



PATRONS OF POWDER

Russian heliboard vacations are so absurd that top pros drop everything when they get the invite.

BY SCOTT YORKO

THERE'S A VOLCANO ERUPTING IN EVERY DIRECTION, THEY'RE NOT ALL SPEWING LIQUID HOT MAGMA, PER SE, BUT THE PLUMES OF SMOKE ARE RISING OMINOUSLY FROM THE SNOW-CAPPED MOUNTAINS. IT'S HIGH NOON, AND OUR SOVIET-ERASER-BOY GUIDELINES JUST PLUNGED INTO A NOBEDIVE AND DISAPPEARED OVER THE HORIZON. THE ENTIRE PARTY IS PLOPPED ON THE HIGHEST PEAK IN THE SKY, A 19,000-FOOT VOLCANIC CONE WITH NO PROTRUDING FROM THE KAMCHATKA PENINSULA—MOUNT DAVY, AN EASTERN APPENDAGE JUTTING INTO THE BERING SEA.

Our star-studded roster boasts some of the most stylish veteran pros in snowboarding. DCP sends a backside 540 off a narrow spine, JP Solberg boosts a laid-out backflip off a windfall, and Torje Haaksson carves an open face with his Sony Action Cam, closely following the line of Miha Lyalin.

Lyalin is the 41-year-old CEO of Zepetlab, a Russian tech company famous for the mobile phone game Cut The Rope, and he's here on vacation burning hell laps with five friends, a media team, and three of his favorite snowboarding icons. No, they're not winners of some "ride with a pro" sweepstakes; these are clients of Russian Helipro, a private travel company catering to billionaire snowboarders who want to go big. Without them, we don't fly.

All three pros are here filming for the Balance Movie, a longtime dream concept for YES. Snowboards co-founder David Carrier-Forchert (DCF), the premise is achieving a euphoric mental flow state by staying in motion with the activities that make them happiest—especially snowboarding, skateboarding, wakeboarding, and surfing. "That's what creates balance in my life, and I get grouchy if I don't get it," says DCF. "I wanted to find out if other people feel the same way. Do they find their balance and true happiness while being in the moment doing those board sports?"

From the get-go, our agenda was stacked with more options than a mail-order bride service. Pointing snowmobiles up cones ridgelines and building kickers into north-facing couloirs was just the warm-up. By day three, the crew was hauling a sled trailer packed with caver and photo gear over mountain passes, across frozen lakes, and even fording a rocky riverbed with steep embankments on both sides. We

set up camp on a snowy remote beach with a small metal felling shack and banya—the steamy Russian sauna with leafy birch branches used for whacking sweaty flesh to enhance circulation. The next morning, a hawk dropped off an affable dinghy that puttered us out of the cove to a nearby pointbreak, where we attempted surfing a lanky swell in 36-degree water.

Once the Helipro clients arrived, we spent four days flying around the valley spotting radical peaks to drop and bombing summit-to-sea leg burners. Enormous brown bears scampered over the hills as we rode across their deep paw prints. Between laps, clients cracked on cookies and hot tea, taking group selfies while the pros set up photos slasting windfalls, the sky and ocean blending into one indistinguishable blue backdrop.

DCF kept pointing out a jagged volcano peak he'd been eyeing up for three days until a client said, "I think we should stop looking and go ride the fucking thing." So we did.

When it comes to terrain, Kamchatka has it all, from Japan-like tree runs to volcanoes that spit the Pacific Northwest to steep couloirs of the Alps and Ah! spines.

Back at the lodge, the crew relaxed in a large hot spring while Torje aired a backflip over the pool. "The sanctions haven't reached Kamchatka yet!!" some clients joked in reference to the European Union's and United States' economic restrictions imposed on Russia's state banks and corporations after their annexation of Crimea three weeks earlier. "No photos, I'm supposed to be deep in the trenches of your allied Western forces, forced to sit here in this pool and eat this crap and clamor and salmon!"

The matremind behind this whole Helipro operation is 40-year-old Maxim Babashovskiy, or Max Babo, who began snowboarding in 1993 as

Top: A Helipro team slasting its way down the peak of a coastal volcano. PHOTO: JESSIE GIZMAN

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No hat, no problem when you have a full production film crew, or an iPhone and some muscles. PHOTO: SCOTT TORGO

only the second rider in Kamchatka. Baloo has been organizing heliboard trips in Russia since 1995, after he showed French freerider Jérôme Caz around the big volcanoes on the northern peninsula. "I was professional snowboarder for 15 years and won freeride championships, and my trips started with this background," says Baloo in a strong Russian accent. His hometown-hare reputation attracted Russian clients looking for a strong rider to show them the goods in new places. "They receive so many information and positive emotions and this kind of stuff," he says.

As Baloo's knack for guiding and trip planning grew in Russia, so did the global possibilities, along with expectations from his clientele. In the past decade, Baloo has chartered private heliboarding trips in Alaska, British Columbia, Greenland, Pakistan, India, Chile, New Zealand, Italy, Switzerland, the Pyrenees, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Nepal, and of course Russia. For years, he's been the man behind the curtain facilitating magazine cover shots and video parts for the likes of *TransWorld SNOWboarding*, *Alpinist*, *Brian Fern*, and more. His trademark phrase is "Yes. This we can prepare."

It's a very simple formula:

- 1) Organize an epic trip in a place no one has ever dreamed of snowboarding.
- 2) Invite a few of the top pro riders in the

world to join.

3) Assemble a group of wealthy clients to pay for it.

4) Produce high-quality photo books and video edits from the trips as souvenirs for clients who, in turn, promote the Helibo business.



Max Baloo getting the shot from another remote mountain peak. PHOTO: JUSSE GZKNAR

"They take us to some rad places," says Solberg, who joins the Helibo crew on every trip he can. "From active volcanoes to riding shoreline, it's like, where, how, and when does this ever happen?"

Helibo clients, who Solberg calls the "Heavy Hitters," are primarily Russian with a wide array

of business ventures, be they in tech, tobacco, fashion design, banking, oil and gas, and even a brewery. One 31-year-old client owns VK.com, Europe's largest social network. Another 47-year-old billionaire cut his teeth in the early '90s aluminum trade, which was so guesstimate and corrupt it's called the Aluminum Wars. "We have a couple oligarchs... Don't really know how they got their money," says Baloo. "But we have one rider never really ask my clients about business, because they come to get away from them." These trips are their vacation, after all, and adventure is the focus. "Sometimes you can have lots of money and not really know how to spend it right," he says. "We show them the way."

And sometimes the way is a week-long trip to Chile, like the one they took in August of 2014 with Xavier De Le Rue, "Russian style. Go big or go home," says De Le Rue in the trip's 18-minute video edit on Vimeo, pointing to the three private helis they had to themselves for the entire week, which cost nearly 300,000 dollars alone before parking them on the stadium roof of a hotel skyscraper. The edit, with professional-grade cinematography from multiple RED cameras, shows the clients toasting champagne with De Le Rue in a secluded murky hot spring, enjoying dinner at a lavish winery, and most of all, aerial footage of them shedding tight couloirs above deep



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Right: Baloo's wife, Kira, getting a selfie with DCB.

Bottom Right: Russian-style surfing: snowmobile to the beach-dropping couloirs along the way—then take a heli-delivered boat to the break.

Bottom Left: Max Baloo snowing lines and skidding missions from a sunny beach campsite.

Left: Jif Solberg with a bit of local flavor: smoked salmon in a steaming hot spring.



WINZED HELIX: TOLUOVA



pow lines on wide-open runs of untouched peaks in the Andes.

"Normally, when I take helis, it's always for quite big objectives and a lot of shitting in my pants involved," says De Le Rue, who gave the clients an unadvised clinic on straight-lining rock fields. "It was really nice to go and enjoy being a tourist and not camping." With De Le Rue's idea of leisure, only one client broke a collarbone and some ribs on the trip.

In September of 2014, Gigi Riff granted the cover of *TransWorld SNOWboarding* while tweaking a method off a massive couloir fluting in the middle of a frozen fjord in Greenland. Helibo brought him there to film for *Repercussions* with *Winter Movie Productions* and Baloo got the aerial shot from a circling heli. "Caviar from Kamchatka makes it fresh in [Baloo's] luggage to any place where the destination might be," says Riff, who calls these trips "the high life of snowboarding." "It's quite a rush to be on a Helibo trip because you want to extend the limits on what's possible," he says.

Riff is certainly not alone there. "I would never have even thought about going to India and Turkey to snowboard," says Nicolas Müller, who has tagged along with Helibo clients to both locations and gotten footage for his parts in *Abandon Films' TheTwo* and *Everness*. "All of

them look so serious," he says. "We were trying to make this one guy laugh the whole time, the big boss who paid for everything [in India]. He was doing this rock gap with me, and before he left in the helicopter to go to the airport, he cracked a little smile."

Professional snowboarders aren't the only ones enjoying the Helibo tagalong. On a pre-

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vious trip to Bighorn Lodge in Revelstoke, BC, the "heavies" liked their private chof so much that they flew him on a private plane to Baloo's Snow Valley Lodge in Kamchatka shortly thereafter. The four-hour flight went from Vancouver cost about 150,000 dollars, though the chof did bring his own steaks.

If you're wondering how snowboarding became such a passion for these high rollers, it was all a matter of timing, really. Under the



Communist Party, most Russian citizens were poor for the majority of the 20th century. While Western Europe enjoyed opportunities for economic prosperity and leisure spots like skiing, it wasn't until the Soviet Union collapsed in the early '90s that Russians could even afford this kind of recreation. With the sudden privatization of previously state-owned industries, many Russian people got incredibly rich incredibly fast, which happened to come at a time when snowboarding was getting really cool in Western culture. Billionaires in Russia are quite young compared to the rest of the world—often in their 30s and early 40s. These guys were teenagers when the snowboard boom reached Russia, and by the time they made millions, snowboarding adventures seemed like a perfect way to spend them.

Benefactors of the snowboard industry aren't unappreciated. From 1990 to 1994, Ken Achenbach and Craig Kelly shaved almost unlimited heli-time with a heroin addict billionaire named Tom whose father invented the sprinkler and at one point owned something like 80 percent of the US irrigation market. Tom spent a lot of time heliboarding at Wiegand's in Blue River, BC, and just wanted to learn their tricks. So he brought them along for week after week of rack-deep powder days and occasionally invited pro surfers, too, including



Middle-aged businessmen and corporate lawyers share hell seats and long, unattended runs with the almighty Terje. PHOTO: SCOTT FORKO

Gerry Lopez and Laird Hamilton.

Sometimes Tom would have to leave early with an abundance of leftover hell time that he'd already paid for and would just turn it over to those guys. "One day he left us, the snow was super bad, so we're like, 'Let's go make Stone Age margaritas.'" Achenbach recalls. "So we flew up to a glacier, grabbed a big chunk that had been broken off, threw it in the basket and flew it back, and broke it up and made margaritas with it. Stone Age margaritas. It was epic, dude!" Epic indeed, if not excessive. "It's like, how much hell time do you have to have before you look down on a 3,000-foot run and think, 'Hey, dude, we should lie down on our boards and hit this like we're sledding.'"

When it comes to Helipro's Heavy Hitters, it's tempting to typecast them as blutary vodka-drunk machoists with bad haircuts and gold chains in backstalls lounging in pools full of models and supermodels.

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To Joe Steinfelds, an American terrain park builder working in Russia for the last three seasons, the idea of these guys bringing pros on vacation fits in with this perception of the opulent Russian elite. "They want the image of having the best but are unwilling to do the work and put in the time it takes to be the best," he says. "Paying to ride with great riders will make them great riders even if they don't leave the cabin. This is the Russian way. So for the riders, that's awesome."

But Steinfelds has never been on a Helipro snowboard trip. Sure, it's awesome for the pros, but the heaves go big, too, and it's a fallacy to view the whole arrangement as some sort of pretentious business transaction/entitlement. The clients want a lot more than glory by association. "I can tell you that our people are pretty fucking tired of the fashion model suits and champagne on the slopes and not real sport," says Baloo of the typical European resort scene. "People go out from the hotel making one run and then straight to the restaurant."

Mostly skiers. My clients try to find something more interesting... something more young with snowboarding."

Unlike hired entertainment, the pros have authentic personal friendships with these guys after

sharing lifetime experiences in far-flung corners of the world. "I'm getting inspiration from them," says Solberg. "Seeing how they set up their life and do this shit. These guys have it so dialed." It's why most pros pack their bags at the drop of a hat when they get the invite from Helipro. They may be working, but it's way more of a bro trip than just another photo shoot. Baloo usually designates at least one line-scouting day with no filmers or cameras, just high-fives and freeriding.

Dennis Ludkovsky is a 45-year-old chairman of the board for Soyuzny, a mobile retail chain. A Helipro regular, he's been on board for Chile, Greenland, New Zealand, India, Alaska, and Kamcharka trips. "They're not only out there as the most amazing riders, but we look at them as our very close friends," he says. They don't just fit together, they eat and drink and party and sweat it out in the banya together, discussing business, family, tattoos, and adventure. Solberg even attended Baloo's wedding in Moscow.

It all comes back to snowboarding, and the clients do a lot more than take selfies and watch pros hunt for cover shots. As one would expect from guys with unlimited hell time to rip the most epic terrain and conditions on the planet with the best riders in the world—these dudes can shred. They're constantly asking for feedback to improve their style and technique, pushing their own limits to send cliff drops and bomb steeps. And from high above a lat apron of fresh snow, wide, arcing snowboard



DCP seeking balance just above the Bering Sea. PHOTO: JUSSI GREZAR



Russians rarely smile, except for when Teje puts on a show. PHOTO: MAX "BALOO" BALAKOVSKI

turns a beautiful work of art, no matter who is making them.

"You got to hang out with the best of the best, you get to ride with the best of the best, and you progress so fast it's unbelievable," says Lyain, the tech guy with follow-cam footage by Terje. "And everyone has different style, and everyone has some pointers to give. Those few days with Terje and DCP and JP, all amazing riders and each one of them sees the mountain differently."

Perhaps the most impressive thing is how patient the clients are in waiting for the pros to set up for that perfect shot while the meter is running at about 1,000 bucks an hour for a stagman hell. They'll take their run, chill on a cigarette at the bottom, and enjoy the live, uncut version of a show that's only partially glimpsed in the movies. "I would do the same," says Müller. "Invite Terje to go in the hell and be a part of the production. Instead of watching him in the movies, they make the movies happen."

So in a highly symbiotic way, pros get to ride in places their sponsors wouldn't be able to take them. Baloo has banger shots for his promo books and edits with professional-level rigging and cinematography, and the clients get a front-row seat for the action while getting pointers from their snowboarding idols. Who they are and how much each guy paid to get there really doesn't matter once they're riding on snow, all searching for balance deep in the flow state.