

## A leap of faith and a cool rush

March 29, 2008

**There is no more dramatic and memorable way to hit the slopes than jumping from a helicopter. Jacquelin Magnay takes one not-so-small step.**

The whomp whomp of the helicopter is deafening. It flies in low and fast. We're huddled low behind our guide with our skis about five metres away. This small gap is the narrow landing corridor for the chopper; it lurches sideways and appears to come directly for us. The snow whips up into an eddy, shards of ice crystals exfoliating any exposed parts of the face. Within this snowstorm, the chopper nests on a semi-flat ridge high in the Monashee Mountains above Blue River in the midst of British Columbia, Canada. It has come to collect us and take us higher for our next ski run.

Pick-ups and drop-offs resemble a tight military operation at Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing. The guide calls in a chopper and within minutes it arrives. Scrambling in and out, heads ducked, waiting for its approach or departure, reminds me of scenes from M\*A\*S\*H. Up to 12 helicopters shuttle skiers to otherwise inaccessible runs in a vast area - 4500 square kilometres of elevated wilderness spanning 1000 mountain peaks. Mix in a heavy dash of testosterone - the skiers and most guides are predominantly men - and the experience is thrilling, even before hitting the slopes.

Of all the frightening scenarios I had played out in my mind before arriving for three days of heli-skiing at Wiegele's remote resort nestled between two mountain ranges, the Caribou and Monashee, I had not anticipated the noise and hair-raising proximity of the chopper. Ridiculous now that I look back, given the helicopter is the key.

Instead, my biggest fear was struggling through steep chutes of waist-deep powder and the cold. The first morning it is minus 25 degrees and I add another layer of thermal clothes, a couple of those indispensable hand and toe warmers and pray that my feet will have some semblance of feeling when I need it. In common with most Australian skiers, I have limited powder experience and even less time spent on the fat powder skis. I had visions of holding up the group and, of course, falling.

Yet all of my fears are groundless. Even the plunging temperatures are manageable, for up high on the peaks the temperature is far warmer, at minus eight degrees.

The night before we arrive we meet an experienced guide in the operation, Ron Betts. One of the most fluid skiers in the world, he has spent some of his Canadian summers instructing skiers at Perisher Blue for the past decade. He is reassuring. Betts says it is a fallacy that heli-skiing is "extreme". That myth, he says, is reserved for James Bond movies. "It is just like catching a lift to the top of any mountain resort in the world," he says, "except here the lift is a helicopter."

And after my first day of heli-skiing, I agree. Adrenalin racing? Yes. Anxious? Yes. Difficult? At times. And safe? Yes.

Skiers are required to have at least "intermediate" skills, "capable of dealing with the challenges presented by deep snow, helicopter transportation and backcountry skiing".

The resort comprises luxuriously appointed hand-cut wooden lodges with roaring fires, super-comfy beds and spa baths, and is a 2 1/2 hour drive from Kamloops airport along a sealed road. Small private aircraft can land at the Blue River airport just 500 metres away, the same place where the helicopters are housed overnight in heated hangars. At 8.15am on the dot every morning the choppers land on various landing pads in the middle of the resort, quickly pick up skiers and head off in different directions to predetermined mountain peaks.

The snow we encounter is magical light powder and boot deep. On the glacier known as Foster, about 15 minutes' flying time from the resort, it is firmish. In another location, about six minutes' further flying time away in the lower tree runs among a burned-out forest called Howard's Burn, there is deeper powder. It's much more challenging here, requiring skiers to negotiate stumps, humps, short pine trees, dips and hollows and a couple of gullies.

During the next two days the terrain becomes steeper as our lead guide, Barry "the Powder Poodle" Widas, maps out more tree runs to find deeper powder stashes and a couple of long, lung-busting runs from the top of various peaks.

There is little time for rest. We fly in, listen to Barry's instructions and ski down behind him. Once one run is over, we tie our skis and poles together, lay them in a pile and find our place kneeling behind Richard, our tail guide. Immediately we sense the vibrations of a chopper echoing around the valley and then it appears, suddenly, heading straight towards us.

The most tiring part is trudging through deep snow and climbing in and out of our helicopter with 10 other skiers and our guides, up to 15 times a day. The skiing is far easier. The short chopper rides ever skywards give us some relief - just enough time to munch on chocolate and nuts, and gulp down some water. Then we'll find the sweetest, most glorious snow to ski down - and do it all again.

In three days we ski 72,000 vertical feet (21,946 metres). One thigh-burning day we clock up 27,000 vertical feet (8230 metres), most of it within the altitudes of 3500 metres and 1000 metres. Barry says this number of vertical feet is extraordinary for a three-day group. "That is what some get in an entire week," he says. Wiegele's company guarantees a minimum figure of 80,000 vertical feet (24,384 metres) of skiing for a seven-day tour, or you get a credit.

Every morning the guides and pilots meet to decide the runs of the day, factoring in wind conditions, temperatures from three remote weather stations, avalanche risk and the results of snow-pit analyses. (The guides dig at least one pit each day to record snow depth, density and type of snow layers.)

The local wildlife is also considered; all sightings of animals are recorded and accommodated in planning the ski runs and helicopter flight paths. On one brilliant morning, high on a peak, we see snow leopard tracks; judging by the size of the paw print, it's one animal we don't want to encounter. We decide to veer at right angles to the tracks.

We're fortunate to enjoy blue skies and clear weather but sometimes the wind conditions and snowfall can delay, shorten or even scupper a day's skiing. Wiegele is vigilant about safety issues. If skiers don't listen to the instructions of their guides, their money is refunded and they're sent home. No room for cowboys here. Unlike some other heli-ski operations around the world, Wiegele has two guides with each group of 10 skiers, and they're highly trained in guiding, mountaineering and ski instructing.

Only once did we ski a slope with a moderate risk of avalanche, and then under careful monitoring. Each skier waits until the preceding one has skied the slope. At all times throughout the heli-ski experience, skiers must wear a transceiver that emits a signal to assist rescuers if an avalanche occurs. Every second skier carries a backpack with rescue shovel, probe and other emergency gear to dig out any buried skiers.

Wiegele moved to Canada from post-war Austria because it had higher mountains than his other option for migration: Australia. A passionate and skilled skier, he scouted the Monashee and Caribou mountains around Blue River for years to find the best untracked ski conditions. He can remember climbing with a group of friends to the top of a local peak in the mid-1960s and while one of the party was lagging behind, they joked that they should get a helicopter to transport them. The joke turned into a germ of an idea and he began his heli-ski business in 1970.

Wiegele's heli-skiing resort is considered one of the top-end places in the world to ski at altitude. In our group there are a couple of US property developers, a surgeon, a retired bonds trader, an architect and an accountant. They're all mad-keen skiers, with holiday homes in Tuleride, Whistler and Aspen. One of them, not yet 50 but long retired and living in Aspen, has arrived in Blue River in his own jet. All of them have heli-skied for years.

There are, of course, more exclusive ski packages available that offer the ultimate in privacy for the well heeled. The company has the super-stylish Albreda Lodge, a fly-in-fly-out operation 45 kilometres north of the main resort. Clients can book out the lodge for their own group of four to 20 people.

Most people reckon the camaraderie and storytelling at the resort's main lodge is the best part of the trip, rivalled only by the sumptuous food - including fresh lobster, mussels, a vast array of canapes and wicked cinnamon bun desserts to fuel up for the next day's skiing. Accommodation in the main resort is top notch. It houses two necessary luxuries: a masseur and a physiotherapist.

### **Ready to take the plunge**

SKIERS need to find their "ski legs" before hitting the deep powder conditions of a heli-ski trip and three British Columbia resorts - Sun Peaks, Big White and Silver Star - are within half a day's drive or a short plane trip from Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing at Blue River.

Skiing for at least five days before climbing into a chopper - even longer if time and budget allow - is essential to ensure the knees and, perhaps more importantly, the lungs, are up to the task. For ideal preparation skiers will have spent a week or so at an Australian resort in winter to finetune technique, perhaps completing a high-intensity training program for a dash of extra style. Then they will have hit the gym for a month or so of lunges and leg presses.

Skiing in the Canadian interior is different to experiencing Australia's heavier snow pack. The snow is lighter and deeper, and the skis find little resistance. It is also a lot colder; two layers of thermals are necessary on chilly days.

None of these factors deters an influx of Australian families who gather at the three popular Canadian resorts. One of our fellow heli-skiers has left his family at Sun Peaks, 2 1/2 hours' drive away near Kamloops. Sun Peaks has four ski mountains, the highest vertical drop of three resorts at 2891 feet and the irrepressible ski legend and Olympic champion Nancy Greene.

Silver Star, which is close to Vernon and serviced by Kelowna airport, two hours south of Kamloops, is a more intimate resort with a couple of special secrets - a back mountainside of double black runs

with terrifying names such as Headwall and Chute Five to test nerves. There are, of course, more benign beginner and intermediate slopes on the front. To fuel up at night there is the Paradise Camp dinner tour. This involves a 20-minute ride on a snowcat, which climbs the steep pitches that the very best skiers love to hurtle down the next morning, while you are snuggled into a cashmere blanket. The cat drops off its passengers at the top of the mountain at a warm, candlelit hut. Here, at Paradise Camp, the food is as good as the top-notch local wine list.

Also near Kelowna in the Okanagan Valley is the fun, funky and family-friendly resort of Big White. It is ski-in, ski-out to a great array of runs, most for intermediate skiers. Parents love this resort: lifts at the door, a gondola linking the ice-skating rink, snowmobile fun (including some cute children-sized models) and the popular bonfire and free hot chocolate stations. There are children's craft activities, film nights, bingo and carnival nights. Oh, and there's skiing, too.

One of the 22 Big White hosts is Kevin, a Brisbane company director, who works for six months in Australia. He then transforms into a "ski bum", hosting free tours of the mountain.

At all three resorts the accommodation is predominantly apartments, with self-catering options. Some of the units and lodges are ideal for a family or several families staying together. Singer John Farnham and his family are regulars at Big White; former Ironman Grant Kenny and his family are often at Silver Star.

*Jacquelin Magnay travelled courtesy of Air Canada and Tourism British Columbia.*

## **FAST FACTS**

### **Getting there**

The nearest international airport to the British Columbia ski resorts is Vancouver. Air Canada flies non-stop from Sydney to Vancouver for \$1870, while Melbourne passengers pay \$1970, flying Qantas to Sydney and onward with Air Canada. China Eastern Airlines has a fare for \$1518 with a paid overnight stop in Shanghai.

Fares to Kelowna (for Big White and Silver Star resorts) are from \$106 one way. Fares to Kamloops, the nearest major town to Sun Peaks Resort, are from \$124 one way. Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing is at Blue River, 230km north-east of Kamloops. There are limited direct flights from Vancouver to Blue River and more from Vancouver to Kamloops, with a courtesy shuttle bus to the resort.

### **Skiing there**

There are three-, five- and seven-day packages at Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing, although only the latter are available during peak season. Prices range from \$C4047 (\$4380) a person for three days to \$C10,164 a person for seven days, including guaranteed minimum vertical feet of skiing, luxury twin-share accommodation, three meals daily and ski hire. Phone +125 0673 8381 or see [www.wiegele.com](http://www.wiegele.com).

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/03/27/1206207279399.html>*