

# Heaven... by Heli

By Shannon Linden

**T**hey call it a bluebird day — when fresh snow blankets the ground and the golden sun spins like a giant disco ball in the sky, beckoning a certain kind of powder hound to get down and dance with the mountain.

Heli-skiers and heli-snowboarders claim nothing — absolutely nothing — compares to the experience.

They know that while valleys lie trapped beneath a cloak of grey, above the clouds there exists a different place, where the sun is shining, snow-capped cliffs are calling, pristine powder is waiting, and the wind is whispering, *come play*.

So spectacular are the vistas, so awe-inspiring is the brawny beauty of the high alpine, some say it's Heaven.

And you better believe that when I signed up to cover a story on my first-time heli experience, I was saying my prayers.

## Welcome to Wiegele World

I am nervous on my way to the world-famous Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing (MWHS) resort — commonly known as Wiegele World.

Founded by Mike Wiegele in 1970, the resort is located in Blue River, a little more than two hours north of Kamloops. Set on the scenic shores of Eleanor Lake, beautiful log buildings boast accommodations ranging from standard rooms to private chalets to the exclusive Bavarian House and Albreda Lodge.

The Powder Max Dining room serves up a spectacular breakfast buffet (lunch is flown in so skiers and boarders can dine on the slopes) and dinner is utterly decadent. The restaurant has also earned the Wine Spectator's Best Award of Excellence "for having one of the most outstanding restaurant wine lists in the world."

All I can say is it's a good thing I'm here to ski and if that doesn't kill enough calories, the stretch class offered after and a workout in the gym or a go at the climbing wall followed by a massage and jacuzzi ought to do the trick.

It's truly a world-class resort, but what really gets hearts hammering? The snow, of course! Nestled in the heart of the





Happy heli-skiers give the thumbs up as the Bell 407 helicopter departs. (l-r: lead guide T.J. Tiedge, writer Shannon Linden, Roland Schneider, Melissa Arnold and Jeff Arnold)

Cariboo and Monashee Mountains, Wiegele's terrain stretches over 1.2 million acres and includes more than 1,000 peaks and runs, with an average of more than 10 metres of snowfall each winter.

### **"Let's Go Skiing"**

This is Mike Wiegele's famous slogan. I am an avid — advanced, even — skier, but being dropped off on a glacier so that I can — gulp — ski down?

I've seen Warren Miller movies. I've watched those guys leap over the sides of cliffs. And I know enough to be totally terrified (though technically uninformed) about avalanches.

Then there are the trees. While I've never hit one, I'm sure it would hurt. Plus, they grow wells in the winter — deep, empty pockets around the trunk — which skiers or boarders may fall into.

And then there's my ego. I like to look like I know what I'm doing and I like to look good doing it. I'm

convinced only experts and adrenaline junkies (all of them dressed to kill the hill and their colleagues) go heli-skiing.

I am wrong — on all accounts.

### **Safety First**

This is the motto at Mike Wiegele's.

One of the first companies in North America to push for international certification standards for the heli-ski industry, MWHS consistently strives to raise the bar of safety and reliability. Guides and pilots meet morning and afternoon to talk weather, snow stability, and the best terrain to ski that day. There is a well-equipped medical clinic and a doctor on site.

The University of Calgary maintains an avalanche research station and every guide is certified by the Canadian Ski Guides Association and is a professional ski instructor.

Despite being a world leader in all aspects of the



Writer Shannon Linden pauses during a run on Tiffany's.

## Talking the (Ski) Talk:

Never mind looking good — talking the lingo will have you fitting right in on the mountain. Here are some terms to toss around:

**Freshies** - "first tracks" in fresh snow

**Powder hound** - someone constantly in search of big, fresh powder

**Pow-pow** - ultra deep powder

**White smoke** - fine mist from light, champagne powder

**Face shot** - powder blowing up over a person's head

**Snorkel day** - powder so deep, a person needs a snorkel to breathe

**On the deck** - fog so low and dense, helicopters are grounded

**Yard sale** - when a skier falls and loses skis, poles, gloves, car keys...

\*For some serious information that will prepare you for your stay at Wiegele's World, visit the website: [www.wiegele.com](http://www.wiegele.com)

industry, Mike Wiegele remains unsatisfied with the status quo, particularly when it comes to safety.

"It is not acceptable to have anything less than the utmost safety standards," he says.

"When people go heli-skiing they say 'it was the best day of my life' and they think it can't be surpassed, but then the next day is even better. We have to strive to bring the same to safety. The best is never enough."

Which is why MWHS advocates ongoing research, education, training and certification in backcountry safety.

### "Relax. You can do it!"

This is the advice lead guide Bob Sayer gives to new heli-skiers like me. After 22 years with MWHS, he's seen a lot of different styles on the slopes and he says there's plenty of negotiable terrain for beginner and intermediate skiers. He claims the confident novice skier will have more success heli-skiing than an

intimidated expert.

I don't believe him.

"You mean it's not all cliffs?"

He laughs at me, shaking his head.

"You have to be confident. Relax. Heli-skiing is about being in the most beautiful place in the world, doing the most exciting thing you can do."

My anxiety gives way to awe as the helicopter lifts off and when we suddenly bust through the clouds, I giggle out loud at the beauty.

With Crosby, a super-fit, super-encouraging guide at the helm and Demelza, the Aussie expert tail guiding, my husband by my side, good friends along, and a fellow virgin heli-skier across from me, I'm feeling better. I'm not alone.

Tom (the virgin) is shaking with excitement. He's spent years saving up the cash and the courage to do this, traveling from California for this B.C. adventure.

But as the chopper cruises up the wall of a cliff,



Carving out turns as the Bell 407 helicopter flies overhead are (l-r) Roland Schneider, writer Shannon Linden, lead guide T.J. Tiedge, Melissa Arnold and Jeff Arnold.

my heart picks up the pace again. When the whirlybird slows down, sailing over the top and sweeping sideways, I panic.

I have no idea how I am going to ski down anything like we just climbed and I wonder what the pilot will say when I refuse to get out of his aircraft.

I look to commiserate with Tom, but his eyes are sealed shut, his arms bent at the elbow, his hands clutching imaginary poles, as he twists at the waist, left to right and back again, silently swooshing down upcoming terrain. I resist the urge to shake him, pointing out the cliff.

But then a miracle happens. The helicopter sails over the snow, flying low now, but traveling a distance to the other side where I can see the slopes are not so steeply pitched. Soft and shimmering in the

brilliant sunshine, they almost look inviting.

Everyone piles out of the chopper, walking hunched over to the meeting place, obediently dropping to one knee as the pilot gives the thumbs up and the flying machine lifts off into the sky, the echoes of the blades beating their good-bye.

An awed hush descends upon the group as we collectively honour the majesty of our surroundings and I understand what Bob Sayer and Mike Wiegele meant. When asked to describe the sounds of heliskiing, both men got far away looks in their eyes as gentle smiles crept across their faces.

"It sounds like silence," they said.

Crosby begins his descent down Back of Moon, his skis floating over the smooth surface, carving gentle S's into the slope. Having instructed us to ski



Shannon Linden grabs some "freshies" on Tiffany's, in the Cariboo Mountains.

five to seven turns apart, he waves his pole behind him, signaling the departure of the next skier.

Nobody wants to be a powder hog but our guide has instructed us to make tracks right of his and judging by the breadth of the hill, there is plenty of room for all of us to carve out new lines, grabbing freshies of our own.

Tom — zenned and ready to rumble — asks, "Anyone mind if I go?" He takes off, his body swaying, mimicking the meditative motions he made in the helicopter.

As he cruises down the hill, I hear him holler, "Yah!"

His enthusiasm is contagious and by the time it's my turn, I am grinning. The surface feels like silk beneath my skis as the soft hiss of them slipping through the snow sings in my ears.

All I have to do is lean and my skis turn themselves. There is a softness; a caress to the experience that is gentler than I imagined — something like soaring and I feel like I could kiss the sky.

Tom is still hooting and hollering, but the quiet thrill is all my own. ●

**"An awed hush descends upon the group as we collectively honour the majesty of our surroundings"**

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