

# TRAVEL



# SIXTY YEARS ON THE SLOPES

Resort celebrates evolution from humble beginnings to world-class, all-season destination

MARK SISSONS

At the top of Whistler Peak, Tim Hunt stops to catch his breath and gestures across the alpine landscape. We've been following one of seven new Wonder Routes launched this season — self-guided ski tours designed to showcase the resort's terrain. "This one takes you through all the different peaks," Hunt says, pointing out the route ahead. "All the way from Peak of Whistler to Harmony, to Symphony, and then over to Blackcomb and up to the top of Seventh Heaven. You just see how big everything is around here."

Hunt, a mountain guide and instructor who's spent 26 years at Whistler Blackcomb, knows the terrain intimately. From up here, it's 1,609 metres (5,280 feet) to the base — exactly a mile of vertical.

This is Whistler Blackcomb in January 2026, six decades after a handful of lifts first started running on what was then known as London Mountain, soon to be renamed Whistler Mountain.

## OPENING DAY

Hugh Smythe was there on opening day in January 1966 as a volunteer ski patroller. His most vivid memory? "A lot of shovelling," he says, laughing.

Lifts would get buried in storms, and patrollers would hand-shovel them out before dawn. The entire operation — gondola, two chairlifts, T-bar and base cafeteria — was built for \$650,000. "Today," Smythe notes, "one of those winch cats that you see up on top of the mountain is worth \$650,000."

Smythe went on to become one of the most influential figures in North American skiing. After leaving Whistler in 1974 to resurrect Fortress Mountain near Calgary, he returned in 1978 to develop Blackcomb Mountain, serving as its president through opening in 1980 and subsequent expansion. He later became president of Intrawest's Resort Operations Group, overseeing 13 mountain resorts and managing the 1997 merger that united Whistler and Blackcomb.

## CELEBRATORY SEASON

The 2025-26 winter season opened with acknowledgment from representatives of the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, recognizing Indigenous communities' long-standing presence in the region before the first lifts began turning. It was a fitting start to a milestone year. Sixty years after that 1966 opening day, the resort now spans more than 33 square kilometres (8,100 acres) across two mountains, with more than 200 runs served by 36 lifts.

## FRIENDLY RIVALS

The dual-mountain setup that defines Whistler Blackcomb today emerged from competition. When Blackcomb opened in 1980, it faced an established rival that had been operating for 14 years.

"Blackcomb was the underdog," Smythe recalls. "Whistler had more than double the number of lifts. So, we decided we were going to compete on customer service — food quality, grooming, and friendly staff."

The strategy worked. When Intrawest merged the two mountains in 1997, the combined operation became North America's premier ski destination.

The village evolved from scattered development in the 1980s and '90s to a pedestrian-oriented



A skier carves down a pristine groomed run set against the spectacular alpine backdrop of the Coast Range. This year marks the 60th anniversary of skiing at Whistler Blackcomb. BEN GIRARDI/TOURISM WHISTLER



Twilight settles over the illuminated pedestrian village and snow-covered slopes of Whistler Blackcomb. JUSTA JESKOVA/TOURISM WHISTLER



Festive lights illuminate the Olympic Plaza skating rink, creating a magical winter atmosphere in the heart of Whistler Village. JUSTA JESKOVA/TOURISM WHISTLER



Cocktails and shared plates sit atop a fire table, capturing the cosy atmosphere of dining at Portobello at Fairmont Whistler. JUSTA JESKOVA/TOURISM WHISTLER



Whistler Blackcomb is more than skiing. Thrill seekers can soar high above the snow-covered valley on a winter zip line tour. THE ADVENTURE GROUP

core: accommodation, dining, and retail concentrated near lift access points, with roads and parking pushed to the perimeter. It was a deliberate European model.

Three primary base areas — Whistler Village, Blackcomb Base and Creekside — provide access to upper-mountain terrain. Chairlifts, gondolas, and marked ski routes connect alpine bowls, ridgelines, and fall-line runs.

## THE WHOLE PACKAGE

The infrastructure may be unrecognizable from 1966, but the setting remains Whistler's biggest draw: glaciated peaks, alpine bowls, and fall-line skiing that rivals anything in the Alps, all accessible from sea level.

"You're coming from sea level from New York, San Francisco, Vancouver, Tokyo," says Smythe. "You're not sitting at 7,000, 8,000, 9,000 feet trying to get a night's sleep."

Getting there remains part of the appeal. The Sea to Sky High-

way got major upgrades ahead of the 2010 Olympics, making the journey safer. But the view when you round the corner at Horseshoe Bay — Howe Sound glittering below, snow-covered peaks rising ahead — remains as spectacular as ever.

Whistler Blackcomb has evolved into a true four-season resort, with summer visitation now approaching winter levels. Mountain biking, hiking, and the PEAK 2 PEAK Gondola draw visitors who never strap on skis.

Back at the top of Whistler Peak, Tim Hunt adjusts his skis and prepares to drop in. When I ask him for advice for first-time visitors, he doesn't hesitate.

"Book more than three days," he says. "And realistically, book an instructor to show you some of the things that people might not find on their own."

After 60 years of development, the terrain still holds secrets worth discovering.

## IF YOU GO

**Season:** The 2025/26 winter season opened on Nov. 21 and typically runs through May, subject to conditions. March offers longer days, reliable snowpack and a full events calendar. Weekly Fire & Ice Shows light up Whistler Village's Skiers Plaza throughout the season.

**Getting there:** Whistler is a two-hour drive north of Vancouver via the Sea to Sky Highway. For those who'd rather skip the drive, Uber Ski offers direct service from Vancouver to Whistler Village, with ski and snowboard equipment accommodated. More budget-friendly options include Epic Rides and Skylinx shuttle services.

**Where to stay:** The Fairmont Chateau Whistler, an iconic stone-and-timber landmark at the base of Blackcomb Mountain, offers a true ski-in/ski-out experience, a full-service spa, and multiple dining options, including the upscale Wildflower restaurant.

**Après & dining:** On-mountain options include Crystal Hut, Raven's Nest, Christine's and Steeps Grill. In the village, Wild Blue serves award-winning, locally sourced West Coast cuisine — think oysters, braised short rib and wild-caught fish. Merlin's anchors après in Whistler Village and Dusty's holds down Creekside. Indigenous-inspired dishes from the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre appear at Merlin's and Raven's Nest.

**Epic Pass:** Whistler Blackcomb is part of the Epic Pass network, offering unlimited access to 42 resorts worldwide. This season adds discounted refundable lift tickets purchased 28 days in advance, 50 per cent-off Epic Friend Tickets for pass holders' guests, and lift ticket credit toward a future Epic Pass. More information at [whistlerblackcomb.com](http://whistlerblackcomb.com).