

A helicopter with a white and green livery is flying in the sky above a vast, snow-covered mountain range. In the foreground, a wooden cabin with a snow-laden roof is nestled among evergreen trees. The scene is set in a high-altitude, alpine environment under a clear blue sky.

WIEGELE'S WORLD

Finding heaven on earth above Blue River, B.C.

Words by **Travis Persaud** | Photos by **Certain Images**

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I AWOKE COCOONED in a sleeping bag on a table converted into a bed. My makeshift sleeping quarters, housed in a RV named Harvey, were parked beside the Petro Canada in Cache Creek, B.C. For the next five days I would exercise my cheerleading skills and shovelling muscles as Mack Jones and Rob Heule hit dumb pieces of metal in dreary towns throughout central B.C.: towns like 100 Mile House, where the highlights include a Tim Horton's without power outlets for road dwellers like ourselves. As we left our cocoons and blossomed into the grimy butterflies needed to complete this metaphor, we took turns hitting the diner attached to the Petro Canada for its breakfast offerings, which consisted of garbage coffee, store-bought muffins up-sold to look like a local delicacy, and a ham and cheese omelette for the cost of \$9.99 and your trust in the kitchen.

"Can I have the muffin warmed up?" I ask the woman working the counter. "Thank you." And into the microwave the muffin went—Saran Wrap and all.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is down with plastic wrap being microwaved on food. So as I ate my death muffin under the assumption that it was an early admittance ticket to the grave, I fantasized about going to a heaven where the sun would shine, the snow would be deep, the mountains would be endless and there would be enough helicopters to recreate a scene from the Vietnam War.

I died six days later, reaching that heaven with a rented Toyota Matrix as my vessel.

heav-en (hev'n) **n.** 1. the place where Mike Wiegele Helicopter Skiing is and where the blessed go after death 2. a) place of great beauty and pleasure b) a state of great happiness.

I opened the pearly gates shortly after midnight and was greeted by a wheel of brie cheese alongside an assortment of crackers, chips, and a fruit and snack platter. The latter two platters were covered in plastic wrap, but it was obvious that neither had been microwaved. As I snacked, I set my alarm to 6 a.m. for transceiver and helicopter training—both necessary for all guests and especially this recovering park rat—and pondered the identity of the women who owned next year's K2 gear that was drying in the common space of the cabin I called home.



Mike Wiegele and his sunglasses drop in with home court advantage.

MIKE WIEGELE has a firm handshake. It's the handshake of a man who steadily built an empire around the love of a good turn and the mountains that provide them. Now in his late 70s, Wiegele came to Canada from Austria in 1959, chasing the dream of Canadian winters.

"I couldn't communicate with the people because I didn't speak any English, but with skiing, I could," says Wiegele, of his early days in the country. Wiegele first hopped in a helicopter to ski with Hans Gmoser in 1962 to film in the Cariboo for a movie Gmoser was working on with Jim McConkey, amongst others. They flew in and walked out, Wiegele says, describing the use of helicopters as a utilitarian tool for skiing rather than something with commercial appeal at that point. Wiegele then followed skiing and ski racing south to the States, where he met Sugar Bowl founder Hannes Schroll after landing a job instructing at the resort. Schroll lit a fire in Wiegele, encouraging him to go back to Canada and develop a mountain for himself—one with lots of snow.

Wiegele narrowed his hunt for a mountain of his own to the Valemount, B.C. area, looking for the perfect combination of glaciers, trees, snow and weather, the latter of which he tracked using meteorologic drawings in the local newspapers. Flash forward to 1970, Wiegele

and his wife gave birth to their daughter Michelle (who now runs the operation) and incorporated the heli-skiing company bearing his name—though he booked precisely zero clients during that first year. Despite business picking up in subsequent years, Wiegele grew frustrated by the winds of Valemount and began paying more attention to the rumours he heard about a town to the south, Blue River, B.C.

"There's a lot of snow in Blue River, it rains and the snowflakes come down big and straight," he recounts hearing, as if it was a three-part riddle. Not wanting anything to do with the rain, but curious still, Wiegele talked to some of the rail workers, some of whom had worked in the area for 50 to 60 years. They said the same thing: "Well, it rains, and the snowflakes come down big and straight."

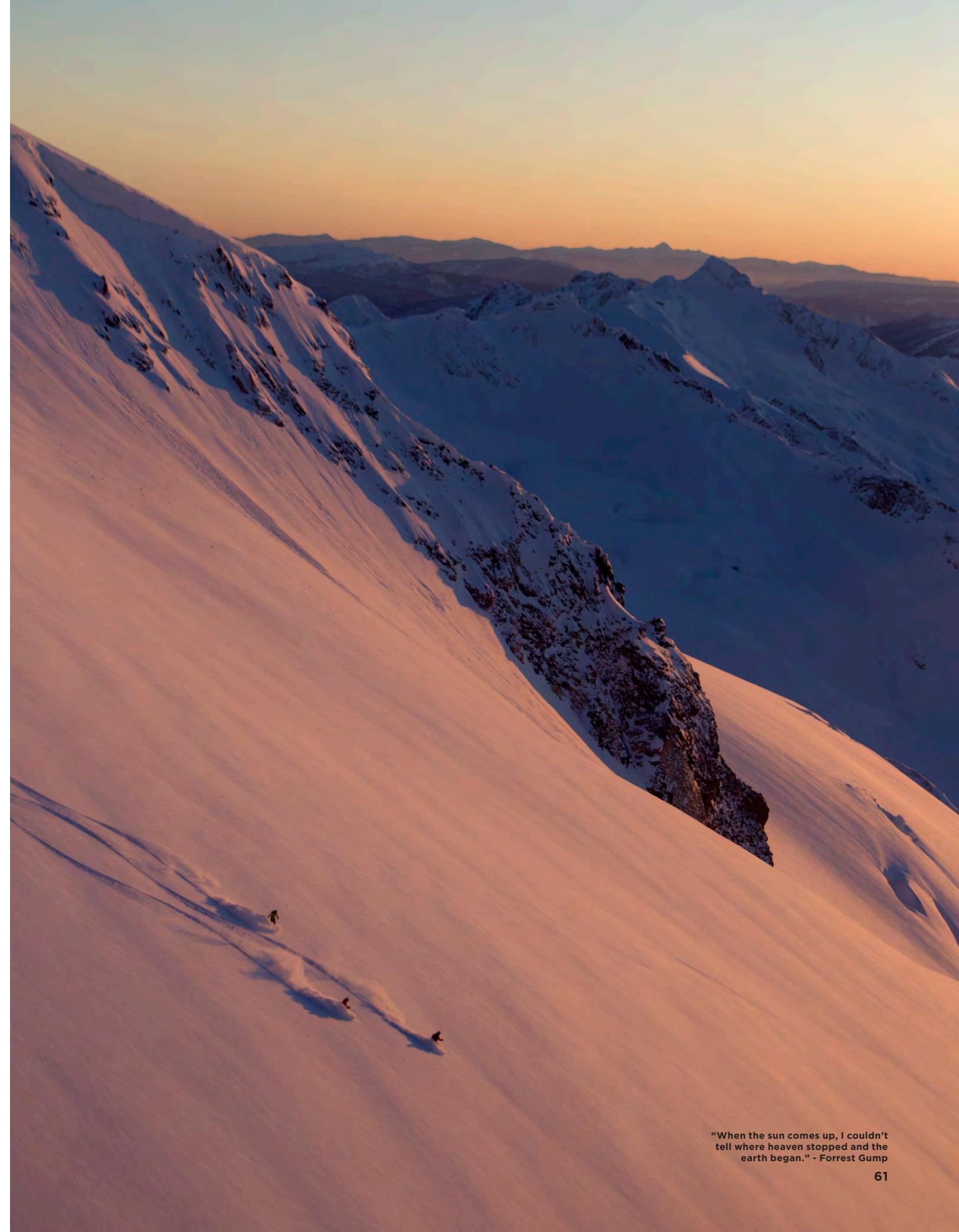
"Then when I came down here, I couldn't see a house. They were all snowed in. So I took that as a hint," says Wiegele, making his way to the riddle's unsolved words. "The next one was that the snowflakes come down big and straight. It took me three years to figure that one out: little wind. That's why you have the big flakes."

Four years after Wiegele first set up shop in Valemount, he moved his operation to Blue River, the location where I stood pondering who had

next year's K2 gear after completing the necessary helicopter and transceiver training. As the guests awoke with crossed fingers that the cloud clover that greeted my arrival would clear and allow for the choppers to get off the ground, I happened across the gear's owners. It turns out that I would be sharing the common space of my cabin with three of the hardest charging women in skiing: McKenna Peterson, Lexi duPont and Amy Engerbretson. While we waited to for updates on whether we would be able to fly, I learned that they were here filming for the new Warren Miller Entertainment film, and that their guide, Bob Rankin, had a few hilarious stories about JP Auclair to share: one involving a bear chasing JP down the highway and into the resort, and the other involving a naked JP in a Yakima box.

If you'll remember, one of my hopes for heaven was that there be enough helicopters to create a Vietnam war scene. Upon getting the green light around 10 a.m. on my first morning in heaven, I left Peterson, duPont and Engerbretson to meet my guides, Jordan Stiefvater and Matt Scholl, and the group I would be spending the rest of my week with. After a quick transceiver check, the fury of roughly a dozen helicopters dropped out of the low-lying clouds one at a time.

Vietnam war scene: check.



"When the sun comes up, I couldn't tell where heaven stopped and the earth began." - Forrest Gump



Big and straight, just like the flakes.

THERE ARE A LOT of tough decisions to make while heli-skiing. Fortunately those decisions are made behind the scenes in The Guide Haus, which doubles as an avalanche research centre overseen by Simon Fraser University and guide Scott Thumlert, the proud owner of a PhD in avalanche mechanics. It's there that guides like Steifvater and his colleagues rely on industry-leading knowledge to choose where to take their guests every day. The size of the tenure eases the dif-

ficulty of these decisions. Standing in front of a map that spans from the floor to ceiling, Steifvater shows me the zones we skied in and around the Grizzly Hut—our on-hill lunch location for the day. "In my nine years here, I've probably skied 65 per cent of the terrain," Steifvater tells me, pointing back to the map. With over 1.2 million acres of terrain spanning across the Monashees and the Cariboos, Wiegele's tenure includes a lifetime of firsts.

A place where the mountains are endless: check. Because the guides effortlessly take care of the hard decisions, the most taxing decisions I had to make during my stay at Wiegele's were made inside the Powder Max Dining Room. At one point I had to decide between three different types of oysters. I went with Royal Miagi, but I'm not sure what that says about me. The first evening rolled into a social affair, which saw live entertainment from a duo who knew no genre

boundaries: Sam Smith to Meghan Trainor, it was all game. A special hat tip goes out to Engerbretson, whose ballroom dancing skills had the European male clientele literally lining up to dance with her all evening. Thursday disappeared into a flurry of the best tree skiing I've ever had the opportunity to drop-in on. As we partnered off and whooped our way through the trees, I played cat-and-mouse with new friends in this bubble where age is just a bunch of gibberish.

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AT 77-YEARS-OLD, Mike Wiegele's excitement for skiing is that of any first-time heli skier. As Friday morning broke on Blue River, the freezing level and cloud cover refused to cooperate, but for the willing, the weather allowed the operation to send a helicopter up Saddle Mountain, a proposed resort development site that overlooks the resort. Breaking the news, Wiegele bounded through the lodge to let everyone know that they didn't have to spend the day in the lodge if they didn't want to.

"We're going skiing!"
And so we went. We took riotous heli-laps on a portion of the mountain with a vertical drop not much bigger than Ontario's Blue Mountain. As we flew back to the resort, the productivity of one man's passion sinks in. Wiegele had spent the last four decades heliskiing, but he didn't miss the opportunity to rip a few laps on crusty, low-elevation snow. With that passion, the empire that sits in the valley floor of Blue River starts to make sense.

And the passion is contagious. Ask Halsted Morris, a regular if such an operation can lay claims to one. I got to chatting with Morris at the bar, where he sat on the stool that was reserved for him with a homemade

placard. The coming Saturday marked the start of his 57th week at Wiegele's.

"This is my favourite place on the planet," he says as he reveals the secret to saving for the first trip he put a deposit on in June of 1988: "Cheese sandwiches, no girlfriends and cheap beer."

This passion again came to the forefront during the Friday Night Show, a weekly tradition where a slideshow recap from the week is played. I watch beside Wiegele, and after a few hoots and hollers, he leans towards me and says "It's all about skiing every day."

Over the breakfast the next morning, I was feeling slightly bitter about leaving the pearly gates in my Toyota Matrix, and then the morning forecast came in for the guests: "Bring your sunscreen and expect 30 to 40 centimetres." I descended into a flurry of panic about leaving on what would undoubtedly be the best day of the trip, so I tracked down Wiegele and begged, without grovelling, for a seat in a heli.

"Of course! You came here to ski." Sunshine? Check. Deep? Check. Best day ever? Check.

HIGH FIVES

Mike Wiegele
Heliskiing Resort
wiegele.com



Yes, let's.



Sure beats a RV.