

Whistler Deserves Olympic Gold

Traveling on the Whistler Mountaineer train to Whistler is half the fun of visiting this British Columbia wonderland.

By Mary Welch

With the 2008 Summer Olympics just ended, the next Olympic gold rush will be 2010 in Vancouver, Canada. Many of the events will take place in Whistler, and this mountain village is gearing up for the onslaught of athletes, media, politicians, spectators and the world's attention.

It couldn't be a more delightful area, and half the fun is getting there. The drive from Vancouver to Whistler via Highway 99, also called the Sea to Sky Highway, is one of the most beautiful drives in the country, if not the entire continent.

But for us, we preferred the Whistler Mountaineer train to Whistler. It's a short trip but a delightful one – imagine a panorama of unbelievable vistas accompanied by fine wines, hot food and attentive attendants. And, we mean attentive. In the Glacier Dome cars, they even present you with a handwritten thank-you note before you exit (on a red carpet, no less).

We boarded the Glacier Dome rail car for the three-hour morning trip and were quickly offered a wake-up mimosa. That was followed by a delicious breakfast, complete with a hot, cheesy omelet and fresh fruit. Soon came the British Columbia wines. Throughout the journey, the hostesses offered commentary about the unsurpassed scenery, local folklore and tales of the Suquamish tribe. (Seattle is named after a Suquamish chief.)

The scenery matched the unparalleled service. One second we're looking at the Coast Mountains rising steeply around the bend and the next at the Pacific Ocean to the left. Nearing the town of Squamish, the impressive cascade of Shannon Falls appears followed by Stawamus Chief, a granite dome that towers above the waters of nearby Howe Sound. The dome, which resembles the chief's profile, is more than 2,303 feet tall. Some claim it is the second largest granite dome – second to the Rock of Gibraltar – although others dispute that claim. Now it is a popular climbing mountain.

For a more authentic feel of the train ride, walk to the Heritage observation car, which was built by the Canadian Pacific Railway



Whistler Mountaineer along the Cheakamus Canyon

Photo courtesy of Rocky Mountaineer Vacations

in 1914. The open car allows you to hear the clanging of the train's wheels and to feel the mist from a cascading waterfall. Truly an invigorating ride.

In addition to the Whistler Mountaineer, the Rocky Mountaineer, which owns the Whistler Mountaineer, offers a variety of rail trips through the Canadian Rockies, including trips to Jasper, the Columbia ice field, and to Calgary and Banff. The privately held company offers rail/cruise, rail/drive and rail/wilderness adventures that are combined with hotels and sightseeing tours. Regardless of which of the Rocky Mountaineer's 21 offerings (anywhere from three to 16-night itineraries) that you sign up for, the experience would truly be the memory of a lifetime. Traveling by rails is never better.

Whistler village is delightful – a well-planned series of interlocking pods of shops, spas and restaurants connected by walkways, bridges and bike paths. In fact, it is a pedestrian town. One parks the car and walks. There are free shuttles that get you from Village North to the Upper Village.



Whistler village

Rory Tucker/www.coastphoto.com

The town is nestled between the peaks of the Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains in the rugged Coast Mountains. For winter enthusiasts, Whistler offers more than 200 ski and snowboard runs, 33 lifts and a new Nordic ski area and a state-of-the-art sliding center – thanks to the Olympics. During the summer months, the area boasts five lakes and four championship golf courses. There is something for everyone, including nature walks, wakeboarding, tree trekking, canoeing, ATV tours and, of course, anything that can be done on snow.

What is so spectacular about Whistler (besides its obvious visual magnificence) is that it is a contained village where locals and visitors – especially families – play, eat, gather and have fun. It is a town where fathers and sons ride dirt bikes down the mountains, and mothers push strollers and give the last of the ice cream cone (from local icon creamery Cows) to their dogs. Adventurers of all ages zip line through trees in an eco-adventure that treads lightly through the forest but lets one commune with nature.

Nature and the outdoors is the prevalent theme at Whistler. One feels healthier at Whistler. The air is clean. The sky incredibly blue and the people athletic, happy and friendly. The food is mostly locally grown and organic. Enjoy the local salmon, prepared just about every way imaginable, and the mussels and the halibut. There are cozy and convivial British pubs, but beware that children under 19 are not permitted. Take them instead for petit gateaux at a French café. Or take the family to one of many steakhouses and Asian restaurants that underscore Canadians' diversity.

It's obvious the Olympic committee knew it was offering a first-class experience by choosing Whistler. Make it a venue for your family team. ♀



Eric Berger



Sterling Lorence/Tourism Whistler