



A SNOWBOARDER ENJOYS THE POWDER IN WHISTLER'S BACKCOUNTRY.

of Tom, Dick and Harry Mountain. "It's steep, with little rocky outcrops and well-spaced trees full of hidden powder stashes," says Jonathan Graca of Hood River. "And when a storm rolls in and the winds are howling up high, Skibowl is protected."

The wildcard here is the weather. Because the ski area sits at a lower elevation—its base is at 3,500 feet, compared with Meadows' 5,366—it can have rain or wet snow when higher areas are enjoying a blizzard. Skibowl wisely counters this potential black mark: With lights on 34 runs and two terrain parks, it's the nation's largest night-skiing area.

Skibowl also ups the fun ante with other activities. Its Multorpor Mountain area (Skibowl East) features the Snow Tube and Adventure Park—a dizzying array of tubing hills, horsedrawn sleigh rides, snowbikes, minisnowmobiles and a zipline that sends you zinging through the air at 40 feet.

This year, Skibowl and Timberline join forces with their "Mt. Hood Fusion Pass," an unlimited season pass for both ski areas, priced to match Mt. Hood Meadows' \$400 season-pass deal. Seems winter just keeps getting better on the Hood.

WHISTLER/BLACKCOMB—BRITISH COLUMBIA

By Julie H. Case

We arrive at Whistler expecting spring. It's April, and most of us spent our Saturdays together this winter teaching and guiding skiers and snowboarders with disabilities through Seattle-based Ski-for-All (now Outdoors for All). For the eight of us, this trip is our bon voyage to winter.

We're anticipating sun and slush. We're hoping for a few good turns, a few late-day T-shirt runs, sunburned noses and chapped lips. We aren't expecting snowfall, but that's what we get. At check-in Thursday afternoon the sky is casually dropping thumb-print-size flakes. The snow collects quietly along the rooftops and

DETAILS

>> **WHISTLER/BLACKCOMB** is about 70 miles from Vancouver, B.C. Snowline 604-932-4211, general 800-766-0449; www.whistlerblackcomb.com. Lift tickets range from (CDN)\$60-\$75.

on the red brick sidewalks of the village.

The snow keeps coming, and when we wake on Saturday, there's nearly 5 new inches—11 in the last 24 hours. My friend Steve, the only other snowboarder on the trip, and I are at the Whistler Village Gondola when it opens. Whistler actually comprises two ski areas—Whistler and Blackcomb—connected by a pedestrian village. Gondolas for both ski areas are just a block from each other at the southeast end of the village. During peak season the resort offers "fresh tracks"—(CDN)\$15.42 for breakfast and early loading privileges on the Whistler gondola—but we're a week too late for that, so it's breakfast on the run for us.

Unloading from the gondola, we're surprised to discover that despite the fresh snow, there are far fewer skiers here than we'd imagined. There's something to be said for spending a festival weekend here—this is the first of two weekends in Whistler's annual Telus World Ski & Snowboard Festival, and most people are here to party. In the morning, only the diehards are on the slopes.

There's already a queue waiting for Whistler's beloved and extreme Peak chair to open, and while we'd love first crack at the virgin snow, we opt instead for the more immediate gratification of the blue and black runs around Big Red Express. I get my own line all the way down the first run, and then I get one again. The runs are good and fresh, with the briefest chatter of ice in the transition between Little Red Run and Jimmy's Joker.

Thanks to Whistler's 5,020 feet of vertical and 4,757 acres of skiable terrain, it's easy to see how it helped the Vancouver area win the 2010 Olympics bid. Already the resort maps are highlighted to detail the location of the men's and women's Downhill

and SuperG—Upper and Lower Dave Murray and Franz's and Lower Franz's, respectively.

After we've worked the hidden stashes around the trees, under Franz's Chair and between the lifts, we find ourselves drawn toward the Peak. The lift is still closed and the line is bulging, but it's worth the wait because the chair gives access to Glacier Bowl, Whistler Bowl, West Bowl and Bagel Bowl, as well as a slew of black and double-black runs. We slide into line with our new friends. Other than the rumors circulating about when the chair will open, nothing's happening. Then, the chair is alive. Lifties and ski patrol begin to load, and we all wish we were them.

Soon a cheer goes up as the first among us board the lift. It takes 10 minutes for the first people to reach the top, cross through Whistler Bowl and drop into sight above us on Shale Slope and Left Hook. It's like a Warren Miller film, and we're the audience. As skiers and riders cut perfect lines, we're all cheers. The first fall—a bouncing yard sale—elicits a groan and mighty "Oh," then laughter as the skier hikes for gear. There are gasps and cheers as daredevils and adrenaline seekers launch off snowy lips and clear the massive rock-face drops; there are collective moans of disappointment when the landing doesn't stick.

By the time I load the chair I can hardly wait. I'm all bliss, dangling high above the mountain's snowy face. I squeeze my mittened hands together, eye Shale Slope and plan my line. That there are still about 150 people waiting and watching below me doesn't register. All I can focus on is the blank slate of snow.

We linger at the entrance to Whistler Roll—it's just a gap-toothed jag of space, white rising on either side—before entering. Knee-deep powder greets us, sucks us in. It's a turn or two out of the steeps, and then we're sailing, turning hard and tight, then cutting long arcs across Whistler Bowl. Soon, we're cresting the ridge and riding toward Shale Slope. I find the line I'd been eyeing and am working my way toward it, toward that final breath I'll take before launching in, when it hits me: I'm no longer one of the crowd in line, waiting. I'm one of the lucky ones above. Below us, the lift line shifts, 300 eyeballs turn upward, waiting for us to descend. I don't expect cheers for a great run—there are better snowboarders out here—but I don't want to be the one tumbling head over teakettle before them. I mutter a breathless little plea—*Don't let me fall; don't let me fall*—and then jump in.

Immediately I'm deep in powder, and it's as if this whole mountain is the answer to my paltry prayers. Every turn is effortless and smooth, and it's not just the mountain, it's also me. It's some of the best riding I've done all year, and given the milling mass below, I'm grateful. There's fresh powder on top of fresh powder, and hardly another line for me to cross. I carve my turns, nose and tail arcing and soaring in unison. The board cuts through the powder and lifts; buoyed and aloft, it's like sailing on snow.

There's more of this to be had, so we slide back into line. Four runs later—the snow tracked out, and the two of us nearly worn through—we head for lunch where we collect the rest of the crew.

We spend the rest of the day playing in the sloping powder

fields and eyeing the virgin powder in Flute Bowl. It's Whistler's inbound backcountry, accessible today only by hiking in *and* out, but when Whistler opens for the 2006-2007 season, a new lift will connect Flute Bowl base to the peak of nearby Piccolo, opening up access to 1,000 skiable acres. Flute Peak will still require a hike in, but not a hike out. On one hand, I'm wistful. I like areas that require commitment and dedication to access. On the other hand, I'm grateful. I really don't like hiking that much.

Après ski is in full swing when we arrive at the village. Ruddy-cheeked skiers and nonskiers—aglow from a day at the spas and in Whistler's 200+ shops—spill out of restaurants and bars. After a couple of well-deserved pints—Steve and I have logged 20,480 feet of vertical today—we head back to the condo for dinner, then it's off to the clubs. But for me the night ends early. There's still too much good snow left, and the skies promise more.

Morning doesn't disappoint: The mountain has received 3½ inches. Jordan—a telemark skier—and Steve and I leave the others to sleep off their late night, and we head to Blackcomb.

Of the two areas, Blackcomb is the larger, though just slightly, featuring a full one mile of vertical and 3,414 skiable acres, and a top elevation of 7,494 feet. Combine the two areas and Whistler/Blackcomb becomes the largest ski resort in North America.

We spend most of the morning in Lakeside Bowl, which is worth the tricky traverse (stay as high as possible) from the 7th Heaven Chair. Slipping below the cliffs and into the bowl, we're greeted by yet more untapped powder.

We're lucky this trip and reach the base of Glacier Express just before it opens. Among the first in line, we debate the day. We could ride up, then hike to Spanky's Ladder and into Blackcomb Glacier. While the Glacier offers an expanse of double-black runs through bowls and chutes, it's work getting in and, especially for snowboarders, getting out. We're tempted, but it's the last day of the season for us and truthfully, we're a bit worn out. I doubt I have the endurance to make the hike in and the wearying traverse along Blackcomb Glacier Road out.

Instead we spend the rest of our time working the area around Glacier Express, where we get access to more fresh snow (is this *really* April?) and great, technical runs. It's the perfect way to end a weekend of chasing down freshies. There may be more terrain on these two mountains than can be covered in a long weekend, but we've tried. Like kids at Christmas, we've nearly drained the batteries. We'll sleep tonight with the roll of the mountains still coursing through us, the scent of snow on our skin.

STEVENS PASS, SNOQUALMIE AND CRYSTAL—WASHINGTON

By Linda Hagen Miller

The next time a winter meeting takes you to Seattle, save some time to hit the slopes. Stevens Pass, the Summit at Snoqualmie and Crystal Mountain are all fewer than 100