

Albreda, Albreda!

Could this be the world's most lavish private heli-ski lodge?

by LESLIE WOIT



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY MIKE WIEGELE HELI SKI

Albreda is a tiny postcode where champagne flows and helicopters fly.

Swirls of diamond dust come to rest as the powerful A-Star helicopter banks above our heads. As it recedes into the valley below, we stand in silvery silence atop an untracked glacier, one of dozens that speckle the largest single tranche of heli-skiing terrain in the world. With Mike Wiegele as our guide and a private helicopter at our beck and radio call, it feels like there's all the time in the world — and the world, hundreds of powder turns' worth, is at our feet. After nearly fifty years of pioneering and — many would say — perfecting the art of heli-skiing, I ask Mike what he considers his most special accomplishment. Thoughtfully, his eyes scan the peaky panorama. "Finding this place."

Since 1970, Mike Wiegele has been creating deep-powder dreams amid a swath of the Cariboo and Monashee mountains the size of 283 Vails combined. During peak season, up to 12 helicopters lift and land on some 1,000 named routes, pinning runs such as *Steinbock*, *Most Magnificent*, and *Dixon Glacier* onto the maps of the world's heli-skiing elite. Last season, the operation's tenure increased by 330,000 acres bringing it to 1.5 million acres, and the ever-expanding village of 22 luxurious chalets now accommodates more than 100 heli-skiers at a time.

Big is undeniably beautiful here. Yet in recent years — quietly, discreetly — word has been spreading about an alternative, more exclusive experience. A tiny postcode where champagne flows and helicopters fly. A place that's perfect for privacy-seeking types keen on their own helicopter, their own chalet, their own program. If this sounds appealing, Albreda Lodge is your perfect scenario.

Some 30 miles up the road from Blue River, Albreda Lodge may constitute the ultimate private heli-ski retreat. With all the bells and whistles — handcrafted massive timbers, dining, bar, three-



from top to bottom

1. A long line through the powder. 2. Mike Wiegele in his office.



story great room, and 19 bedrooms — Albreda invokes the spirit of the great chalets of *vieux* Davos or century-old St. Anton.

"Gone are the days when people would bunk up together," Mike says, opening the door onto a massive outdoor patio that is dug out and decorated each week for a stylish ice bar party. "So now we give them what they want."

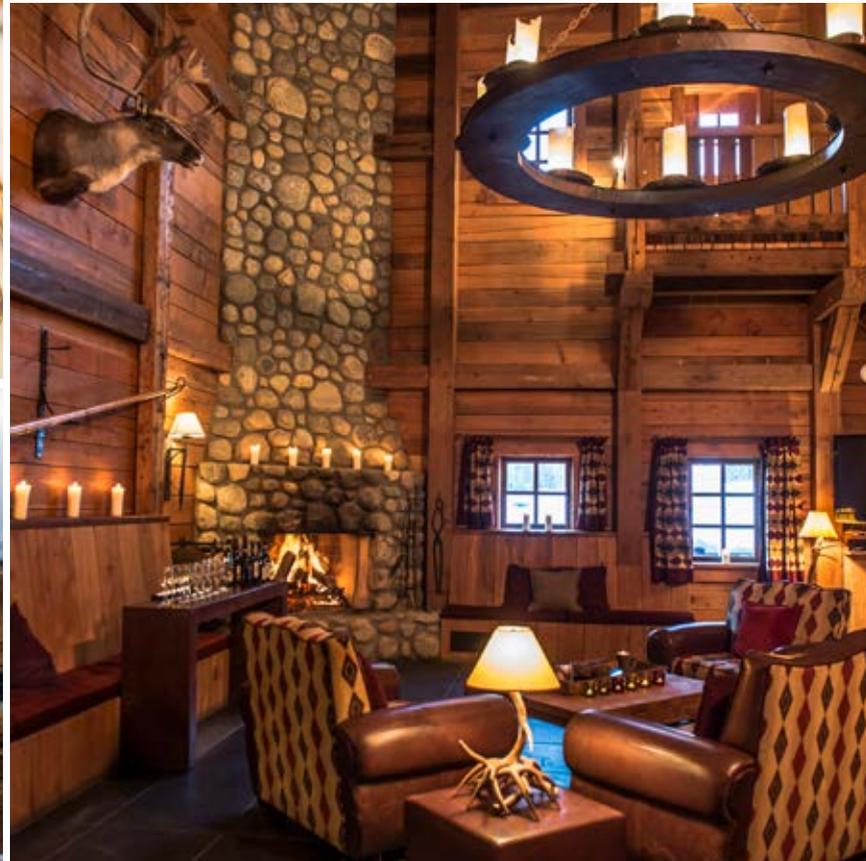
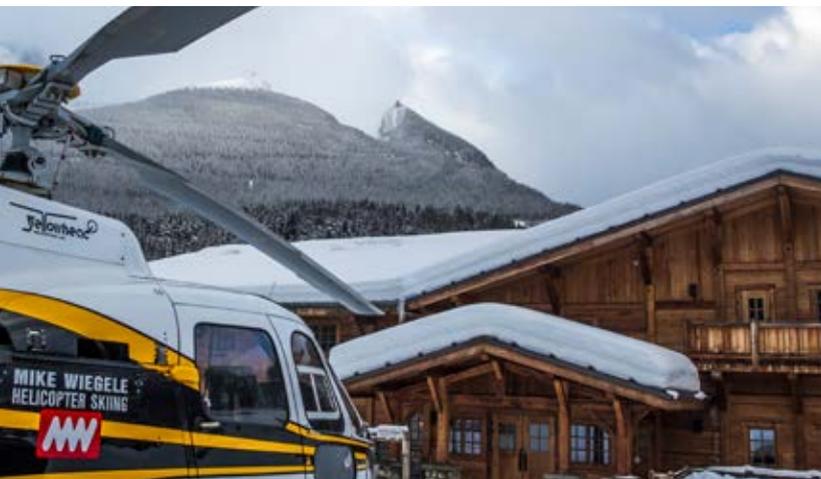
Clearly, Mike takes his clients' desires to heart. His guest list has long featured a tony set of doctors, dentists, and dealmakers: Past non-bunkers at Blue River have included ski royalty icons Jake Burton and Marcel Hirscher, as well as more conventional crowned heads such as Princess Caroline of Monaco and the Aga Khan. While, like Blue River, Albreda Lodge is accessible by car, it's not uncommon for guests to arrive by helicopter from Vancouver or Kamloops Airport.

Once alighting at Albreda — the helipad is poised just steps from the door — everything is located under one snow-



clockwise from left

1. Dinner is served.
2. The Great Room at the Lodge.
3. Your private helicopter awaits.



covered roof. Tended by a dozen employees, needs are met by a lodge manager, a full complement of bar and waitstaff, discrete housekeepers, an in-house massage therapist, and most importantly, a deeply talented private chef. Bespoke menus are designed to spec. What you want, when you want it — including the bounty of a thoughtfully curated wine cellar.

From the cossetting coziness of the wood-lined dining room — a low, arched ceiling creates the sense of being on an elegant ship — to the crimson-cushioned long bar, the rich carpets, black slate, and fir flooring produce an alpine patina that far exceeds the building's actual 14 year history. Indeed, Albreda's reclaimed timbers were painstakingly transported from a disused Alberta prairie grain elevator, giving new life to beams that now frame the great room, visibly smoothed and shaped by decades of kernels washing over their girth. (An interesting historical aside: Wiegele's grandfather worked as an Alberta prairie farmhand from 1928-30 and would have almost certainly hauled wheat to an elevator such as this, if not this very one.)

The upper floor, reached by a striking saw-tooth iron staircase (or by elevator, for the truly powder-addled knees in the house) is home to a long corridor of bedrooms. Each ensuite room is

appointed with two queen beds and has windows with grand mountain vistas. A grand master suite features a large bedroom and sitting room with slate fireplace, as well as a small kitchen. Sepia photos showcasing a half-century of heli-history line the hallways, including a series of hand-painted ski prints by Warren Miller himself.

For those with energy to burn after a day of heli-skiing, there's a boutique, fitness room, sauna, steam room, hot tub, and a rather spectacular three-story, five-lane climbing wall that await. The ski shop has a wide variety of powder skis, as well as cross-country skis and snowshoes. The guides' room is fully equipped with state of the art safety and weather equipment as well as a video link to the Blue River guides' meeting room.

Come sunset, the heli is put to bed and the lodge comes to life with the glow of crackling fires, the tinkle of drinks, and the sound of laughter of après heli-ski among friends. On this sacred land of the Simpcw First Nation, there's more than a little magic to go round. As we dream about the next day, Mike says, "I'm just so happy we found this place." So are we! **S**

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