

WITH the Alps overcrowded and the North American ski market 'mature', Asia is gearing up to become the boom destination for skiers in the 21st century. Resorts are opening up in a dozen Asian countries; but for Europeans the most exciting and immediately accessible development is a new heli-skiing operation in Nepal. For the first time the spectacular Himalayan kingdom has granted a licence for heli-skiing, creating almost limitless opportunities for skiers and boarders to make first descents of the mountains – and choose names for the runs afterwards.

Each and every first descent will be recorded by Himalayan Heli Ski Guides, the company operating the new venture, on a map that will show the runs, name them and give an account of the first descent. In addition, every skier or boarder involved will be given a certificate stating the date and time of the descent – and of course the vertical drop and gradient of the run.

Craig Calonica, director of Himalayan Heli Ski Guides, enthuses about heli-skiing 'entering a new dimension. We're talking about skiing in

SKIING OUT OF THE SKIES

Helicopters are opening up descents in Nepal's Himalayas, and 300 resorts are planned in China: Asian skiing is spreading high and wide. Except in Japan, where it is going downhill fast. **Patrick Thorne** reports

the biggest, highest and most outrageous mountain range in the world. This is pure adventure.' Calonica, a former US ski racer now based in Chamonix, has climbed and skied in Nepal for 22 years and made several attempts to ski down Mount Everest. Assisting him will be a group of experienced US and European ski guides.

The helicopter trips will go into areas offering descents suitable for skiers of different skill-levels, ranging from effortless powder fields through

'We're talking about skiing the biggest, highest mountain range in the world'

moderate and advanced slopes to extreme terrain. This winter, the company will concentrate on the Annapurna region, plus terrain either around the base of Mount Everest or in the less well-known Dolpo area near Tibet. The final decision will depend on snow conditions when the season begins in mid-January; but the Dolpo area near Tibet has one of the best snow records in Nepal plus the added interest of the local Tibetan influence.

Himalayan Heli Ski Guides is marketing the holidays more at skiers looking for a 'trip of a lifetime' adventure than those intent on clocking up as many long descents as possible. But the 'vertical' figures are impressive: spread over six runs, 12,000 metres per day

should be possible when the weather is clear.

The company has chosen the Yak & Yeti hotel in Kathmandu as its base, but for guests who would prefer to rough it in a tent, there will be a base camp set up in each ski area, staffed by sherpas. In late October prices had not been finalised but a week's skiing as part of a group will probably cost £3,500 or more, without flights to Nepal.

Other Asian countries are also hoping to cash in on skiing. China, which put in a bid for the 2010 Winter Olympics but was knocked out in the first round, aims to open 300 ski areas by the end of the decade. And the Thai tourist destination of Chiang Mai has been earmarked by Burma's >

