

X Games

The world's fastest private jet and a Bell 212 helicopter are the ticket to the greatest secret in skiing. And some important style points.

by Dr. Bob Arnot

Draw up a list of the world's greatest ski resorts: Vail, Zermatt, Chamonix, Whistler . . . Mike Wiegele's. Yes, Mike Wiegele's. This remarkable Shangri-La, nestled between the Monashee and Caribou mountains in British Columbia, is quite simply the largest and most spectacular ski destination in North America. With more than 1.2 million acres and 1,000 peaks, it is large enough to swallow every ski area in North America and have room to spare. Named for the legendary 70-year-old Austrian skier who continues to run it, the resort is like a fairy-tale version of a ski town, all of it constructed of hand-hewn yellow cedar.

At night, the lights twinkle under the eaves in the still mountain air as you stroll along the footpaths banked high with snow and scurry inside the vaulted great room of your lodge to warm up around the massive stone hearth. Each of the guest lodges looks like something out of Architectural Digest: rustic chandeliers hanging from exposed-beam ceilings, sleigh beds piled high with goose down, boot blowers and heated closets to dry ski clothes, basement-level sauna and Jacuzzi and — most important of all — a masseuse.

There's never a lift line at Wiegele's, but then there are no lifts either. Every trip up the mountain is by heated A-Star or Bell helicopter. And have I mentioned the snow? Look at a winter weather map and you'll see that Wiegele's — located at the very spot where massive low-pressure systems off the Pacific slam into the cold, crisp air barreling down from the Arctic — is one of Mother Nature's most effective snowmaking machines. As global warming heats up, this unheralded resort could become one of the last sure things in skiing.

The one catch is that Wiegele's is not exactly the easiest spot to get to. From my home in New England, it's a 12-hour trip by commercial airline: Burlington to Boston to Toronto to Calgary to Kamloops to Blue River. Just one storm or missed connection can easily stretch it to an all-day slog. Of course, if you planned on hauling all the way out there commercial, you probably wouldn't be reading this. So you'll be happy to know that if, like my party of six, you hop aboard a NetJets Citation X, the trip from Boston shrinks to less than six hours: just over four for the Citation to Kamloops, and 40 minutes for the helicopter to the short strip right at Mike Wiegele's door.



Kill Bob

It starts somewhere over Minnesota. I've been regaling my traveling companions — Rob, our avid-sportsman group leader and owner of the Citation share; Billy, the near-professional-caliber cyclist and charity fundraiser; Rob's friends Jorge the Argentine banker and financier brothers Paul and Ham — with my recent string of adventure mishaps while shooting the series *Dr. Danger for Mojo TV*.

Between riding on patrol in Afghanistan, rock climbing in Saudi Arabia and motorcycling in Yemen, I'd already broken a tooth, dislocated a shoulder and elbow and wrecked my right hip. The oldest of the group is at least a decade my junior, and I'm hoping these stories might get them to take it a little easier on me. However, I soon learn that Jorge has climbed half the Andes and is a guide-level heliskiier; and that Paul and Ham, so stolid and buttoned-down on the surface, plan to take some major air over the next several days. Suddenly, I note the raised eyebrows, the curled lips, the way they all seem to be sizing me up, as if calculating which aging bone or joint is likely to give out next. My producers always joke that it's not considered a successful trip unless Dr. Bob winds up in the hospital.

I'm worried now that this pack of alpha dogs may be working off the same memo. The common perception of heliskiing is of skiers leaping out of a helicopter in mid-flight onto a nearly sheer cliff face. In truth, though, in recent years the sport has gone much more mainstream. At most heliskiing destinations such as Wiegele's, you now have your choice of all sorts of runs, many of them no steeper — and far less heavily trafficked and bumped up — than the blue trail at your local ski area. Fat skis have helped as well, lowering the bar of difficulty to within range of even the average intermediate skier. What was once just the purview of daredevils who had little interest in growing old has become the ultimate bonding experience for almost any couple or group of friends. The only exception, it seems, is if you show up with five hyper-competitive contenders for the Banker Gravity Games 2008. In that case, better bring your insurance card.

As dawn breaks on a crystal morning, it's 15 degrees below zero — and I feel great. The splitting altitude headache I usually wake up with on the first morning at a ski resort is thankfully MIA, owing to the fact that the lodges at Wiegele's reside at only 2,040 feet. Our runs today will range from 3,400 feet to a staggering 11,600, but with Wiegele's high-octane "lift" system we'll be back down to 2,040 before our synapses have a chance to notice.

Before we can go anywhere, though, we need to get in some avalanche training. Out behind the main lodge, we meet our guides, TJ and Tim, who hand each of us our transceiver. They then have us turn around while they bury one of the transceivers in the six feet of snow before demonstrating the proper technique for locating and digging out one of our companions. Not the sort of search and reconnaissance I'm used to on a ski vacation (Hi, can you hear me now? I'm in the restaurant at the foot of Little Nell. Where are you?), but it's part of what's helped Wiegele's achieve an enviable safety record. Last night, while we were taking an inaugural soak in the Jacuzzi, our guides were poring over dozens of charts and snow data from sensors throughout the range, choosing between 1,000+ possible landing sites to find the best and safest routes for us to ski down today. The more I think about it, at a time when North American avalanches claim an average of 40 skiers a year, we're probably safer here than ducking any rope into the back country at Aspen or Vail.

As the sun pierces the pines, we drag our skis to the Bell 212 and lift off with 12 onboard. Within seconds we're soaring up into the mountains. The views are astounding: We pass just feet above a sheer cliff and sea-blue glacier, majestic alpine peaks and emerald lakes stretching clean to the horizon.

After landing, we exit the left side of the aircraft and kneel in the snow as the guides gather our skis. The helicopter alights for the landing zone below, nearly blowing me face-first into the snow. Tim, followed in turn by his fellow guide, then skis the slope in a series of large Zs to test the snow and break loose any potential avalanches. With a pair of 190cm Atomic Heli Daddys I picked out at the equipment lodge last night, I slash down the slope like a slalom racer.



The snow is astonishing: creamy, smooth powder that the boards cut through with the ease of a heated knife. From a wide-open alpine vista at the top I descend into an enormous open forest for the run to the valley floor. The first part is easy; the second part . . . not so much. "Bob," I hear TJ calling from below, "just let your skis go." Thwack, off comes a branch. Thwack, death to a small scrub pine. Thwack, another branch. I'm waiting for the Sierra Club to come hunt me down any second, but I do seem to be getting the hang of it until I hear more yelling ("Bob, more to the left! No, no, now the right!") and — ugh — end up in a tree well.

Tree wells are the alpine equivalent of quicksand, sucking in unsuspecting skiers who try to turn too closely around big trees. They're even less fun to get out of than into, but I eventually extricate myself and finish the run with a couple of flourishing turns, sending a big fantail of snow onto the helo. Bob, our veteran pilot, rolls his eyes. I retreat into the cabin, and we take off for the next peak.



These runs are more adventuresome — one has a firm crust, which Ham, Paul and Rob ski flawlessly. “You’re working too hard,” they advise, smiling wide. “Just let ‘em rip.” Sure, I say to myself. I know where this is going. Let ‘em rip right off a cliff! One after the other — woosh, woosh, woosh — the guys rip down the mountain, leaving me in their wake. Billy, the cycling star, takes a jump and nails an impressive 360. No lack of testosterone here! At day’s end, we’re met at the heliport by snow cat and taken to our lodge for our pre-dinner massages. The evening’s festivities begin in earnest in an elegant dining room with a toast by Herr Wiegele, a raw bar of glistening Malpeques and a carving table groaning under a slab of venison. Our guides join in for a thorough ribbing about the day’s mishaps, and it’s at that point that I catch sight of the one obligatory beautiful woman you always meet on a buddy trip like this. Her name is Eleanor, and she has already caught the attention of every single (and not-so-single) male in the vicinity. The competition is on to see which of us can impress her with the wildest stories. I trot out my Dr. Danger injury report, which seems to take the top prize — yes, she’ll be delighted to fly with me on our helo.

Each subsequent day is like the one before, with achingly blue skies, perfect whipped-cream snow . . . and Eleanor. I’m skiing way over my head. I’ve even learned to avoid the tree wells, and she seems impressed. But just when I think I’m really getting somewhere, I mosey up one evening to the bar in my bright orange Norwegian ski team jacket, only to spy Eleanor surrounded by four other gentlemen wearing the very same jacket.

“Hey!” I call.

“Where are you guys from?”

“We’re from the Norwegian national ski team. You?”

“Hey, I’m a big fan!” I say, and quietly disappear before they (or Eleanor) can determine that I acquired their national team uniform one night in a bar in Innsbruck in a trade for several drinks and a New England Patriots Super Bowl cap. By the final day, my skiing has improved to the point that even TJ and Tim have ceased barking orders from down the slope. I’ve gotten forward on my skis; my turns are smooth, effortless and fast. Now it’s time to bust the banker boys from Boston. Right before lunch, three of us take off in hot pursuit of TJ. I move right to pass Ham and Billy. Suddenly, I feel the earth open up below me. I instinctively jam my right pole into the snow and... Thud. “Has anyone seen Bob?”

“Uh, guys, down here. Owww, that hurts.”

I’ve fallen about 15 feet and felt a terrible rip upon impact. TJ helps me loosen my jacket. My right shoulder has swollen to the size of the venison carving station and turned a similar color. The guys gather around, looking concerned. I have to admit, they’re extremely solicitous . . . almost too much so. “Bob, are you sure you don’t want to take the helicopter back now? Maybe we should call the Medevac chopper and have them airlift you to the hospi—”

OK, not so fast. I prop myself up on my one good arm: “Tim, you got a sling in that pack?”

“Indeed, Bob.”

“Then why don’t you tape me up so we can get back to skiing?” The last three runs of the day are just awesome — awesome snow, awesome turns and awesome expressions of admiration on my companions’ faces as I try to keep from passing out from the pain. We ski up until 3 p.m., at which point our helicopter flies us directly to the charter prop plane waiting at Blue River for the 40-minute flight to Kamloops.



On the Citation, one of the crew discreetly slips me a fistful of Ibuprofen with my double Macallan, and I lean back in the black-leather swivel seat and try to enjoy the ride. Rob’s Citation completes the 2,068-nautical-mile trip from Kamloops to Boston in what must be a near-record four hours and five minutes, landing just after 11 p.m. My throbbing shoulder and I are home by midnight. Just before my head hits the pillow, in the seconds before further meds take effect, I reflect back on the Dr. Bob over-under injury pool and give myself — ouch — a pat on the back: The trip has, indeed, been a success.