of the southernmost glaciers in Canada. Our objective is a set of ice

caves that the tour operators will only identify as being “on the doorstep of Whistler.” Our guide in the front seat points out the flattened-top tuya volcanoes, black sentinels from the ice age, reminders of the epic sweeps of geologic time that shaped this topography. And just like that, we settle down into a vast bowl, kicking up swirling plumes of snow that reach hundreds of metres higher than we were just minutes ago.

The Sea-to-Sky Corridor, the region stretching more than a hundred kilometres up Hwy. 99 from the edge of Vancouver, through Squamish and Whistler, to the Pemberton Valley, is home to perhaps the highest concentration of extreme (with a capital ‘X’) outdoor-adventure types in Canada: Red Bull athletes, Olympians, outdoor gear brand ambassadors, and elite racers of every stripe. So the bar gets raised for everyone,

With B.C.'s many peaks and vast remote regions, a helicopter adventure is a common winter activity. But Scot Keith and JC Leroux (opposite) have just as much fun with nothing more than an incline and some snow. Average snowfall in Pemberton in December is 58 cm.

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How an ice cave gets made

Ice caves, such as this one near Pemberton, B.C., are actually abandoned water channels. Surface meltwater finds its way through a glacier and to the bed, where it flows together, according to Gwenn Flowers, a glaciologist with the department of earth sciences at Simon Fraser University. "The heat generated by friction in the flowing water is enough to melt the ice around it and form these channels," she says. "If the ice is thin, as it is near the end of a glacier, the channels remain open even after the water flow stops, and air circulates within, further melting the ice." Voila: ice cave.



The caves are so stunning as to look unreal. Undulating waves of ice rise in domes up to 10 metres overhead, like Superman's Fortress of Solitude

even aging weekend warriors, those maturing north of 40 and living south of Horseshoe Bay, who get the stoke to maximize their time in the field on weekends. As Scot says, "We're pretty well exhausted come Monday morning."

JC, who owns a company that helps business owners get financing, and Scot, a partner in a Vancouver advertising firm, are both transplants from Ontario, so their versions of cottage country would have been more like Muskoka or Algonquin Park. They spent a decade in B.C. before moving back to Toronto for five years to advance their careers, but they missed the B.C. outdoors. "It doesn't get any better," says Scot. "We were coming out here for vacation even after we'd lived here for 10 years. We missed the mountains and ocean." It was this love of the landscape that played a large role in their decision to move back west permanently in 2010. Their hunt for some land in the mountains, a place to build a base camp of their own, started the following year.

Growing up, Scot played hockey and other competitive sports, but the business lifestyle put some pounds onto his six-foot frame. "We work a lot. I've done some startups. But, you know, love life, love food, love having a beer, all that stuff. Then you wake up and just feel unhealthy. The stuff I liked doing in the outdoors wasn't as much fun because I had a bit more weight on me than I should have." He entered a "biggest loser" competition at his gym and with the aid of a trainer shed an impressive 31 pounds in 60 days, winning the \$10,000 purse. "I was training hard during the week in the gym, and then during the weekends I was out in the mountains doing all these activities. It was a good combination."

The operator for our trip today, Head-Line Mountain Holidays, working with Blackcomb Helicopters, has found success on the principle that there aren't many things that a helicopter won't improve: heli-sledding, for example, or heli-hot-springing. As it turns out, the most strenuous thing we'll do on this trip is pose for photos and hoist a gluten-free sandwich. But there's no disputing that we're out there, doing it—heli-ice-caving.

Now, as the helicopter noisily departs, we crouch in the snow and hang on to our toques. JC flashes a megawatt smile,

"I'd heard about all the obscure things people do," says Scot, "and I thought one of them I could picture myself doing was going up in a heli to the ice caves." JC says she was just along for the ride, but once there, was astounded. "We'd never seen something so majestic."



her blond hair and mirrored aviators reflecting the raw glacial light, and says something that elicits Scot's distinctive chortle. By the time the helicopter is just a red blot in the cerulean sky, we're enveloped in a supernatural silence. Here in the alpine air, everything is brighter, sharper, cleaner.

Expectations are high. Our veteran guide, Matt King—all-round mountain man, climber, sledder, boarder, and after-hours rock star—pumped this particular outing as having a "zero per cent disappointment factor" and says, "I've guided a lot of different disciplines, and exploring the ice caves is still my favourite thing." Like a line of goslings, we follow him and slide on our butts down a natural playground slide into an entrance to the glacial hollows.

Sincere exclamations of "Oh, my God!" and "Unbelievable!" from JC and Scot affirm that the zero per cent disappointment record remains unbroken. So stunning as to look unreal, like a Plexiglas movie version of itself, the caves bring to mind Superman's Fortress of Solitude or Edward Norton's happy place in *Fight Club*. Undulating waves of ice rise in domes up to 10 metres overhead. ("Like the Pacific Ocean," says Matt, "except upside down.")

The caves are formed by water running underneath the ice, gradually carving out enormous caverns that sprawl out into interconnected rooms. Stalactites and stalagmites form, then join together to create ice columns. Over the years whole atriums emerge, then dissipate. Ancient yet dynamic. The ice is surprisingly dry to the touch. Scot and JC peer at it up close,

“We went for using wood and hired as many local tradesman and suppliers as possible,” says JC. “We wanted to keep as many dollars as we could within the community and within Canada.”

marvelling at swirls, bubbles, and galaxies of dust suspended in the ice, strata like sheets of foil trapped under enormous pressure. “The frozen timeline of the last, let’s call it, 10,000 years,” says Matt in the background.

We wander through successively more impressive chambers and nooks for an hour—or is it two hours? We lose track of time in the quiet, cool, otherworldly stillness of this amoeba-like eon bubble, but reluctantly re-emerge back into the topside world through an opening close to where we entered. Judging from their enthusiasm, this first brush with the ice caves won’t likely be Scot and JC’s last. (“It was like being in a dream,” says JC later. “The blues and whites were so intense. Everything was accentuated. It was very surreal and mystic. You feel nature’s power when you’re inside there.”)

Outside the cave, we pose for our pictures and decimate our sandwiches, and then we’re airborne again. We aren’t so baller that the chopper will drop us right back at JC and Scot’s place. Instead we drive north out of Whistler toward Pemberton. The first of the weekend’s activities under our belts, we still have another day and a half to play.

JC AND SCOT’S RETURN TO THE WEST COAST came post-Whistler Olympics. The real estate market had already exploded.

“I started my first company in 2010. I didn’t know how it was going to go,” says Scot. “We had a house in Toronto, and then we had a place in Vancouver. We flipped all that to bankroll the company, in case things didn’t go that well. Luckily, they went well.” They rented an apartment in the city, and since Vancouver got “really, really expensive,” they thought it was the perfect time to go counter to the flow and buy some recreational property where they could have some land.

“We looked at the Sunshine Coast and even Tofino, but we’re not really ferry people,” says Scot. “JC likes mountains and the sea, but I’m a mountain person.” Whistler would have worked, but prices had climbed. “We wanted some land, some space. Some quiet.” So they looked farther afield. “Some of the places were too far off the grid,” says Scot. One 15-acre piece was “absolutely gorgeous,” and they were close to buying, but it required that they build their own road. “I woke up in a cold sweat, thinking, Oh, no—a total money pit!” They continued their search. They were looking for somewhere with cell coverage, somewhere where they could bring a laptop and work if they wanted to.

One day toward the end of 2011, after snowboarding at Whistler, Scot drove up the road to take a swing through Pemberton, saw the sign for a private sale of raw land, and called JC to say, “I found it.” Their place was completed three years ago.

Pemberton has only been growing, in a positive way, since. “It’s really one of the cutest places now in B.C.,” says Scot. “It’s got a lot of momentum. Two craft breweries just opened up in the summer. There’s a really great vibe going on. It’s kind of quiet but is one of the best outdoor lifestyle places in the world, if you love the mountains.” JC likes the sense of community and the quieter pace. “It’s secluded” *Cont’d on p. 89*



and off the beaten path, but not too far from civilization,” she says. “You have easy access to the amenities you need.”

TAKING THE FIRST LEFT, we drive through Pemberton’s historic town centre. We pass a boy packing down a kicker for his snowboard in the skate park. Then we’re soon out into horse paddock country. Five kilometres outside of town we come to a motorized gate. Though signed as being an “estate,” this isn’t so much a gated community as it is a product of an arrangement with a company that sells electricity to BC Hydro and uses the road to access a power station upriver. It is an arrangement that provides benefits to those residing on this side of the gate, as we’ll take advantage of tomorrow. We pull into the driveway of their three-acre lot, which leads into a large clearing among young red cedar without any evidence of landscaping (“I don’t want to come here and cut grass,” says Scot). In the clearing is a clean-lined, shed-roofed, 2,800 sq. ft. example of a modern Scandinavian aesthetic. To call it a cabin is a little disingenuous. It’s not so much a cabin as a dwelling; minimalist rather than simple and not in the least bit rustic. “What appeals to me aesthetically,” JC explains, “is clean lines and balance, lots of space, lots of light. It just makes me feel better. It’s calming.”

Heading toward the front door, we pass a roof support with a small bench built around it that Scot and JC say makes for a great spot to sit with a glass of wine and watch the cauldrons of colourful paragliders catch thermals during the summer. Inside, it’s clear that more consideration and forethought was given to the design than just aesthetics. “We added two feet to the length of the house,” says JC, who had blown out an ACL skiing, “to lower the rise on the stairs. For when we get older.”

The upper floor is open concept with white oak floors and 24-foot ceilings. Save for a sizable collage of photos by the visual artist Anthony Redpath on the landing coming up, the walls are decidedly devoid of art, or anything that might constitute clutter. “We wanted the views to be the art,” explains Scot, as if pitching a creative concept. The most apparent view, unobstructed by even the

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ON SALE MARCH 2

Ice Caves *Cont'd from p. 89*

porch balustrades, which are glass, is of the mountains holding down the edges of the sky.

Conscientious new arrivals to a small town, JC and Scot had sought to employ local materials and local builders. Once the two-month building project was done, fabricated off-site and assembled here over three days, they hosted a dinner for all the builders and their families.

Between them, JC and Scot spend about a hundred days of the year in their cabin. With reliable Internet, they can work remotely, blurring the lines between workdays and weekends. Throughout the year, they have a smorgasbord of activities to pass their time here: horseback riding, road biking, hiking, lake fishing, jet-boating the Green River, tenting up the infamously rough Hurley road. Downstairs, their double garage is a walk-in toy chest, wall-to-wall with shiny new gear: boards, bikes, kayaks, a sled, and a side-by-side ATV gleam and sit in anticipation of outings to come. JC, who had once been the publisher of a martial arts magazine, wanted to hang a punching bag in the garage, but Scot vetoed that. There doesn't actually seem to be space for it.

This morning they take the snowmobile out and head up the mountain behind their cabin. Scot shuttles JC so she can drop in to carve a few turns on her snowboard, coasting down the access road past the hydro station. With snow on the ground and a private access road, there's no need to load the sled onto the truck; they just drag it from the garage and head straight out the driveway. Within 15 minutes, Scot and JC are well on their way up into the high country, punching up toward a snowbound meadow. At her leisure, JC jumps off the back, steps into her bindings, and happily slaloms her way back down. "There's no gondola, and you've got a fresh line. That's a big novelty, that sense of being solo," says JC. "Although it is good to have someone follow you just from a safety perspective. We carry our avalanche transceivers and walkie-talkies." After several 10- to 15-minute runs, JC is cooked and returns to the cabin to rest for the afternoon's activity: a date with a hole in the ice, having

booked the pre-eminent local fishing guide. Scot has been out with this guide more than a half-dozen times. "He always catches fish," says Scot, as we scarf down a quick lunch.

Soon we're back shuttling on a sled. This time we take turns clamping on to the "Pemberton Fish Finder" himself, Brad Knowles, as he brings us in, one at a time, to one of his many favoured (semi-secret) winter fishing spots. A Pembertonian since childhood, Knowles has parlayed decades of dedication to fishing into a guiding business that doesn't seem to have dampened his enthusiasm for pulling up fish of his own (as evidenced by his hundreds of YouTube fishing videos).

With him today is one of his star guides, Scott LeBoldus, a former chef. While we sit on our five-gallon buckets fitted with padded seats, jiggling our lines expectantly into the augered holes, LeBoldus shares his recipe for trout burgers with wasabi mayo and pickled ginger. Yes, we could be heli-fishing right now, but this is plenty amazing enough. Scot shoots the breeze with Knowles, their conversation punctuated with boyish yelps when something bites, followed by high-fives and fist-bumps when another of a dozen fish gets landed. True, the smiles sometimes seem disproportionately wider than the size of the fish, but damned if even after hauling up thousands of slabs and lunkers the boys aren't still truly stoked.

The power of intermittent reward works its magic, and only the falling light forces the anglers off the misty frozen lake. Even if they haven't shed any real sweat; endangered any lives or limbs; or established any records, firsts, or personal bests, Scot and JC are truly content with their weekend. Nothing left but to scoot back down the Corridor and head into town refreshed rather than pooped. Plenty more days to come for them to rip, drop, or ride.

The next time that I talk with Scot, he's bought another sled, one more powerful and with longer range. He managed to make it back all the way up onto the icefield. He found a new ice cave. 🐾

Masa Takei lives in Vancouver and writes mostly about people who like being outside.

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