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All I want for Christmas is . . . heli-skiing?

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I've been a good boy this year, honest.

I took out the trash almost every week, bought my wife flowers a couple of times and remembered her birthday and our anniversary. I also

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missed more than a few of my soccer team's matches to stay home and watch our little ones.

So here's my Christmas list. It's short and sweet. You might think a heli-skiing request is over the top, but that's what wish lists are for, right?

And I figure with global warming staring us down, there might not be a whole lot of snow to ski on in the future, so I might as well ask for my fantasy chopper skiing trip now.

And, Santa, I've even included Web sites and phone numbers so you can look this stuff up yourself and make the arrangements for me.

Here goes:

I've always wanted to meet Mike Wiegele, a heli-skiing legend who runs a helicopter operation out of Blue River, British Columbia. His

outfit is in the Canadian boonies – a good thing – nestled between the Cariboo and Monashee mountain ranges about two hours north of Kamloops on Highway 5.

The resort lies in one of the most productive snow belts on the continent with surrounding peaks rising to 14,000 feet. The operation, which has been in business for 35 years, has its pick of virgin slopes across 1.2 million acres. The season's first flights began two weeks ago.

They say if you can ski or snowboard on the more advanced slopes of your favorite resorts, you should be capable of taking part. You also should be pretty darned fit. (I've been staying in shape, Santa, running and swimming.) During a week of skiing or riding, you might get to log as many as 150,000 vertical feet.

Guests can stay in one of 24 hand-crafted log chalets ranging in size from one to six bedrooms. There is also a luxurious Bavarian estate for private parties. And new this winter is the Albreda Lodge, a \$7 million, 17-room inn at the base of Mount Albreda.

The Wiegele operation offers three-, five- and seven-day packages. The most popular one for Americans is the seven-day deal, which costs roughly \$7,000 and is all-inclusive. For details, look up www.wiegele.com or call (800) 661-9170.

Closer to home is Ruby Mountain Heli-Skiing, which is run by Joe Royer out of the small Nevada ranching community of Lamoille, 20 minutes from Elko and five hours east of Reno by car.

I've hiked and camped there in the

summer but would love to return to ski, Santa.

Guests stay at Reds Ranch, which is modeled after the great hunting lodges of the northern Rockies. It features 10 bedrooms in the main lodge, which has a huge stone fireplace, a billiards room and a library stocked with favorite novels. (I wonder if they also provide big, fat cigars.)

The Rubies – a rugged, 60-mile-long mountain range rising more than 11,000 feet – are the crown jewel of the Great Basin Desert. They are considered one of the country's best-kept skiing and riding secrets because there are no resorts in them.

The operation's choppers have access to 500 square miles of pristine wilderness and limitless terrain ranging from wide-open

lines.

And the snow?

It's produced by storms sweeping in from the Pacific Northwest and cross the high desert of the Great Basin.

In the process, moisture is wrung out of the clouds in the form of light, dry flakes – the same stuff that makes that famous champagne powder at Wasatch Mountain ski resorts in Utah. Makes me drool, Santa.

The Ruby operation, which is in its 27th year, starts in January and offers three-day packages that include food, lodging and Rossignol skis. They cost \$3,050 and guarantee 39,000 vertical feet. For details, look up www.helicopterskiing.com or call (775) 753-6867.

Further afield are heli-skiing and snowboarding trips in Switzerland and Italy. (I could move there in a heartbeat just for the schussing.)

One company, called SwisSKI safari, offers adventures in what it calls the "last wild terrain" of the Alps.

Rather than being based at remote mountain lodges, this operation flies out of classy resorts such as Switzerland's Zermatt (at the base of the Matterhorn, elevation 14,691 feet), Saas Fe, Verbier (which has views of Mont Blanc, elevation 15,771 feet) and Italy's Breuil-Cervinia. With lodging in five-star hotels, no less.

SwisSKI safari's choppers drop off skiers near the top of peaks, and then guides lead them down runs that seem to go on forever. In some cases, you'll get a three-plus-hour run descending more than 8,000

vertical feet from summit to valley floor in stunningly beautiful country. Now that's skiing.

For more information, look up www.swisskisafari.com. Week-long trips cost around \$7,000.

Oh, and Santa, if you have any pull with Mother Nature, could you ask her to keep temperatures from climbing too much so the glaciers don't melt and so we can have snow on the slopes for at least a few more decades?

And one more thing. Do you think I could have another week or two of vacation so I can ski more?

Thanks, Brian

P.S. The milk and cookies are in the usual spot beside the tree.

•Brian E. Clark:

