

# TRAVEL

FEBRUARY 19, 2006 • DAILY NEWS

## Whistler returns

The snow is back and deeper than ever at British Columbia's famed resort

By Brian Schott

GOES DOWN EASY  
Atop Whistler's  
Flute Bowl

BRIAN SCHOTT

STEAL AWAY It's good to be a grandparent in Puerto Rico | LONG WEEKEND Off-season Bermuda | TOP 10 Cruise ships

## THE WONDERS OF WHISTLER

By Brian Schott

Deep in the powder” is one of those cliché expressions in the ski world, and I’ve plowed through my share of fresh new snow at many a mountain. It was way over my head at Park City, Utah, last winter. So deep at another Utah spot, Alta, that I needed the proverbial snorkel.

But never before have I been so deep that I went into a mountain. Literally.


It was last winter at Whistler Black-comb ski resort in Whistler, British Columbia, which at the time was experiencing one of the lowest snow years on record. After skiing the huge bowl that the snow-covered Blackcomb Glacier creeps down like an ancient slug, my guide, Blackcomb’s mountain manager, Doug MacFarlane, took me on a side excursion to truly meet the mountain.

With the low snowpack, some crevasses on the glacier usually buried under many feet of snow had become exposed. The craggy mouth of a cave opened up on one side of this massive natural ski slope, and we clicked out of our ski bindings and slipped inside a cave of 12,000-year-old ice. Our sounds were muffled as we explored the dark, hidden gem while skiers and snowboarders cruised through the sun-kissed bowl outside. The surface of the cavern glowed an eerie green and the cupped ice enticed me to lick it. I’m told that some visitors even chip slivers of ice off and save them to soak in Scotch — 100-year-old spirits meet Ice Age molecules. I felt drunk on pure alpine air.

### DRINKING IT ALL IN

After arriving two days earlier via bus from the Vancouver airport, I studied the trail map over a martini at the Mallard Lounge in the Fairmont Chateau Whistler and tried to quell my nerves at the sheer magnitude of the two sister mountains. This winter marks Blackcomb Mountain’s 25th and Whistler’s 40th anniversary — which in ski resort years is fairly long, but in geologic time just a wink.

In the time it took to finish my drink, I learned from the bartender about an incredible natural phenomenon called the “Fitzsimmon slump.” A piece of Black-comb Mountain the size of seven football fields is literally falling into Fitzsimmon Creek, which runs between the two mountains, causing some fears of a potential slide. The “slump” has been moving steadily over the past few years.

 **COVER STORY** By Brian Schott



The wonders of  
**Whistler**  
After a washout last season,  
the British Columbia ski resort  
is in deep snow and deals



But there's another major landslide facing the resort: the 2010 Winter Olympics. "It may take away the cachet of our small mountain village and, honestly, I don't see a lot of positives about it," the bartender, who asked to remain unnamed, told me. However, most people I surveyed later in the trip seemed genuinely happy about the possibility.

A majority of construction for the Olympics will be outside Whistler. Therefore, the soul of Whistler Village should remain unchanged, other than adding some major bragging rights to the already huge heap of accolades it receives in ski magazines each year.

Whistler Village has the feel of a small city in the mountains: 115 hotels, more than 5,400 rooms, 93 restaurants and 207 retail shops. With an average annual snowfall of 30 feet and the longest season in North America, it's no surprise that the resort sees more than 2 million skiers each year. Which means that there's still plenty of time to make up for warm weather and a mediocre ski season on the East Coast with a trip to B.C., Canada. At press time, Whistler had 308 inches of snow on 8,100 skiable acres, 1 mile of vertical drop, more than 200 trails, three glaciers, 33 lifts and 12 alpine bowls. See why I was nervous?

### THE POWDER EXPRESS

One way to be sure you're carving fresh tracks in the snow is by taking advantage of the aptly named "Fresh Tracks" program — it's open to the first 150 people who slap down an extra \$15 to load onto the early gondola while the sun is first hitting the mountain. Even if it didn't snow the night before, freshly groomed "corduroy" trails are the next best thing to fresh powder. When there is new snow, you may see hundreds line up for a ticket.

After breakfast at the Roundhouse Lodge, I took a tour around the resort with Whistler's mountain manager, Paul Skelton (aka "Bones"). One of the first things I saw on the slopes was a sign that reads "Mandatory Air." It's not an advertisement for a rock band playing in the hip village that connects the two mountains, but a warning to turn around before flying off a cliff. What impressed me most, though, is that skiers can ride to the summit of Whistler, surrounded by glaciers and peaks like Black Tusk, and still ski a beginners' run down the slope — Burnt Stew, for



instance. The trail is so long it might take a novice all day to get down. This stunning alpine environment has challenges for skiers at all levels of ability. "Meet Our Mountain" tours are another great way to become acquainted with Whistler Blackcomb. The mountains are huge and can be intimidating to even the most experienced ski bunnies, and guides for newcomers are especially helpful on low-visibility days.

Though I only saw sun on my three-day trip, I'm told that epic storms can sock the mountains in a shroud of clouds for days. With the 1-mile drop from summit to village, the

weather can vary dramatically from the high alpine where perfect snow will be falling, to the village, where there can be a soaking rain.

For intermediates, the resort's new "Peak to Creek" trail offers 400 acres spanning 5,020 vertical feet — the longest intermediate run in North America. For fun, I got into a tuck for the final few hundred feet of Dave Murray's downhill, which will be used for the men's 2010 Olympic downhill. I'll point to the screen in 2010 telling my son: "Daddy skied that run!"

Après ski is legendary in Whistler Village — but the nightlife is more so. I come from a small town, so the big-city energy was daunting at first. But New Yorkers, as this hometown boy did, will feel the buzz, thrive on it and love it. With a population of 10,000, Whistler doesn't feel small. Seventy-two percent of the people who work in Whistler, live there — which makes for a lively mountain town where everybody knows everybody's business. I was impressed when the bartender called me by name at the busy Longhorn Bar — sure, my credit card was in his hand — but it still made me feel good.

### **WATCH THAT FIRST STEP**

Locals will tell you to get your legs in shape on Whistler Mountain — then go scare yourself on Blackcomb, which offers less of the European-style, meandering trails of Whistler (read: steeper terrain). Greg Pritchard works as a mountain guide and was kind enough to show me around the mountains for the better part of two days. After checking out the huge terrain park that regularly lands photos on the cover of ski magazines, we decided to explore the steeper side of Blackcomb.



BRIAN SCHOTT

**RARE TREAT** Below-average snowfall last year made it possible to explore this snow cave on the Blackcomb Glacier. This season, it's completely buried.

On our final run together, the temperature, spring-snow quality and our moods were perfect. We made beautiful turns the length of the run. Looking up from the bottom, it's amazing that something so beautiful and steep is even skiable.

At the end of the day, at the Garibaldi Lift Company bar, we clinked glasses to our skiing adventure. As the ice melted in our drinks, my mind returned to the massive ice walls of the glacial cave I had visited earlier in the day. I imagined the cave as a fitting metaphor. Whistler Blackcomb is massive. The mountains are huge, and can be intimidating to the uninitiated. But beyond the spilling glaciers, raucous village, ski-star scene and newfound fame as an Olympic site, this mega resort has an intimate side to it, too. Just let it melt it down a bit; then take the plunge.

## **IF YOU GO...**

### **GETTING THERE**

Fly into Vancouver, B.C. on one of many direct flights daily from New York (LGA, JFK & Newark). Perimeter's Whistler Express bus takes you directly from the airport to your accommodations in Whistler for around \$115 round trip. ([www.perimeterbus.com](http://www.perimeterbus.com)) 1-877-317-7788

A five-night package good through April 2 includes accommodations for five nights, four-day lift tickets for two adults, starting at \$515 per adult ([www.whistlerblackcomb.com](http://www.whistlerblackcomb.com), 1-800-766-0449). For last-minute deals visit [www.whistlerblackcomb.com/hiddentreasures/index.htm](http://www.whistlerblackcomb.com/hiddentreasures/index.htm).

### **WHERE TO STAY**

Nestled at the foot of Blackcomb and Whistler mountains, the plush, chateau-style Fairmont Chateau Whistler has luxurious rooms, an array of dining options, shops and rental equipment, and a full-service spa; rooms start at \$489 (604-938-8000; [www.fairmont.com](http://www.fairmont.com)). Or try the Village's Coast Whistler Hotel, with a hot tub area and standard rooms starting at \$94 and \$659 for seven nights.

For more on the resort, contact [www.tourismwhistler.com](http://www.tourismwhistler.com), [www.whistlerblackcomb.com](http://www.whistlerblackcomb.com) or call 1-800-944-7853.