

Travel and Adventure: When the weather warms, Whistler still charms

by Robert Ragaini

WHISTLER, British Columbia - Bears and skiing do not go together. Then why is that 200-pound, black, furry creature climbing a trail at western Canada's Whistler Ski Resort? Because this is summer and in summer, Whistler has bears.

STEPPING SAFELY - The Hortsman Glacier on Blackcomb Mountain is the site for summer hikes in Canada's Whistler Ski Resort. Though the terrain is suitable for hikers of all abilities, one beginner is properly cautious about a dangerous crevasse. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. THE IRON WAY - The Via Ferrata - Iron Way - is a safe way for non-mountain climbers to scale cliffs that would otherwise have been impossible for them. Using hooks, wires, ladders and iron steps, beginners climb to the very top of Whistler Peak. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. DOWNHILL ON TWO WHEELS - Whistler Ski Resort believes that it's never too early to learn how to mountain bike. A young biker on the kid's bike park believes that, too. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. FACE-FIRST - Rap jumping is one of Whistler's more exciting adventures. Securely held by sturdy ropes, the participant descends a sheer cliff facing down rather than the customary backward method of rappelling. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. SCENE FROM ABOVE - The view from a small plane flying toward the mountains surrounding Whistler Ski Resort is grand. The tour includes flying over glaciers, a sparkling turquoise lake and a gigantic volcanic plug. CNS Photo by Robert Ragaini. In winter, skiers, not bears, crisscross the Horstman Glacier after launching themselves from the top of Blackcomb Mountain, one of Whistler's two major peaks. Last August, guides Guillaume Otis and Dave Sarkany led six visitors from a green meadow onto the glacier. Bearing ice axes, shod in crampons and tethered by ropes, we cut across the ice.

Before long, we began to trust that the crampons would prevent us from slipping and began to feel cocky - until Guillaume chopped at a white patch and it caved in, revealing a very deep hole.

"The ice is safe to walk on," he said. "The snow maybe not."

An amazing variety of activities is why Whistler Ski Resort attracts more visitors in summer than winter. Take this "easy" version of mountain climbing, for example.

"If you stand over your feet and don't hug the wall," said mountain guide James Webb, "you're balanced and comfortable." Webb's toes were dug into a crack in a cliff hundreds of feet above the ground. "Comfortable" is not the word I would have used.

Webb is a guide on the Via Ferrata - the Iron Way - a unique hike that is exciting, exhilarating and a workout. It starts at a rocky abutment into which metal loops have been sunk. Novice climbers clip themselves to a guide wire and begin the climb to Whistler Peak, a climb involving rock scrambling, searching for handholds and hugging that wall.

Though the climb is safe, when you look down and see nothing beneath your feet but the helmets of other climbers, it takes time to get your heart out of your throat. While we struggled upward, others biked or strolled the Valley Trail, a level lane that meanders for 12.4 miles through thick evergreen forests, passing tranquil lakes and lovely picnic-ready parks.

More-athletic bikers attack the 120 miles of trails at the Whistler Mountain Bike Park, which culminate at the base of the mountain. There, experts take to the air on jumps and bumps and beginners sneak down the sides.

Throughout a section of Whistler's forest, wires stretch high above the Fitzsimmons River. Platforms perch in the treetops and daredevils are hooked to the wires to ride them across the chasm. They range in age from about 7 to 70, so the crossing, thrilling as it is, is very safe. Those who are uninterested in more strenuous activities are perfectly capable of zip trekking.

But not rap jumping. Up on Whistler peak, Rob McCurdy of Whistler Guides fit a harness tightly around my torso. Trussed like a turkey, I stepped to the edge of the cliff and leaned into space. Safely suspended by a rope attached to my waist, I pushed off and descended, face forward, body horizontal, in a controlled free-fall. Easy it is not, but near the landing I think I began to get the hang of it.

I think.

More down to earth, ATVs - all-terrain vehicles - can roll over boulders and tree trunks and take you everywhere you never wanted to go. Wearing helmets and face masks, four of us bounced off on mammoth balloon tires, trailing plumes of dust. By the time we turned back, we weren't exactly experts, but it was fun. When we dismounted, our kidneys breathed a sigh of relief.

With a half-dozen lakes within easy biking distance, a Whistler pedal-paddle tour is a natural. First, guests mountain bike on gorgeous paths through the firs around aptly named Lost Lake. After conquering the Molly Logan, Donkey Puncher and Tin Pants trails, kayaks are waiting for a gentle paddle to a "ghost" logging camp, a collection of collapsed buildings in the wilderness. They wander among the memories, then paddle back to where a van picks them up.

Of the 100,000 black bears in British Columbia, bear expert Michael Allen has identified over 350 individuals in Whistler alone.

"They have very different personalities," he says. "Once you get to know them it's like a soap opera."

Amy, a young female, ambled into a patch of berries, busily putting on the extra 100 pounds she'll need before hibernating. Suddenly, she bounded up a tree and scanned the meadow.

"That's unusual," Allen said. "Perhaps she heard another bear."

Sure enough, a female with two cubs appeared, but not the 500-pound male Allen saw the day before.

For our final Whistler adventure, we flew in a small plane toward the mountains. Soon we were wheeling over a glacier chopped into giant ice cubes and a lake of startling turquoise. Atop a gigantic volcanic plug, climbers looked impossibly tiny and vulnerable.

On our return, we looked down to where we crossed the Horstman Glacier and climbed the Via Ferrata, where we kayaked on Green Lake and biked the Valley Trail. Yet, of all we had done, we had only scratched the surface. It's clear that we'll have to return to Whistler Ski Resort. In summer, of course.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Air Canada (888-247-2262, www.aircanada.com) flies to Vancouver from 50 cities across the United States. Whistler Express (877-317-7788, www.perimeterbus.com) provides bus service from Vancouver.

Activities: Glacier walks: Whistler X-Country Ski and Hike (604-932-7711, www.whistlerski-hike.com).

Via Ferrata and rap jump: Whistler Alpine Guides (604-938-9242, www.whistlerguides.com).

ATV tour: Outdoor Adventures at Whistler (604 932-0647, www.adventureswhistler.com).

Pedal-paddle tour: Whistler Eco Tours (877-988-4900, www.whistlerecotours.com).

ZipTrek tour: ZipTrek Ecotours Inc. (866-935-0001, www.ziptrek.com).

Bear tours: Michael Allen (604-902-1660, e-mail mallen_coastbear@direct.ca).

Float plane flights: Whistler Air (800-806-2299, www.whistlerair.ca).

Taman Sari spa: (604-938-5982, www.tamansarispa.com).

Other activities: eight golf courses, glider and helicopter flights, bungee jumping, rafting, horseback riding, hiking, Hummer tours, fishing, festivals, events and performances.

Accommodations: The two Pan Pacific Whistler hotels (888-905-9995, www.panpacific.com) feature suites with kitchens, fireplaces, balconies and floor-to-ceiling windows with spectacular views. Swimming pools and hot tubs are complemented by a cardio/weight room and spa. The hotels have won top awards from Conde Nast Traveler Magazine and Travel and Leisure Family Magazine.

The kitchens in the Hilton Resort and Spa (800-515-4050, www.hiltonwhistler.com) sport jet-black counters and beige wooden cabinets. The adjacent space is large enough for a king-size bed, pullout couch, TV cabinet and a handsome stone fireplace. Renovated two years ago and steps from the gondola and the center of the village, the Hilton is the epitome of elegance and comfort.

The Four Seasons Resort Whistler (604-935-3400, www.fourseasons.com) is both modern and rustic, with sumptuous guest rooms, suites and town houses featuring fine leathers, rich woods, fireplaces and private balconies. Bathrooms are stone-clad with deep soaking tubs. The Fifty Two 80 Bistro and Bar provides some of the best dining in the area. Treatments are offered by the alpine spa while the fitness center features yoga, pilates and spin classes. Many consider the Four Seasons the best hotel in town.

Dining: Two terrific restaurants are Quattro (604-905-4844, www.quattrorestaurants.com) for wonderful Italian dishes and Araxi (604-932-4540, www.toptable.ca), whose awards include Best Whistler Restaurant and Wine Spectator's "Best of" Award of Excellence.

For further information: Tourism Whistler (800-WHISTLER, www.tourismwhistler.com). Whistler Blackcomb (866-218-9690, www.whistlerblackcomb.com).

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