



**10 BARREL  
BREWING CO**



**COAST TRIP**  
GUAVA CREAM ALE - NOW AVAILABLE!



No regrets at Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing. PHOTO: Franklin Towers

# The Greatest Guilty Pleasure of All Time

Helicopter skiing at Mike Wiegele's, in British Columbia, is a gluttonous feast of powder

March 12, 2018 | By Matt Hansen

*This story originally published in the February 2018 issue of POWDER (Volume 46, Issue 6). To have award-winning content delivered to your door, subscribe now.*

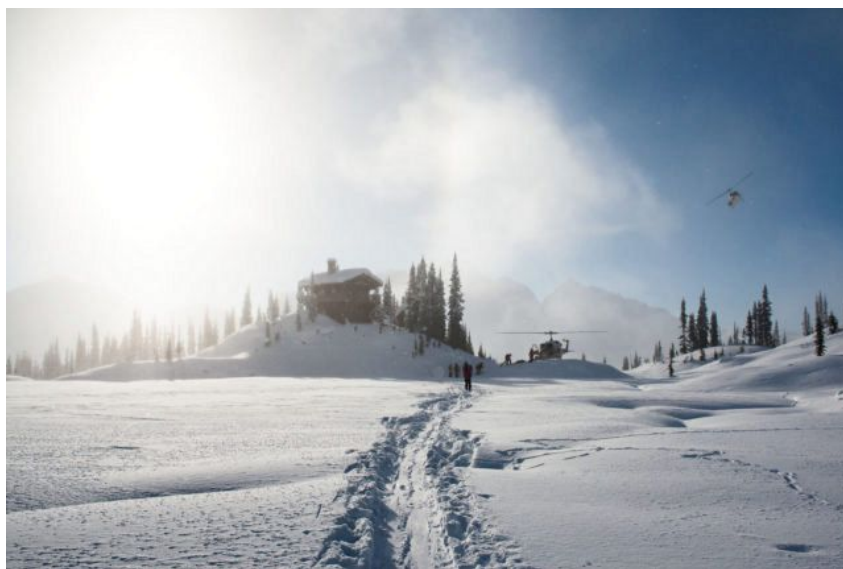
**chest cold had turned into something more serious.** For some reason, my fingers and toes were starting to go numb. Through exhausted eyes, I could see my fingertips turning gray and wrinkled, like I'd spent too much time in a cold pool.

I concentrated on my raspy breathing and continued forward. I held out my passport and kept telling myself, "Just get on the plane." *Baby steps*, I thought, *baby steps*.

Feeling like death warmed over is not exactly the departure you'd expect after a week of helicopter skiing with Mike Wiegele, one of the cushiest and infinitely refined outfits in the skiing world. Given Wiegele's 46-year reputation for servicing mostly older gentlemen of a certain income tax bracket, it was embarrassing to admit that it (along with a heavy travel schedule beforehand) had left me with a 104-degree temperature and double-lung pneumonia, confined to my bed and an oxygen machine for five days.

At home recovering, feeling the cold burn of oxygen coursing through my nostrils and into my lungs, I started to regret the whole damn thing. I hated my lack of self-discipline, my inability to recognize certain limits, my gluttonous desire to take, take, take. I knew I was sick and that the negative temperatures blanketing the Monashees that week, while preserving perfect powder, would only make it worse.

But I went skiing anyway. Because when a Bell 212 helicopter comes roaring through the sky to gather you and all your gear and lifts you weightlessly into the vast, sparkling immaculateness of the most beautiful mountain range you've ever seen, you simply cannot, under any circumstances, ever say no.



Lunch includes hot soup and a warm backcountry cabin. PHOTO: Franklin Towers

through the air like diamond dust, unaffected by gravity and replenished by the smoky contrails of yet another powder turn.

It was December 11, 2016--early for powder skiing, no matter where you are--and minus 20 degrees. With every icy breath, I could feel something ugly rising in my chest. But if there's anything that'll take your mind off the numbing oppressiveness of subzero temperatures, it is the maelstrom of rotor wash as you climb aboard a helicopter (caution: don't break the door, it costs more than your life), buckle up, and watch the trees fall away as you lift off. Then it touches down, you hop out, and find yourself in the middle of a sea of mountains and perched above thousands of feet of untracked powder--about to enjoy the greatest guilty pleasure of all time.

ADVERTISING

[Learn more](#)

Our lead guide, a 54-year-old New Zealander named Bill Mark, sorted our skis and stepped into his own. Tall and lean, he had been with Wiegele's since 1999, and employed the calm demeanor of a seasoned guide. The tail guide was Marius Marginean, 46, one of the 'new guys' who had worked with the outfit for six years. After we clicked into our skis, Mark explained the run, where to ski based on his track, and then dropped in, skiing with his heavy guide pack unbuckled at the waist. From there, he wiggled through knee-deep powder, skiing without emotion, if there ever was such a thing, far below until he was just a mere speck.

---

*I told him that sometimes, as a writer, I feel guilty for over-romanticizing and embellishing the beauty of skiing. He took a breath and said, "That's not possible."*

---

Following his track was a chance to live out childhood fantasies. The Austrian Hans Gmoser gave birth to helicopter skiing in the nearby Bugaboo Mountains in 1965. Five years later, his good friend Mike Wiegele, another young Austrian, started his own operation in BC's northern interior. Together, they crafted heli

The iconic image of the Flying V comes from Wiegele World--groups of one-piece clad skiers descending an enormous glacier all at the same time, the helicopter racing just over their heads. So diving into a slope of perfect snow, suspected slope angle around 36 degrees (not steep, not scary), it was hard not to imitate the '80s wiggle: knees together, leaning back a bit, arms outstretched to that glorious sundog. But as the slope and speed increased, modern technique and equipment took over, and I filled up my soul till it was overflowing, selfishly and without remorse.

Midslope, I pulled up next to where Mark had stopped. We both looked out into the sea of mountains, the valley floor filled with dense fog. I told him that sometimes, as a writer, I feel guilty for over-romanticizing and embellishing the beauty of skiing. He took a breath and said, "That's not possible."



Jay Pyur goes for the day ball. PHOTO: Franklin Towers

### **Standard protocol for a morning at Wiegele's is to first hit the ski shop.**

Actually, that's not quite accurate. The first thing is to hit the breakfast hall to stuff your face with a mountain of bacon and scrambled eggs, and maybe some oatmeal with dates and fresh berries, a freshly made chocolate croissant, blueberry muffin, and strawberry-banana smoothie for good measure, just to make sure you don't die of starvation out there--though you might collapse of Heli Belly after struggling to buckle your boots, which, if you were smart the evening before, have been warmed for you on the dry rack in the ski shop.

One morning after breakfast, I found my boots near a very used white Smith helmet and white Atomic Redsters. The boots' spine had been labeled "Mike" in black magic marker. Mike was a guest like me, I presumed, until Mike Wiegele, who is 79 years old, walked into the shop and lifted them off the rack. Small in stature and very soft-spoken, he greeted the handful of skiers in the shop before sitting down on the bench to put on his stiff, four-buckle boots.



Like Dave McCoy, Warren Miller, Klaus Obermeyer, and Betsy Pratt, Wiegele is part of a generation of skiing royalty that established skiing in North America after the Great War. Raised in Austria in the aftermath of World War II, he grew up the youngest of five children. Unlike his heli-skiing guests, Wiegele's family did not have a lot of money. As he tells it, he always had hand-me-down skis and lederhosen.

*"I have a philosophy that you have to introduce yourself to the mountain, not the other way around," Wiegele says. "Even though the mountain doesn't speak, I think it does. You have to listen to it, accept it in the mountains, and you will find out pretty quick if it's a friendly place or not."*

At the age of 20, he immigrated to Canada and started ski instructing at Mont-Tremblant before moving on to Sugar Bowl, California. One day after skiing, he was in the lodge when Hannes Schroll, the Austrian who had founded the ski area, barreled over to him and said he needed to go to Canada to find the best snow. Moving north, Wiegele started a ski school in Lake Louise, where he met his wife, Bonnie, and as an instructor produced six national team athletes.

But he wanted to launch his own operation, perhaps build a new ski area. Heli skiing wasn't exactly on his radar yet. He simply aimed to find the perfect combination of a "good mountain, good glacier, and good snow." Always with respect for his surroundings, he eventually began exploring the wild north country of interior BC.

"I have a philosophy that you have to introduce yourself to the mountain, not the other way around," he says. "Even though the mountain doesn't speak, I think it does. You have to listen to it, accept it in the mountains, and you will find out pretty quick if it's a friendly place or not."

His pursuit led him to the North Thompson River Valley, which sits in a weather belt between the Cariboo and Monashee mountain ranges and produces 400 inches of annual snowfall. In 1970, he founded Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing out of Valemount but soon moved 60 miles south to Blue River, a logging town

main economic driver for the region, employing up to 200 staff (including 35 guides and 13 doctors) and servicing 2,500 skiers every winter. Wiegele's family (he and Bonnie have a daughter, Michelle) has also become a fixture in Blue River, giving generously to the small 20-pupil elementary school, holding community races, hosting Christmas gatherings for local children, and occasionally taking them skiing.

In the shop that morning, Wiegele went about his business, doing the requisite skier exercise of talking about the weather and putting on his ski boots.

Then he quietly called to Dan Tyndall, the shop manager. Wiegele had fallen on his skis the week before, and had taken a rare few days off. Today, he needed a little help. So Tyndall came over from behind the counter and buckled Wiegele's boots for him, with just a little bit of friendly ribbing. After 46 years of skiing powder, the man had earned a butler for his buckles.



Located in the tiny town of Blue River, Wiegele's sits in the middle of a powder vortex.

PHOTO: Franklin Towers

**Over five days, I skied steep trees like you find around Nelson, down glaciers that dwarfed football stadiums, rolling terrain peppered with small trees and cliff bands,** through deep ravines with steep drop offs, and a casual meadow home to a rather grouchy ptarmigan who chased off anyone who got too close. The runs blurred together. Marginean once playfully scolded me for crossing a track. Lunches, held out in the snow next to the resting helicopter, were punctuated by hot soup from a thermos, deli sandwiches, hot cider, and full-sized Snickers bars.

On two occasions, the last run of the day came down a heavenly slope, called Cedar West, that was dotted with trees encased with thick rime. As the late afternoon light bathed the mountain in a soft glow, Mark let us all ski it

On the final morning, I could hardly get out of bed. My chest and throat burned with molten lava. I thought I was going to pass out just putting on my ski socks. All I could stomach for breakfast was hot tea and a few scoops of oatmeal.

A couple hours later, I found myself on my skis, standing atop a slope called Elk Run. Starting out as a steep headwall, it dropped 2,000 vertical feet to a forested valley floor, like West Rustler at Alta, but without the pesky imperfections from other skiers. Only a few of the runs we skied throughout the week could be taken in one fell swoop. Most were skied from safe zone to safe zone, hopping between islands of trees or rocks a few hundred yards apart. But Elk Run, Mark informed us, would be skied nonstop, T to B.

In the 17 years that Mark had been guiding at Wiegele's, he'd never skied it. Either group dynamics or snow conditions didn't allow it. But today, Elk Run was prime for the taking, and off he went, noodling his perfectly casual turns down the skier's right flank, all the way to the valley floor.

When it was my turn, I tried to follow Mark's tracks, but I just let it go--skiing as fast as I could, sending my skis into huge arcs as they planed over the immaculate surface of cold, undisturbed snow. My lungs felt like they'd burst from a lack of oxygen, while my quads burned down to the bone. I jumped a couple of spongy trees near the bottom, compressed a few shallow creek beds, and coasted up to Mark. We tapped ski poles and I reared my head back to scream out, in joy or pain I couldn't tell which, but nothing came out. I had nothing left.

And yet, the helicopter was there to pick us up. So we climbed aboard and went back up for more.



Marius Marginean leaves a trail of cold smoke in the Monashees. PHOTO: Franklin Towers



Most guests at Wiegele's fly in on Saturday and depart a week later through Kelowna International Airport. Otherwise, it's seven hours from Calgary, and six from Vancouver.

This season, Wiegele's permit area expanded by 300,000 acres, including some of the original terrain from its founding in Valemount. It means the outfit can now fly in three mountain ranges: the Monashee, Cariboo, and Rockies.

No need to bring your own skis. Wiegele's has a good selection of powder skis for demo.

Though there are three- and five-day packages, stay the week if you can. Costs start at \$4,713 for three days.

Twenty years ago, Mike Wiegele and some friends started the Tour de Blue, a 320-mile bicycle trip from Banff to Blue River. At age 79, Wiegele still rides it every summer as a way to get into shape for ski season.

Dinner starts at 7 p.m. and apps can go fast if there are large groups in town. But don't start loading your plate before the bell rings, or you may get reprimanded.

Lunch is all about homemade soup, complements of head chef Jimmy McDermott, a fine skier originally from Ireland.

SAVE ON SELECT APPLIANCES

SHOP ALL

LG Electronics

5.0 cu. ft. Front Load All-In-One Electric Washer-Dryer Combo in White

\$2,298.00

SAVE \$400.00



#Blue River #British Columbia #heli skiing #Matt Hansen #mike wiegele

PREV

NEXT

FEATURED VIDEO

YouTube 14K