

Whistler's airy, 130m-long
Cloudraker Skybridge.

WHISTLING UP SOME SUMMER FUN

Canada's Whistler is a global winter playground equally well-known as the world's biggest mountain bike park. Bikes aside, summer in Whistler is way more than steep hills and knobby tyres. From paddling and long hikes, to scaling mountains and airborne experiences, this iconic mountain town is chock-full of outdoor fun for everyone. Let's go...

WORDS ANDREW BAIN PHOTOS AB/WHISTLER TOURISM

A WHISTLER IN SUMMER

EVERYONE HAS A WHISTLER. For skiers, it's the 200-plus runs that tattoo the slopes of side-by-side Whistler and Blackcomb mountains. For mountain bikers, it's A Line and Top of the World, the headline acts at the world's biggest mountain-bike park.

But there are myriad other Whistlers, especially in summer when the snow melts away into hiking trails, zip-lines, a via ferrata, kayak trips, a summer bobsled on wheels, floatplane trips and jetboat rides.

And the most surprising detail about Whistler? This famed ski resort, so familiar to Australians that some locals call it Whistralia, now gets more visitors in summer than winter – 1.6 million summer visitors at last count, compared to 1.4 million in winter. And while a large proportion are here for the mountain biking, it's entirely feasible to plan an extended Whistler stay without ever turning a pedal.

Start on a high note

There are more than 50km of hiking trails at Whistler, the literal pinnacle of which is the High Note Trail. This 10.5km loop begins on Whistler Mountain's summit, reached in the most languid of fashions – on gondolas and chairlifts – and with the most spectacular of starts.

Stepping off the Peak Express chairlift, the trail begins across the Cloudraker Skybridge, a 130m-long suspension bridge dangled between two peaks and swaying in the mountain winds above one of the two tiny glaciers that cling on grimly to the mountain's uppermost slopes. Crossing it will be one of the hike's most exposed moments, followed immediately by its most challenging moments as the trail descends steeply on a loose, stony path to a low point in the ridge.

Three days before I set foot on the High Note, a cougar had knocked a mountain biker off his bike and then stalked him



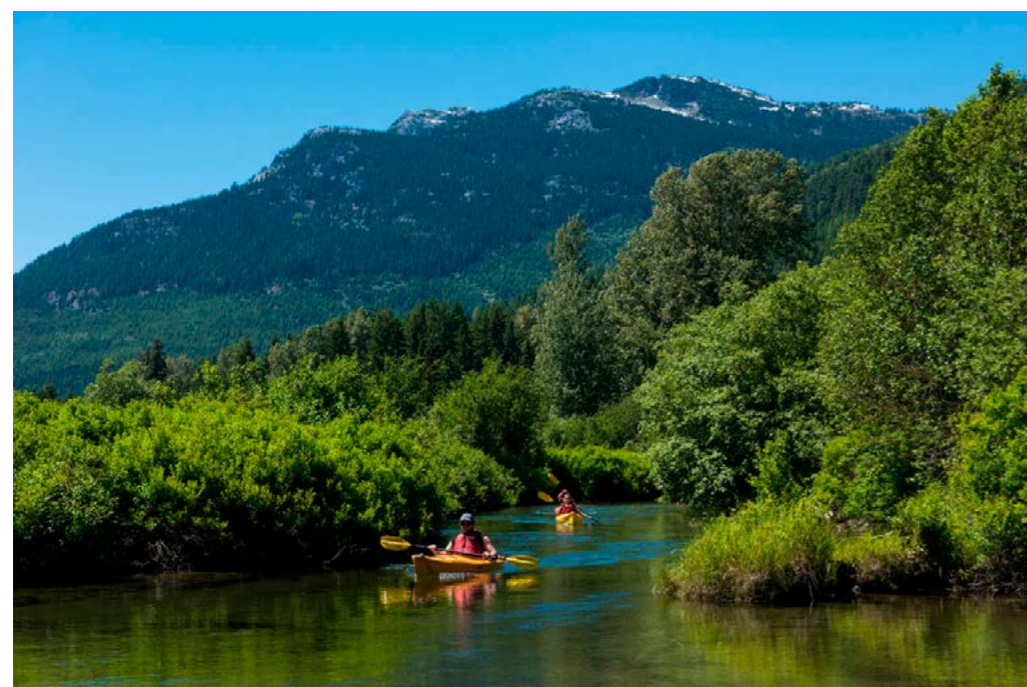
down the mountain, so there's an extra feeling of daring along the trails this day. But as we continue from the ridge, contouring across alpine meadows, the only wild creatures we see are marmots, the whistling calls of which gave Whistler its name.

"They're the couch potato of the mountains," says local outdoors guide Chris Kaipio. "The first animal into hibernation, and the last one out."

The High Note Trail is so named because it journeys past Whistler's so-called Musical Bumps – a strip of summits named Flute, Oboe and Piccolo. For a time, however, it's another peak – the striking horn of Black Tusk – that dominates the view, at least until robin-egg-blue Cheakamus Lake slides into sight.

This glacier-fed lake resembles a paint spot in the valley, while high above is the hanging Corrie Lake, pooled on a flat bench of land etched into the Coast Mountains. What's great about Whistler is that enticing sites like Corrie Lake are still untracked, despite the wealth of development. Even after 20 years in Whistler, Kaipio says he's never made it to Corrie's shores, repelled each time he's tried.

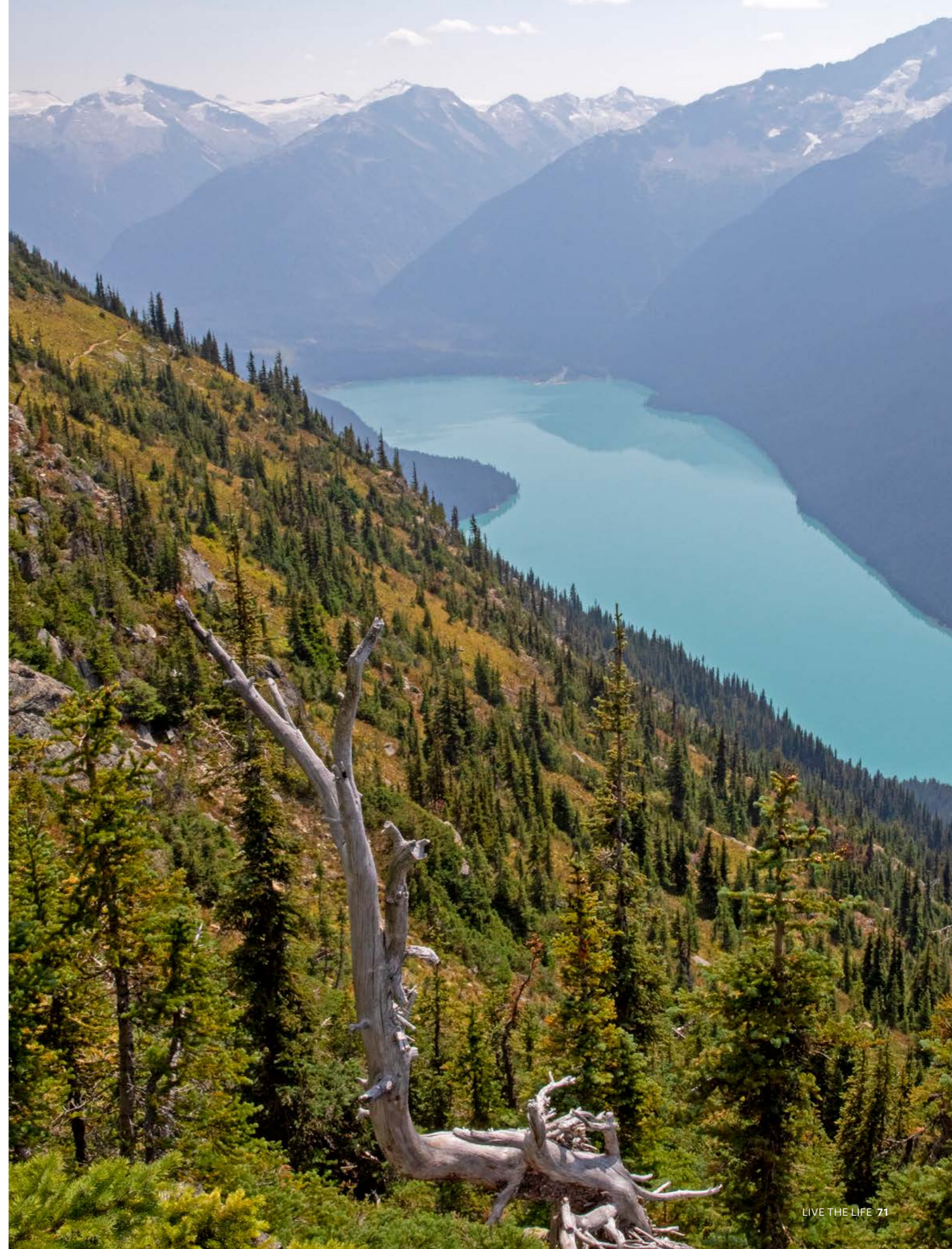
Midway along the High Note's length, the trail cuts through a



Above: Cliff-hanging... scaling the wall on Whistler's via ferrata.

Left: Serene moments on the whimsical River of Golden Dreams

Right: High Note view onto Cheakamus Lake.





Above: Zipping across the sky on the Eagle Tour zip-line.

Right: Topping out on the via ferrata 1500m above Whistler village.

break in the ridge between Piccolo and Flute to gorgeously green Symphony Lake. The orchestral theme rises yet another octave as the trail's final steps rise on to Symphony Lake's more popular companion piece, Harmony Lake, its surface so still this day that it creates a mirror finish of mountains.

Scaling the heights

The following morning, I'm once again riding a gondola towards the summit of Whistler Mountain, only this time I'll complete the final 300m of climbing on Whistler's via ferrata.

Modelled on the famous 'iron paths' that have criss-crossed Italy's Dolomite mountains since WWI, the via ferrata scales Whistler's towering summit cliffs, providing the experience and exposure of rock climbing without the risks.

At the Roundhouse, at the head of the Whistler Village Gondola, we slip into harnesses and helmets and set out on the short walk into Glacier Bowl. Marmots whistle from among the rocks, and a stream paints a green line of life into the otherwise barren bowl. When Mountain Skills Academy and Adventures created the via ferrata around 15 years ago, participants had to crampon across a glacier to reach its base, but the ice has since retreated far up the slopes, leaving us crunching over only rock.

At the base of the cliffs, with rockfalls pouring down what's left of the glacier below us, we clip into a metal cable and begin ascending the cliffs. Via ferratas can include a range of features and assistance, from ladders and bridges to chains and rungs. On Whistler's cliffs, it's predominantly rungs, clipping into the rock like staples, so that it's much like climbing a very exposed ladder.

In between rungs, there are scrambles across ledges, including one moment around a protruding rock that requires you to lean out over the abyss above Glacier Bowl. Other times, the rungs run out and you must briefly climb on rock alone, though the gradings are no more than 12 or 13.

The sound of rockfalls continue from the bowl, echoing violently up the cliffs, but suddenly there are no more rungs and I'm atop the cliffs rather than hanging from them. Just a few metres away, the chairlift whirs down the mountain. What goes up must go back down.



Zip to it

Most of Whistler's summer activities are half-day affairs, making it possible to squeeze a couple into a day. Unclipping from my climbing helmet, I'm quickly clipping back into another at the start of Whistler's Eagle Tour zip-lines.

This string of five zip-lines crisses and crosses the deep Fitzsimmons Creek valley like faster, sportier versions of the famed Peak 2 Peak Gondola, with its 3km-long unsupported span, high above. The first line is the longest at 750m from go through wow to whoa, reaching speeds up to 75km/h, though it feels about three times that fast when you're hanging from a cable about a centimetre wide. (It's small shrift compared to the Sasquatch zip-line higher up the mountain, which stretches for 2km and tops out well above 100km/h.)

It's life in the treetops, a mountain game of snakes and ladders as the zip-lines switch from slope to slope – Whistler, Blackcomb, Whistler – punching through small breaks in the hemlock forest and hurtling over the creek.

As the lines progress, so too does courage. By the third and fourth zip-lines, there are people somersaulting off the platforms or tucking their knees in tight for a cannonball effect, flowing faster than the creek below on the fourth and fastest of the lines.

The final zip-line delivers us almost down into the village. It's the shortest and slowest ride, and a chance to attempt any aerial

tricks you've been contemplating. Dangling upside down, arms outstretched, my fingers seem almost to skim across the helmets of the mountain bikers who now coil downhill beneath the line.

It's a brush with Whistler's summer raison d'être, but the day is winding down and Whistler village promises its customary civilised end to a day. Despite a permanent population of less than 15,000, Whistler sports three craft breweries, a distillery and more than 200 eateries, from poutine stands to four restaurants that made the most recent list of Canada's top 100 restaurants.

For Whistler-weary muscles, there's also the Scandinave Spa. Sat at the edge of town and yet encased (and excited from Whistler's crazy hubbub) by forest, its hot and cold pools – from 10 degrees to 40 degrees – provide Scandinavian-style hot and cold therapy, preparing your body for another tilt at the mountains.

Green machines

One of the most striking sights from the tops of the mountains is a lone green lake dotted among the blue lakes around Whistler village. The simply named Green Lake is the only one of the lakes fed by glacial melt, and the setting for a mountain-ringed afternoon of kayaking.

Trips begin on the quixotically named River of Golden Dreams, flowing between Lake Alta and Green Lake, and given its name by the owner of Whistler's first fishing lodge – an ardent fan of romance novels – more than a century ago.

The river is both narrow and shallow, the banks closing in tight around us as we paddle downstream. "Around this bend is one of my favourite views from anywhere in the valley," Kaipio says as we approach the river's final turn. And sure enough, rounding it is like watching a stage curtain pull back on an epic movie. Blackcomb and Whistler suddenly tower out of the water, Whistler seemingly stitched together by its Skybridge, and Blackcomb's lift towers looking strangely like something from War of the Worlds.

It's a mesmerising 4km paddle to the lake's far end. There's no hint of wind and no movement in the water other than the floatplanes that use Green Lake as an airport of sorts, taking off and plumping down around our kayaks and canoes like heavy pelicans.

Along the shore, we paddle across the reflections of the mountains, heading towards the glacial inlet that flows into the lake through the Nicklaus North golf course, rated among Canada's top 100 courses. As we approach the inlet, I trail my hand through the water, feeling it get colder and colder until we're in its icy stream.

Further along the shore, there's a chance to pull into the remains of Parkhurst, a sawmill settlement from the 1930s. It's now a ghost town that's more ghost than town, with little remaining other than a few foundations, a collapsed loading dock and a rusted bulldozer behind it.

A short distance beyond Parkhurst, the lake pours away into Green River and violently into Nairn Falls. It's no place for a kayak, so we turn back, crossing to a beach nestled among luxury homes. The money is all on this shore, but the billion-dollar views are across the water, to these mountains that have provided such a memorable few summer days.



FACT FILE

Find all things Whistler at www.whistler.com. Whistler Eco Tours (www.whistlerecotours.com) guides hikes and paddles through the mountains and lakes around Whistler. Mountain Skills Academy and Adventures (www.mountainskillsacademy.com) operates climbs on the via ferrata, while Ziptrek (<https://whistler.ziptrek.com/>) runs Whistler's zip-line tours.