

30 **SKI WEDNESDAY**

Whistler Blackcomb is a big slice of heaven



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Trip to British Columbia well worth it

MOIRA MCCARTHY PHOTOS
Every trail at Whistler Blackcomb has amazing views.

In my long life of ski dedication, one big resort and I kept missing one another like chairlifts passing in a storm.

One year, a family emergency caused my cancellation. Another, a bad (non-ski related) crash ended my plans. Then that pesky pandemic got in the way.

It seemed, despite my world travel, that Whistler Blackcomb (<https://www.whistlerblackcomb.com/>) and I were destined not to meet. So when I booked a trip last winter, I held my breath. And for a moment, I wondered – if I finally made it there – if this would fall under what I call “prom syndrome,” when you so look forward to something that it cannot possibly live up to your expectations.

Here's the end first: Made it there, savored it all. And as for Prom syndrome? I now need to come up with a term for quite the opposite. Because my late winter skiing visit to Whistler Blackcomb was all I imagined and more.

From sunny morning runs to snowy powder moments; from the quiet sanctity of soaking in a true Scandinavian spa to the rumpus apres fun at the Whistler base – and everything in between – Whistler and I were, after all, meant to meet.

I arrived in Vancouver midday with my husband – we'd hopped an easy flight,

with a Minneapolis stop over – and then met up with VIP Whistler Car Service (<https://www.vipwhistler.com/>), a choice worth the extra cost because first: you don't need a car in Whistler and second: the drive there is a just under two hour spectacle of beauty known as the Sea to Sky Highway that is an event in itself. Our driver pointed out sites, shared historic details and really made the last leg of our journey great. There are buses and other options as well.

We made the Fairmont Whistler Chalet our base camp. The famed hotel serves as the centerpiece of the Blackcomb side of the resort, where it's a bit quieter than the bustling, fun and busier Whistler side.

The hotel is posh yet peaceful, and has all the perks: an outdoor pool, spa, restaurant choices, ski valet and a fun tented hot cocoa area for you to glide into apres or break time. It's magnificent.

But we were there for the skiing. Whistler Blackcomb is two distinct peaks – both once did and still could stand as complete resorts on their own – now joined as one, linked by shuttles and the base and even better, the world-renowned Peak 2 Peak Gondola, which holds the Guinness Book of World Records title of highest lift (1,427 feet) and is the

world's longest at 1.8 miles.

Some of the gondolas (which are more like trams) have glass bottoms. The view and experience are unmatched, and it's not uncommon to ride along with non-skiers just up there for the thrill.

We skied Blackcomb our first day, finding fresh powder shots on a sunny post storm day off of the Seventh Heaven lift (a friend in the know had suggested this. Whistler offers free daily 1.5 hour tours at 11:15 a.m.

Because we'd come midweek, crowds were minimal. Sure, we waited at a few lifts, but only for a bit, and the scenery kept us happy. Plus, the combination of 36 top-notch lifts and 8,171 acres of skiing means that while you may encounter crowds and waits at the base (I found them smaller on the Blackcomb side but they are hard to totally avoid) they spread out fast.

And in some cases, the waiting paid off. In line at Seventh Heaven, everyone puts their poles up in the air and waits for the Whiskey Jack birds to land on them – and they do. Coolness factor goes to 11 on that one.

The Blackcomb side skis steeper and bigger: Its 5,280 foot vertical drop is the most in North America. You'll find more trees to hit, steeper trails with multiple

fall lines and overall, more challenge, although any strong intermediate can take on much of the peak.

And while Whistler has more skiable life accessed acres, Blackcomb is massive as well. There are fun hike-to spots too where you'll find fresh tracks nearly all the time.

Whistler is the tamer peak, though do not take that as meaning boring. It has more green trails and many ways for more laid back skiers and riders to take long and interesting – and view-worthy – runs. Like Blackcomb, it has hike-to-ski spots that are easy to access as well.

More families tend to stick to the Whistler side, though you see all ages across both peaks. The apres scene pops more on the Whistler side. We liked shuttling over there to be in the middle of the fun, or choosing a quieter yet as lovely scene on the Blackcomb side. Best of both worlds.

We headed back down that Sea to Sky Highway with so many great trail memories, along with a realization: Whistler Blackcomb is a spot that demands revisiting. There's so much to see, ski, taste, and just plain soak in that no mere mortal can do it all in one trip.

Here's to planning the next visit. After all: We've got history, finally, now.

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The outdoor pool at the Fairmont Chateau is great for Apres fun.

WHISTLER BLACKCOMB SIGNPOSTS

By Moira McCarthy

Where: Whistler Blackcomb sits about two hours north of Vancouver in the Fitzsimmons Range of the Coastal Mountains. That coastal locale means lots of moisture (read: snow) but sometimes variable conditions. Don't let that scare you. It's tall enough to always have fluffy stuff in most spots.

Tickets: Whistler Blackcomb is on the Epic Pass (www.epicpass.com) so that's your best bet for deals (you can purchase a season pass or multi-day epic pass on line). No matter what, do purchase ahead of time, as window ticket purchases are never the best deal.

When: The resort opens early November and runs through mid May – and those early and late dates can be a great choice with less crowding and still a lot of snow. Weekends and holiday weeks are at a premium and super busy; just know if you go and you can make a plan for it to work even in busy times.

Gear: Consider bringing your own boots and getting the rest as rentals on site. Black Tie Ski Rentals (<https://www.blacktieskis.com/whistler/>) come to you and fit you with just the gear you need (at your hotel or condo). Then, when conditions change (they always do) you can trade out for gear just for that day either by asking them to meet you again or popping into their shop at the Blackcomb base. It's the way to go, and you save by not having to check your skis on the plane.

Dining: There's just about every kind of dining possible in and around the base areas. Check out The Grill Room in the Fairmont Chateau for local sourced food paired with excellent British Columbia wines – and a near over the top breakfast spread. Araxi Restaurant + Bar at the Whistler base – one of the region's longest operating spots – is a must visit apres or dinner time. For a more laid back meal that will nevertheless wow you, grab the shuttle to Barn Nork Aharn Thai Restaurant. There may be a line and a wait but it's worth it.

Other than skiing: There's snowshoeing, winter hiking, pools, spas, shopping, museums and more. One must do is multi-hour visit to the Scandinave Spa (<http://www.scandinave.com/en/whistler/>), an other-worldly experience and the perfect match to an active ski day. Hot and cold plunges, relaxation rooms, tea and baked goods and more. Details: <https://www.whistlerblackcomb.com/>



Fresh made wonderful at the Barn Nork Aharn Thai Restaurant.

The REAL DEAL

A \$4 lift ticket? For real. King Pine Ski Area in Madison, N.H., rolls back its clock on Thursday, Dec. 21 to the era when skiing was a low cost option. You ski or ride all day – from first bell at 10 a.m. to last chair under the lights at 6 p.m. for just \$4. Then you can roll into their fun apres spot and grab an affordable meal and beverage. Tickets must be purchased in advance and on line at <https://www.kingpine.com>.



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