

Olympic Eden: Summer Travel to Whistler, B.C.

By Laurel Brauns

Just two plane rides or a day's drive north, the summer wonderland of Whistler, B.C. awaits the adventurous Bendite. While it may be difficult to justify leaving during our own arcadian summer days, Whistler has some of the best lift-accessed mountain biking in the world. The scenery is punctuated by turquoise lakes, snow-spotted hills and a rainbow of wild flowers. It is an idyllic vacation spot for families, couples and singles looking to experience both a quick hit of adrenalin and a dose of culinary sophistication.

If Whistler is a place of extremes and gravity defying possibilities, it is also one of ceaseless optimism. In a few decades, it went from a barely accessible fishing retreat to a ski town built with the Olympics in mind. Whistler lost its first bid for the Olympics in 1976.

Three decades later, with the Winter Olympic games less than a year and a half away, the quaint and compact village is bubbling with the energy of a rockstar about to go international.

Zipidee Do Dah

My first morning in Whistler, I tried the Ziptrek Ecotour which follows a network of wooden platforms and suspension bridges 15 stories high, weaving through giant old-growth trees.

After clipping in, tightening my belts and straightening my helmet, I was pushed from a tree fort by two exuberant Aussie's who were my tour guides. I sailed like a bird with arms outstretched over the roaring glacial waters of Fitzsimmons Creek, which cuts between Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains. For ten seconds, I understood the drive behind every avian fantasy.

Green Mountain Biking

That afternoon, I geared up in a veritable suit of armor to try out the lift-accessed mountain biking. In my new outfit, I looked and felt like a futuristic battle woman from a Street Fighter video game, but when it came down to filling out the "ability level" card before my lesson, I realized my idea of extreme was a few rock hops on Phil's Trail back in Bend.

I stopped the chair lift both getting on and off because I couldn't heave my bike onto the specially designed clips built into the chair to carry bikes. At the lifts terminus about halfway up the mountain, I joined a group of other beginners and began traversing a green circle trail at an embarrassingly slow speed. Still, as I took up the

back end of our progression to try to gain some momentum, I had short sensations of plunging down the tracks of Thunder Mountain Rollercoaster at Disneyworld.

I was hooked.

Forest Chic

Despite the movie star sightings and Prada handbags, downtown Whistler feels like a party that everyone is invited to. Seasonal workers sip beers on the decks of the Garibaldi Lift Co. (the GLC to locals), watching mountain bikers perform acrobatics, while musicians and magicians trade the spotlight in the town square. The expansive pedestrian plazas offer views of the mountains at every turn, and buildings are scaled low to the ground. The effect is both comfortable and predictable, with architecture and city layout that alludes to European alpine villages, but with a Starbucks always in view.

Of the resorts 22,800 beds, 88 percent are located 500 meters from the base of the mountain and range from B & B's, swank hotels and family rental houses. One of the resort's most luxurious accommodations is the Four Seasons, a 273-room hotel with a full spa and unpretentious bistro complete with a flickering fireplace.

For those looking for something more hip and personalized, stay at the Adara, where dogs are welcome—doggie beds and all. Rooms feature a triangular deck off the second-floor master bedroom that opens up to views of the mountains. Summer is still considered Whistler's slow season, so rooms that sell for \$229 in the winter are only \$129 in the summer.

Mouth Amusement

Dining out in Whistler is also a sensuous experience. The 90 different restaurants and bars range from the Dubh Linn Gate Pub with live Irish music on the patio every afternoon, to the elegant La Rua Restaurante, which specializes in steak and game. The ocean is only 50 miles away, thus seafood specials and raw bars make up a good portion of the local fare. Combine that with the fresh produce of the nearby Pemberton Valley and the wines of the Okanagan region (British Columbia's Napa Valley), and you have an abundance of restaurants that are contenders for the best of the Northwest.

My last night in Whistler, I made reservations at Araxi, voted Best Restaurant in Whistler at the Vancouver Magazine Restaurant Awards for the ninth consecutive year. The highlight of the night was the *Amuse Bouche* or mouth amuser, a group of summer specialties put together by Araxi's sommelier, Steve Edwards. As Edwards kept me smiling with snowboarding jokes and tales of his most recent sommelier party, I decided my favorite course was the first, a clear-brothed Gazpacho soup, made from olive oil and baby cucumbers and kept cold with a chive-infused ice cube.

Peak 2 Peak

Before I packed my bags to catch a flight from Vancouver back to Bend via Seattle, I rode to the top of Whistler to tour the Peak 2 Peak Gondola. Connecting the summit of Whistler and Blackcomb, with 28 sky cabins and stretching 1.88 miles, it is the longest lift of its kind in the world.

The next time I come here, I imagine taking the 11-minute trip between mountain peaks. At the halfway point I'll be 1,361 feet above Fitzsimmons Creek, where I'd criss-crossed on the Zip Trek tour.

I asked a tourist from Montreal to take my picture by the inukshuk (pronounced in-OOK-Schook), which is the emblem for the upcoming Olympic Winter Games. Made of enormous slabs of granite stacked on top of each other to create a human form, this particular interpretation is called "Ilanaaq," the Inuit word for friend. With his arms outstretched framed by the snowcapped peaks in the distance, it looked like, with a little imagination or even engineering, he could lift off the ground and glide through the sky.

He is the perfect symbol for Whistler.

