

Golf tourism

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Simon and Louise Hudson

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

10 The Future for Golf Tourism

Spotlight: Heli-Golf takes golf vacations to a whole new elevation



An Astar helicopter flies over the 5th green at Fernie Golf & Country Club, British Columbia, courtesy of Ryan McKenzie

Luke Haberman must have one of the golf industry's plum jobs – guiding golf tours via helicopter in Canada's Rocky and Purcell Mountains. Haberman launched the innovative tour company in 2007 in the Kootenay region of British Columbia. Western Canadian Golf Tours specializes in 'Heli-Golf', using helicopters to oversee courses with golf professionals on board to define players' strategy from an aerial perspective before tackling the course.

Haberman studied Golf Management and Operations at Selkirk College in Nelson, BC, and wanted to combine his love for both golf and skiing in his career choices. 'I worked for a heli ski company for a while and did my research with them. I saw the benefit of Heli-Golf in the Kimberley-Fernie area,' he explained. When looking at career opportunities he dismissed the idea of becoming a club golf pro: 'The average CPGA assistant is just scraping by, maybe getting \$100 handshakes once in a while but not enough to survive. So I had to find something more lucrative,' he said.

Golf Tourism

In the early days of golf clubs, pro shops were typically owned and run by the course's golf pro, giving them a secondary source of income. Haberman said initial startups for pro shops are expensive, hence new clubs often want pros to take on the extra financial burden. 'The pros would traditionally get a 15-year contract often, and then it's all gravy after the initial costs,' he explained. 'Now, when pros retire, the clubs are taking over the shops as they want the revenue.'

Backed with the know-how and confidence he garnered from his golf management course, Haberman started to plan his own golf business in 2006. 'My professors were all ex golf club managers and topnotch people from the industry. It was definitely beneficial because of the contacts I made. If I'd stayed at one specific golf club for those two years then I would have been further up the ladder maybe,' he said. 'But with people to help, experts to call upon, there's a great safety net to try to go it alone.'

Looking for something niche rather than run of the mill, Haberman came up with the idea of running Heli-Golf as well as Heli-Fishing guided tours. A three-handicap himself with the goal of reaching par in 2009, Haberman said that a guide makes all the difference for golfers, saving them three to five strokes. 'Because pros go round with the players they can work on aspects such as their bunker game and solve issues. We are able to use the time to assess the specific coaching needs of each player,' said Haberman. Western Canadian also offers traditional lessons as well as access to practice facilities.

The heli tours are customized to suit both tourists and corporate groups: 'Nothing is cookie cutter, no two tours are the same,' he said. Western Canadian personnel run players' clubs and equipment by car to the golf club so that everything is ready for the guests when they arrive from their aerial tour of the course. Groups are usually threesomes or sixes with either Haberman or a CPGA professional attending as guide and instructor. 'Before playing, we do a flight over the course to point out signature holes. We then land on the course, hop out and away we go,' said Haberman.

Although clubs were initially worried that helicopters could interrupt other golfers' play, they found that people were fascinated rather than annoyed by the choppers. 'People are infatuated with helicopters so we have no issues with it, they just gather and watch, wide-eyed and excited and wave at us,' he explained.

The Western Canadian Golf Tours' website details various packages, including accommodation, high-end meals, guides, transportation, practice facilities, and home video swing analysis. Haberman has contracts with local speciality restaurants such as the Old Bauernhaus in Kimberley. The 350-year-old Bavarian building was dismantled and transported to Canada in 1989 and now is renowned for its Alpine cuisine. Packages runs from \$2500 for a two-day tour to \$8750 for the 'Ultimate Week Heli-Golf Tour' which includes seven days and nights, CPGA lessons, heli flights, guides, and a visit to Ainsworth Hot Springs on Kootenay Lake. 'The three-day tour is the most popular. It's a question of time over money,' said Haberman. Flights can also be provided via Pacific Coastal, Central Mountain Air, Air Canada and Delta.

Chapter extract

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