Why Heli Assisted Touring Is the Real Upgrade for Backcountry Riders

From the Helipad to the Ridge

The first time I stepped off an A-Star helicopter onto a wind-scoured ridge in the Chugach Mountains, I thought I knew what I was getting into. I had spent years hiking for turns, reading snowpits, and carrying an avalanche transceiver, shovel probe, and all the other gear that goes with serious backcountry skiing. But the moment the rotors faded and the silence came back, I realized this was something different. Not just because of the access, but because of the way the whole day was structured. That was my first real taste of heli assisted touring, and it changed how I think about riding big terrain.

Heli assisted touring sits in a specific, useful middle ground between a full guided heli skiing operation and a self-supported backcountry tour. You get the vertical and the terrain that only a helicopter can unlock, but you also keep the pace, the decision-making, and the physical effort that make touring rewarding. It is not a shortcut. It is a different tool, and for riders who want to cover more ground in variable snow conditions, it makes a lot of sense.

What Heli Assisted Touring Actually Looks Like

In a typical heli assisted touring day, the helicopter drops you on a ridge or high alpine bench and then flies out. You spend the next several hours skinning or booting across a glacier, up a side drainage, or along a ridgeline to find your line. The heli does not sit on standby. It comes back at a scheduled time or at a prearranged pickup point, often hours later. That means you are moving under your own power for most of the day, making terrain choices and snow assessments as you go. The helicopter simply handles the heavy lifting of getting you above the treeline quickly, and sometimes extracts you from a valley bottom at the end.

This approach works especially well in places like Valdez, Alaska, where the Chugach Mountains offer enormous vertical relief and complex terrain. The snowpack here is deep and maritime, which means it can be stable one day and reactive the next. A good guide service treats heli assisted touring with the same seriousness as a full heli skiing operation. You still get a thorough safety briefing before the first flight. You still carry an avalanche beacon, shovel, and probe on your body at all times. You still go through an AST-1 avalanche course or its equivalent if you are new to the area. The helicopter does not replace judgment. It just changes the logistics.

The Gear Shift

One of the first things I noticed is how gear choices change when you mix heli access with touring. In a standard heli skiing day, you might ride a heavy freeride snowboard or a stiff alpine ski because you are only making downhill turns. In heli assisted touring, you need to be efficient on the uptrack too. That means touring skis with tech bindings or a splitboard, climbing skins in your pack, and poles that stow easily when you drop into a couloir. The A-Star helicopter has limited internal space, so you also want a pack that is streamlined but carries your rescue sled, extra layers, and a day's worth of food and water. I have seen riders try to bring too much gear and spend the whole first lap reorganizing. Less really is more.

The trade-off is real. You lose the convenience of lapping a single face all day, which is one of the great joys of heli skiing. But you gain the ability to ski or ride terrain that no one has touched in weeks, sometimes years, because it is not accessible from a single drop point. When the powder snow is deep and the visibility is good, that trade feels easy. When the snow is tracked out or the weather is marginal, you appreciate having the option to move to a different aspect or elevation under your own power.

Terrain and Decision Making

The Chugach Mountains are famous for steep terrain, and heli assisted touring opens up lines that would take multiple days to reach on foot. But the helicopter also changes how you think about avalanche risk. In a typical backcountry skiing day, you might start low and work up, testing the snowpack as you go. In heli assisted touring, you start high. That means your first turns of the day could be on a 40-degree slope with a wind-loaded pocket. The guide service compensates for this by choosing drop points that have been assessed from the air and by relying on local knowledge of how the snowpack behaves in different drainages around Valdez.

I remember one trip where we flew into a bowl that had not seen a track all season. The guide pointed out a subtle cross-loading pattern near the ridge crest and routed us onto a more protected aspect for the first run. That kind of judgment comes from experience and from reading the snow on the ground, not just from a satellite image. The helicopter gives you options, but it does not give you a pass on making good decisions. If anything, the speed of access means you need to be more deliberate about where you put your skis.

Who Should Try It

Heli assisted touring is not for beginners, but it is also not only for experts. A rider who is comfortable on black-diamond terrain in a resort, has some backcountry experience, and is solid on their avalanche transceiver and rescue skills will get a lot out of it. You do not need to be an alpinist or a big-mountain competitor. You do need to be fit enough to skin for several hours at altitude and carry a pack that includes a shovel, probe, and extra clothing. Most guide services will ask about your experience level and pair you with a group that matches. If you

have never taken an AST-1 avalanche course, do that first. It is not just a checkbox. It will make you a better partner in the backcountry, whether you are using a helicopter or a snowcat to get around.

Practical Details

Logistics for heli assisted touring vary by operation, but a few things are consistent. You typically meet at a helipad in the morning for a gear check and safety briefing. The guide will review the flight plan, the communication protocols, and the pickup schedule. You fly in groups of four or five, depending on the helicopter model and the weight of the group. The A-Star is common in this role because it handles high-altitude takeoffs well and has good visibility for the pilot. Once you are on the snow, the guide sets the pace and picks the route. You might get two or three runs in a day, sometimes more if the terrain is close and the snow is good.

I have done heli assisted touring in the Canadian Rockies and in the Alps, but the Chugach Mountains near Valdez offer something unique. The snowpack here is deep and persistent, and the terrain is big enough that you can ride for weeks without repeating a line. The guide services in Valdez tend to be small and focused, which means you get more attention and a better ratio of guides to guests. That matters when you are navigating complex terrain under time pressure.

Why It Works

The real value of heli assisted touring is not just the vertical or the access. It is the way it forces you to stay engaged all day. In a full heli skiing operation, you can sometimes zone out between runs because the helicopter does all the work. In heli assisted touring, you are always reading the snow, choosing your skin track, and thinking about the next line. That keeps the day feeling like a real backcountry skiing experience, not just a ride. You earn your turns, even if you got a lift to the top of the ridge.

For riders who are comfortable with avalanche terrain and want to explore bigger country without committing to a multi-day expedition, heli assisted touring is a solid option. It sits in a sweet spot between effort and reward, and it rewards good judgment as much as it rewards athletic ability. If you have ever stood on a ridge in the Chugach Mountains and wished you could see what was on the other side without spending three days hiking, this is the way to do it.