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# Travel



## Falling for Whistler Blackcomb — finally

By ANNE Z. COOKE  
For the Journal-Constitution

**Vancouver, British Columbia** — For more than two months, the snow's been falling on British Columbia's Coast Range. And for more than two months the e-mails have been flying, stacking up in my in-box like snowdrifts against a fence.

On Nov. 8, weather forecasters at Whistler Blackcomb, Canada's premier ski resort, reported the first winter storms, with eight inches of snow dusting the tops of 7,494-foot Blackcomb and 7,160-foot Whistler. By the end of the week, another 30 inches had floated to earth and jubilant weather-watchers reported incoming storms massing over

the Pacific Ocean.

By early December, the total snowfall measured 53 inches, according to the official snow meter at Pig Alley Weather Station, under the Whistler Gondola. And by New



► Please see **WHISTLER, L4**

# Whistler: Resort isn't as crowded as you think

► Continued from L1

Year's, holiday skiers had a special reason to toast the north country's twin peaks: 14 feet of light, white powder.

Another year, another ski season at North America's top-rated but least-visited resort. Surprised? Not when you know that most recreational skiers — couples, families, ski clubs, people with tight schedules and limited vacation time — tend to head for resorts closer to home. In skiing, as in most things, familiarity means comfort.

Even my husband and I were among the reluctant, naysayers who thought Vancouver was unreasonably far away just to ski. Like dummies, it took us 10 years to reprogram our heads — but only a day to realize what we'd missed.

"Back again, are you?" asked Steve Johnson, one of the Mountain Hosts who volunteer at help stations and lead on-mountain tours. "Sounds like me," he said when he heard our story. "But after I'd been here a couple of times, I decided it was time to buy a place and put down roots. When I'm not traveling for business, I'm skiing. It's an easy bus ride to the airport and a straight flight to the London office. Tough life, right?"

Like Johnson, we'd taken the point-to-point shuttle bus from Vancouver International to the resort, a scenic 2½-hour drive on the Sea to Sky Highway (Route 99), along Howe Sound and up through Squamish Canyon. Close as it is, the resort — the alpine skiing venue for the 2010 Winter Olympics and Paralympic Winter Games — feels remote, tucked into a river valley and surrounded by forests and snowy peaks.

It was foggy on the lower slopes that first day, so Johnson offered to show us his favorite above treeline runs — and not incidentally — make sure we didn't go blind in the soup and ski out of bounds. Periodic fog is Whistler's only Achilles' heel. The same weather that makes the snow, sometimes makes fog, created when warmer Pacific Ocean air meets cold mountain currents.

"It can be raining in the village and foggy on the lower lifts and perfectly clear higher up," said Johnson. "If you take the gondola up through the fog belt, you emerge in the midst of blue sky and sun. Our best weather is probably late February and March. It's a bit warmer then, too."

Fourteen feet is a lot of snow, but here, at 50 degrees north, it's just a teaser. According to resort records, Whistler Blackcomb's average annual snowfall is a gargantuan 33.5 feet. But predictable snow isn't the only reason ski magazines rank Whistler Blackcomb on every Top 10 list. The resort's spokespeople like to recite the numbers, and when you hear them, you know why: One stands for one mile of vertical elevation. Two are the mountains, linked at the ski area base by Whistler Village. Three glaciers hang near the summit. Six terrain parks give boarders their own playground. Seven (miles) is the longest top-to-bottom run.

Twelve alpine bowls let you leave the trail to explore, or go "off piste" as skiers put it; 17 on-mountain restaurants serve everything from Mongolian barbecue and burgers to salads and coq au vin; 38 chairlifts carry 61,407 skiers per hour uphill; and 200-plus named runs and trails, marked on the trail map, funnel them all back down.

Whistler Blackcomb's biggest number is 8,171, meaning the skiable acres within bounds, a region so immense that you could fit 10 Aspens (the ski resort) inside and still have room left over. When you stand at the top of the highest lifts, surrounded by snowcapped peaks, Whistler Blackcomb looks and skis like the Alps. Lift lines are rare except at the base area, and wide-open slopes are seldom crowded. More than once we were the only skiers, carving big lazy turns by ourselves.



This view toward Blackcomb Mountain is a favorite for many visitors who ski in British Columbia. According to Whistler Blackcomb's records, the average annual snowfall is 33.5 feet. Periodic fog is its only Achilles' heel.

Photos by STEVE HAGGERTY / ColorWorld



The Roundhouse Lodge sits 6,069 feet above sea level on Whistler Mountain and is accessed via the Whistler Village gondola.

If you're a hotshot skier, look alive; a quarter of the terrain is rated for you (black diamonds and double black diamonds on the trail map), including hair-raising chutes and steepes that plummet off Whistler Mountain's exposed upper slopes. Only skiers with thighs of iron should attempt the glade skiing on steep trails through partially cleared forests below the treeline. Beginners get just the opposite. Long level

runs (green lines on the trail map), some signed "easiest way down," zigzag from top to bottom, connecting to Snowcat tracks and maintenance roads. The family zone, a broad meadow under the Emerald Express, gives parents a place to teach their kids to ski.

That leaves more than half the terrain for the majority, confident intermediate skiers happy to play all day on groomed cruisers, short

powder sprints and easy bump runs (blue lines on the map). Some of the best are in the recently opened Symphony Bowl, 1,000 acres above timberline on the back side of Whistler Mountain. Two new high-speed quad chairlifts, the Harmony Express and the Symphony Express, take skiers to this wide open bit of heaven, one of my favorite places, not just to ski, really, but to inhale the rugged vistas and sense of permanence that mountains inspire.

Whistler Blackcomb's other asset is the base area Village, an up-market destination carefully planned and designed from the get-go. As I've said before, purpose-built ski villages are never my preference. But it's hard not to resist this one's urbane architecture, winding pedestrian lanes and eye-catching store windows. Nothing's forgotten here, either. Lodges, condominiums and three-, four- and five-star hotels (with spas) are within walking distance of ski and gear-rental shops, cafes, bistros and gourmet restaurants, specialty cheese and wine shops, a market and pharmacy, a designer furrier, art galleries, Native America art dealers, shops selling casual fashions, sportswear and a library and movie theater.

You'll need lodging, of course, so check out some of the 60 lodges, hotels, inns and condominiums in all price ranges listed on Whistler Tourism's Web site. If you're leaning toward deluxe digs, check out the Fairmont Château Whistler and the Four Seasons, in the Upper Village, on the other side of Fitzsimmons Creek. At the

Fairmont Château Whistler, we did the sleigh ride and fondue evening, with a one-hour twilight ride through the woods, and a romantic candle-lit dinner at the Chalet.

At the 3-year-old Four Seasons Hotel, we joined the après (as they call it here) crowd for happy hour-priced drinks and free tapas (5-7 p.m.) at the Fifty-Two 80 Bistro and Bar. A jumping place, be warned that the tables fill up quickly. Or spend your après-ski hours at the spa, or in the hotel's heated outdoor pool, where

## IF YOU GO

### Getting there

Delta Air Lines flies nonstop from Atlanta to Vancouver daily, or through Salt Lake. Round-trip tickets start at about \$464 before taxes (prices are subject to change). Alaska Airlines flies through Portland, Ore. Other major carriers fly through Denver, Houston, Dallas and Phoenix.

### Where to stay

Book rooms or condos with Whistler Central Reservations, 1-800-944-7857, or visit [www.tourismwhistler.com](http://www.tourismwhistler.com). For the Fairmont Château Whistler, [www.fairmont.com](http://www.fairmont.com). For the Four Seasons, [www.fourseasons.com/whistler](http://www.fourseasons.com/whistler).

### Information

► Skiing: 604-932-3434, or see [www.whistlerblackcomb.com](http://www.whistlerblackcomb.com).

► Tourism: Free shuttle buses provide village and hotel transportation; a rental car is not necessary. For other winter activities — Nordic skiing, ice skating, trout fishing and snowshoeing — call 604-932-3928, or 1-800-435-5622. Village facilities include bars, movie theaters, video rentals, banks, churches, swimming pool, skating rink, indoor tennis courts and a medical clinic.

waitresses serve complimentary hot cocoa (or hot cider) and cookies.

The Four Seasons, a contemporary mountain lodge, showcases natural materials, with massive finished beams, native red and yellow cedar paneling and local stone. The design is a perfect setting for its art collection (ask at the desk for the "art experience" brochure) and tour yourself through the magnificent public lounges.

It isn't a boast to say that Whistler Blackcomb really has everything, even almost-guaranteed snow. So don't drag your feet the way we did. While the storms lurk and the snow flies, go get some.