

Here: The Village Stroll in picturesque Whistler Village. Opposite page: Sleigh ride on an 'olde fashion bob-sleigh.'



Chilled Out Thrills

Whistler warms up winter with a cool vibe and hot après-ski scene.

—BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO—

DESPITE MY LOBBY FOR A BEACH HOLIDAY and my general protest against temperatures below 50 degrees, I booked a family ski trip to Whistler, British Columbia, for several reasons: its proximity to our home in San Francisco (a direct two-and-a-half-hour flight), our teenage daughter's relentless pursuit of snowboarding prowess (and Instagram-worthy photos), and because my Canadian husband had never visited his country's westernmost province. The weather in February, it seemed, was not a consideration.

"In Canada, we have 10 months of winter and two months of bad skating," he joked. "You just need to learn to celebrate the cold."

Celebrate the cold? That's an oxymoron in my dictionary.

As a native of southern California, I understood winter to mean going from cotton to cashmere and switching from Pinot Grigio to Pinot Noir, then sipping it in front of a gas fireplace turned on by a light switch. But I have been married to a Canadian for over 18 years and have learned a few things about life in his cold country. I now know what a tuque is (a woolen hat); I know that cars, like smartphones, sometimes need to be plugged in overnight; and I know that a Canadian's favorite sport usually involves ice in some way (fishing, curling, hockey, drinking). I had not learned, however, to fête anything frigid.

The heart of Whistler beats around its village, a maze of cobbled pedestrian lanes hemmed between the bases of the twin peaks of Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains, easily accessible via a stunning two-hour drive along the Sea to Sky Highway (the more appealing name for Highway 99 that joins Vancouver to Pemberton). When we arrived in Whistler, the Dubh Linn Gate Pub, on the ground level of the Pan Pacific Hotel where we were staying, buzzed with furry boot-clad revelers downing hot toddies while dueling fiddlers screeched out Irish folk and country jigs. The party in Whistler continued beyond sundown when the best trick skiers soared through a blazing ring of fire at the annual Fire and Ice show (every Sunday during winter), which I insisted we watch from the warmth of our mountain-view room. It was only a few hours into our frozen pilgrimage and I had already learned two more valuable lessons: 1) There's more to Whistler than just skiing, and 2) Après-ski is referred to simply as "après," and it's a verb, as in, "Where should we après today?"

Among the dozens of bars and restaurants scattered about, nary a heated porch, firepit or live band on a wooden deck exists that doesn't pay homage to the alpine tradition of post-ski socializing and swilling. During our week in Whistler, we frequented the sophisticated bar at Araxi Restaurant for glasses of B.C. wine (from its whopping 12,000 bottle wine cellar),

and après-ed on the heated outdoor patio at Giribaldi Lift Co., watching skiers take their last runs (and spills) down the mountain.

"What we really need is fondue," said my daughter Chloe.

It seemed the "mountainy" thing to do, and who was I to turn down a pot of hot, gooey cheese when the temperature dipped from icy to insane each night? I asked the concierge for his best tip, and he insisted we go to The Chalet at The Fairmont hotel, just a few minutes walk from the village. While a snapping fire took the chill from our bones, three courses of bubbly goodness warmed us from the inside out: first, the cheese with bread and vegetables, followed by broth with beef and prawns for dipping and, finally, a pot of melted swirling chocolate. It was only when we left that I learned the Fairmont also offered a horse-drawn sleigh ride with their fondue dinner.

Dining, it seems, is as much about the experience as the winter sporting, and the exceptional variety and quality of both set Whistler apart from other ski resorts I've visited. On the mountain, casual huts serve up steaming bowls of chili, and it's tough to top the potent sake margaritas at the popular Sushi Village, where the line for a table stretches out the door each night. Dusty's has been a local favorite for decades, thanks to live music and barbecue steaks on open grills, as well as its location at

PHOTO LEFT BY ROBIN O'NEILL; TOP RIGHT BY STEVE ROGERS



Here: Creekside at dusk; below: Whistler Village.

the finish line of the Dave Murray Downhill, the 2010 Olympic run still open to skiers and gold medal dreamers. For gourmets, Whistler's pièce de résistance is the swanky (and pricey) Bearfoot Bistro. Executive Chef Melissa Craig's inventive menu straddles local and luxe, with foie gras, caviar, fish, duck and game among the rotating seasonal ingredients that lure food-savvy crowds year after year. The deconstructed French onion soup was like nothing I'd ever experienced (in a good way). And I don't normally order frozen dessert in sub-zero weather, but I couldn't pass on the nitro ice cream, a dinner theater-meets-chemistry class experiment of smoking liquid nitrogen and cream, hand-mixed tableside and served in a steel martini glass.

"Would you like to see something really cool?"

asked a man who'd approached our table wearing a leather jacket.

At first, I thought he meant "The Fonz" cool, but when he invited us into the restaurant's Belvedere Ice Room, "the coldest vodka tasting room in the world," he said, waving us in, I understood. Luckily, the restaurant provided goose down parkas. Maybe my cold-loving Canadian other half sensed my reluctance because he said, "It's only cold if you don't dress for it," then he zipped me in and pulled the fur-lined hood around my ears. The ice closet, where we tasted six different vodkas of the more than 50 types tucked into carved out cubbyholes, was a balmy -25 degrees. After a few photos and a heated debate over whether or not our tongues would stick to the ice wall, we wandered home

and agreed that the Bearfoot Bistro experience was, both literally and figuratively, cool.

Food is reason enough to come to Whistler, but like most, we had come for the skiing. Fellow travelers we encountered confirmed that this majestic corner of B.C. is a sought-after destination for winter sports enthusiasts from around the globe. We met a father-son duo from New York who had spent the day traversing the backcountry in a snow-cat, skiing on fresh powder. A young couple from New Zealand said they were in search of "endless winter" and had come north of the equator for their summer vacation. When I asked them why they had chosen Whistler instead of another North American resort, they said, "We visited during the Winter Olympics, and the Canadians know how to throw a party."

I couldn't disagree there.

Whistler is well known the world over as the site of the Alpine and Nordic events of the 2010 Winter Olympics. The resort got its start back in 1966, after four local B.C. ski buffs, having arrived home from Squaw Valley, California, six years prior, were determined to bring the games to B.C. The quest led them to London Mountain, renamed Whistler Mountain after the silvery marmot, a critter native to the area that emits a shrill whistling noise. When the now-massive Whistler Ski Resort opened in 1966, it had a chairlift, a couple of T-bar tows, one gondola and a small pedestrian-only town at its base, now known as Creekside, about a 5-minute bus ride from the current Whistler Village. Despite the continued transformation and growth, Whistler lost out twice in its bid for the Winter Games, first to Grenoble, France in 1968 and then to Innsbruck, Austria in 1976.

These days, Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains combine into the largest ski resort in North America, with over 8,100-acres of skiable terrain (for comparison, Vail has around 5,200)

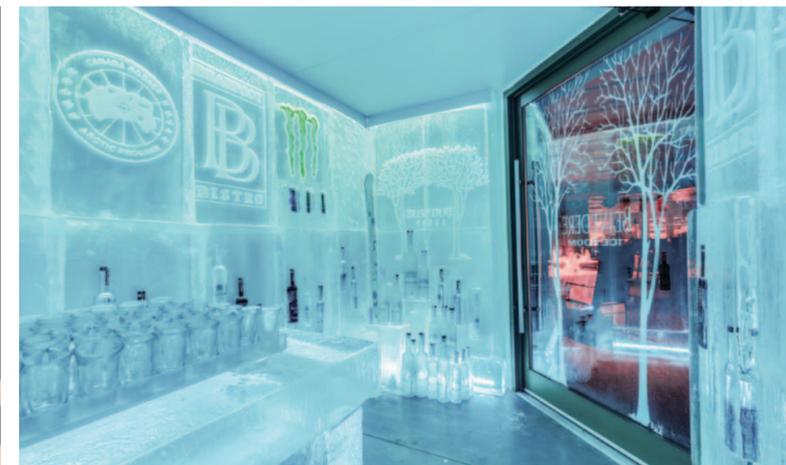
PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY MIKE CRANE



Below, left: Executive Chef Melissa Craig in her kitchen at Bearfoot Bistro; right: a snow boarder hits the slopes at Whistler Blackcomb.



Here: Fire and Ice Show; right: Belvedere Ice Room, Bearfoot Bistro.



crisscrossed by 200 marked runs, from gentle beginner slopes to OMG-no-way-am-I-doing-that double black diamond chutes and pine tree-lined alleyways. There is also a fleet of high-speed chairs and gondolas to maximize time on the mountain. For non-downhillers, miles of cross country and snow-shoeing trails, an ice skating rink in the center of the village, zip-lining, snow-mobile treks and sledding deliver plenty of wintry wonder, and the small Whistler Museum tells the town's story via vintage black and white photos, from early pioneers to Olympic celebrities.

I'm not going to lie. There were times when the lines at the base were so long, I was convinced that Whistler's one million annual winter visitors had arrived at once. But they moved quickly, and once on the mountain, Whistler's size worked to its advantage and graced me with many intimate moments with only the rhythmic rasp of my ski edge against the snow to keep me company.

What Whistler doesn't see in winter is a whole lot of sun. One afternoon, my husband and I stood under a gunmetal gray sky while the wind lashed at our cheeks and hands. We had stopped to consult our trail map when one of the ubiquitous and eager-to-please ski instructors swooshed up beside us to help us find our way.

"The weather is supposed to be nice tomorrow," he said as he left. "So if you get a chance, get up to 7th Heaven. The views are amazing."

We'd been on the 7th Heaven Express chair lift the day before, and some of our favorite

runs, with equally lovely names like Cloud Nine, Hugh's Heaven and the long and winding Sunset Boulevard, were skiable from there. Any possible views, however, were engulfed by snow and fog.

The next day was a different story. We stood at the top and let the sun warm our faces while we admired a sky as blue as sapphires and pearly-white clouds suspended below our feet. It did indeed look like winter's Eden. I agreed with my husband who pointed out that I would not have appreciated the setting nearly as much had the weather been this glorious all week.

On our last day, we dared Whistler's longest trail, Peak to Creek—four miles of thigh-burning, muscle-melting downhill. The grey and snow had returned, and by the time we reached the bottom, my legs wobbled like those of a newborn colt. It was après time, and we slumped onto a bench on the wood deck at Dusty's, ordered two draft Kokanees, a locally brewed B.C. beer, and clinked glasses to our accomplishment.

Was I celebrating? Maybe just a little. "The cold wasn't too bad, was it?" my husband smiled, pulling off his hat and gloves.

I had to admit the week had been fun, despite the temperatures, and thoughts of next year's winter vacation even entered my mind and didn't involve a sunny beach.

"It's only cold if you don't dress for it," I smiled back.

Then I unzipped my jacket and welcomed in the ice-cold Canadian air. ❄️

PLAN
Tourism Whistler Whistler.com

GET THERE
Perimeter Bus service runs regularly between Vancouver Airport and Whistler. PerimeterBus.com

Private car and limousine service is also available. PearlLimousine.ca

STAY
Pan Pacific Whistler Mountainside offers all-suite accommodations with full kitchens, ski rentals on-site and lockers, and ski in/out access. PanPacific.com

The Fairmont Whistler offers luxury hotel accommodations at the base of Blackcomb. Fairmont.com/Whistler

EAT
Bearfoot Bistro is the village's premier restaurant and champagne bar. BearfootBistro.com

Sushi Village serves legendary sake margaritas and epic sushi. SushiVillage.com

Dusty's has been here for decades and still serves up barbecue and après. (604) 905-2171

Araxi offers fine dining and stellar wining in the heart of the village. Araxi.com