

An aerial photograph of a vast, snowy mountain landscape. Two skiers are visible on a wide, open slope, leaving tracks in the powder. To the right, a large, jagged ice formation or glacier edge is visible, with some snow-covered rocks and patches of brown vegetation. The overall scene is bright and expansive, capturing the scale of the mountain environment.

LEGEND OF THE
FALLINE

BY JESSI HACKETT

Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing celebrates half a century of classic powder skiing and making dreams come true in the mountains of British Columbia.



CRYSTALLINE SNOW SWIRLS

around me. I shield my face and the hushed, snow-covered meadow I'm standing in is transformed into an adrenaline-inducing helicopter landing pad. It's a spatial metamorphosis I've come to relish. We climb into the heli—an act that made my stomach drop when even thinking about it four days ago, but now, thanks to repetition, feels as a simple as loading onto a chairlift.

I sit next to the window and spot another yellow, white and black helicopter below our own, landing to scoop up a different party of skiers, who behind them have left side by side, synchronized ski tracks cascading down the massive slope above them.

"It's like they're bees," shouts Daniel, smirking as he points down at the heli I'm eyeing. "Just buzzing around, looking to pollinate skiers on mountain tops." I like this analogy because it feels true to the efficient and purposeful nature of the Yellowhead Helicopters soaring around these ranges, with pilots and guides working together to choose each ski line carefully.

"I'm so glad the sun finally came out to play," I say after unloading and we're left in silence again. I've been randomly paired with seven other guests all week, including Daniel Demschar, a Former Australian World Cup racer and his father Herwig Demschar, the former coach for the Austrian Ski Team

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and more recently, the U.S. Women's Olympic Team, as well as other skiers and riders like myself, out chasing the heliskiing dream.

"Would you say conditions are amazing today?" I ask our guide Erich Schadinger, the most veteran guide at Wiegele's with 43 years under his belt. "They're okay," he smirks.

I laugh, not because I think he's kidding, but because I know that he means he's seen days with bluer skies and more breathtaking views. The thought blows my mind.

Steep, rocky mountain faces transition into vertical pitches that roll into pristine, snow-covered hills—a skier's dream. Mountains layered over mountains, a canvas of never-ending peaks deep out into the horizon. I've been attempting to wrap my head around the fact that there are 1.5 million acres of this terrain across the Monashee, Cariboo and Rocky Mountain ranges available for skiing at

PHOTO CREDIT



Mike Wiegele Heli Skiing (MWHs) in British Columbia—370,000 of which was just added to the tenure in 2017. I'm no mathlete, but quick internet arithmetic says this is more acreage than if all four Aspen mountains, Big Sky, Vail and Jackson Hole were combined and then casually multiplied 75 times.

I was supposed to have left two days ago, but after only two ski days early in the week and a day and a half of bad weather grounding us to chess playing and beer drinking, I jumped at the opportunity to extend my trip. Technically, I wasn't supposed to be on this trip at all, but a coworker was injured, and I was up next to bat.

The usual anxieties that I tell myself plague all late-twenty-somethings early in their career have quietly crept in and loitered from time to time throughout this trip. A curious self-doubt that's lingering. Some would call it "imposter syndrome", defined as a "collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success." But I just see it as that big, bold, hovering question: "Do I belong here?"

The more I learn about Mike Wiegele however, the more I think he may have felt that way too. Born and raised in Austria, Mike set up shop in these Canadian mountains in 1970 around the age of 30, the story goes that he never imagined "Wiegele World" would become the kingdom of

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heliskiing it is today. Most people, including himself, thought he was crazy.

"That first winter I only had one guest," Mike says as I sat with him on my first afternoon in Blue River—the small, 260-person town situated at the convergence of the Blue and North Thompson Rivers, about three hours north-east of Kamloops and home to the heli-ski operation.

"I was a war child and I kept hearing the word 'freedom.' I didn't know what it was, but I adopted it. Canada meant freedom to me. So, I came in 1959." He spent the next decade making connections with top industry per-



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Mike's obvious inclination to champion the underdog seem to craft the ethos of his operation and his personality. When snowboarding was not yet widely accepted, Mike facilitated Jake Burton's filming projects. And, his philanthropic endeavors have ranged from giving money to rare scientific studies on wolverines, to getting first nations kids on the ski slopes and helping to develop the skills of young guides from the area.

With roughly 230 staff members in the winter, a roster of doctors who trade their time for a week or two a season, access to 13 helicopters and about 1,300 guests visiting between December 1 and early April, Wiegale's is among the most successful and well-known heli ops in the industry.

"He comes from a simple, farming background," explains Herwig Demschar, who grew up in Austria about 20 miles from Mike's home. Demschar has visited MWHS multiple times over the years and almost guided here in 1985 but opted to coach the Austrian ski team instead.

"He was a ski instructor who had a vision and he followed his vision and built a real empire. So many people will have a vision and things fall through, but Mike was relentless, and he should be proud of it."

We clip back into our skis and the mid-morning sun casts enough light to make the snow shine like I've never seen before. We've only done two runs and the promise of a long day

sonalities, like Canadian Mountain Holidays founder Hans Gmoser, leading him to his next stage in life.

"I had explored the Cariboos since 1960, ski touring and hiking for ten years, so when I started my guiding in 1970, I felt confident and wrote to Warren Miller to invite him up to film, and he accepted."

Fifty years later, MWHS has been featured in over 25 Warren Miller films and it's understood that Warren helped to create the buzz that got Wiegale's started. Through the decades, big names like John Denver (who was inspired by his visits to write "Blue River"), as well as Princess Caroline of Monaco, Kiefer Sutherland and high-profile Russian oligarchs have all frequented these mountains.



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HE PUSHES OFF WITH GRACE AND LINKS SEVEN SWIFT, BUTTERY TURNS.

Don't Miss:

KAMLOOPS, B.C. En route to Wiegele's? Passing through Kamloops an added bonus of your trip. Located in southern interior B.C., Kamloops is a river town shy of 100,000 people chock-full of everything to love about a mountain community. Just a quick 50-minute flight from Vancouver or an hour-or-so flight from Calgary, Kamloops is a 45-minute drive from **SUN PEAKS RESORT**. The area boasts three seasons of mountain biking, offering world-class downhill at **KAMLOOPS BIKE RANCH** or cross-country trails accessed from all over town. Also take in the burgeoning dining scene, combining comfort food with innovative ingredients and cooking styles. Grab a flight of beer and a pretzel from **IRON ROAD BREWING** or plan a full- or half-day wine tour to the handful wineries in the region. For dinner, pair one of **FORNO ON 5TH'S EMPRESS** gin cocktails paired with the lamb meatballs. In the morning fuel up at **HELLO TOAST**, which offers a quirky vibe, delicious sourdough French toast, or an assortment of Egg Bennies to choose from.



ahead is intoxicating.

“Okay, Jess,” says our guide, Erich, pointing to me with his ski pole. “You’re going to follow after me.” He pushes off with grace and links seven swift, buttery turns down the inviting 50-degree pitch of untouched, wide-open terrain.

Like a schoolgirl picked by the teacher, I am the chosen one. I begin my descent, laying into each turn more freely than the last, the light snow lifting and spraying over my Volk 100Eights. Spotting Erich’s fresh tracks laid out before me, I begin to link them—one by one, letting out genuine laughs with each breath.

The slope relaxes and I ski to where Erich waits. “Ah Jess, isn’t it beautiful?” he asks. I look back at our linked, powder eights cascading down the white, 1,500-foot descent with a blue-sky backdrop. It’s just the two of us now, stopping to watch the rest of the group descend.

Hervig and Daniel make their way down the slope with precision. Then comes the next father-son duo, a laid-back Brit named Tim, traveling with his snowboarding son Franky from Southern California. They hoot and holler as Franky straight lines. Across the way on a different aspect, I spot another group where I recognize two women my age, here with their mom to fulfill her dream of celebrating her 60th birthday by going heliskiing.



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and two, notorious side-by-side mountains aptly called “Two Titties”. I’ve been openly curious about checking them out all week.

“They are rather symmetrical,” says Tim, his British accent rolling over the noise of the helicopter and his matter-of-fact statement confirming what we are all thinking. We land atop the peak to looker’s right, put on our skis to play our follow-the-leader game again. This time, I take the opportunity to hang back and watch the others descend first.

Herwig in sunglasses and gray hair flowing, synchs his turns with Erich, and the pair paint matching lines. I watch Daniel watch his dad.

“People come here, and it becomes a part of their life,” Mike had said with a knowing, toothy smile when I first arrived having never heli-skied before. “For the next 50 years, we are just going to fine tune and protect what we have now.” And on this last day, with these people in this setting, I know exactly what he meant.

I think of dinner the night before, with the usual five-star spread of food prepared by Swiss chef Tony Spori laid before us. Herwig stood to make the nightly toast to the dozen tables filled with this week’s guests.

“We will be skiing three seasons in one run tomorrow,” he had said, coaching us on the way

“Yes, it is so, so beautiful,” is the only thing that comes out as I take it all in. We reconvene and load into the helicopter, and yet again I’m taken aback by the striking terrain as we zoom over and around more pointed peaks. “Jesse, that’s ‘Two Titties,’” says Ryan, our 26-year-old tail guide while pointing straight to where we are headed.

I swivel around like a 12-year-old boy eager to see the real things. In my initial sit-down with Mike I learned Wiegele’s 1.5 million acres has over thousand named runs, including “Warren’s Way,” “Cobra,” “Boo Boo Juice,”