

SKI SCENE



GLENN CROUTER
Special to the Sun

Late-season skiing at Whistler Blackcomb — it's not too late

Just when you think one of the world's biggest ski resorts has everything imaginable, it surprises you with yet another world-class attraction.

Whistler Blackcomb now offers Dawn Patrol, a personalized and elevated version of First Tracks by Whistler Heli-Ski, celebrating its 45th year of creating unforgettable lifetime memories. It delivers the same off-piste, backcountry deep powder thrill — without the helicopter — and what's truly unique is that it's open to skiers of all levels.

Your day begins by meeting your Whistler Heli Skiing guide at 7:30 a.m. Ryo and I met at the Blackcomb gondola and then enjoyed the mountain all to ourselves, taking in a stunning sunrise over Blackcomb Glacier. It's an experience I'll never forget. From there we ventured off-piste into incredible untouched powder. Every minute counts, so lift-line priority is a major bonus — no waiting, just skiing.

Dawn Patrol not only offers a unique, world-class backcountry experience, but it's also affordable. You can enjoy a remarkable half-day, including your guide, for \$399 per person. While heli-skiing is amazing and should be on your bucket list, this is an excellent alternative — a thrilling adventure tailored to your ability, across a wide range of conditions, with expert, world-class guidance.

60TH ANNIVERSARY

It's also a milestone year for Whistler Blackcomb, celebrating its 60th anniversary. Back in 1965, Whistler began with just one chalet, one chairlift, one gondola, two T-bars, and seven slopes. Today, it's the largest ski area in Canada and North America, and is consistently rated among the world's top 10 ski resorts, with 8,100 acres of skiable terrain, over 200 marked trails, and 37 state-of-the-art lifts, welcoming more than three million visitors annually.

Prestigious Condé Nast named Whistler Blackcomb No. 1 ski resort in the world and that's just one of the many awards and accolades over the years. The snowfall is deep and consistent thanks to its location within the Coastal Temperate Rainforest in the Pacific Ranges of the Coast Mountains on the edge of the Garibaldi Provincial Park. There's even a 7 route, self guided map "Wonder Routes" designed to showcase the best terrain and history of both mountains



Spring peaks

Whistler Blackcomb: Why there's still time for a late-season ski trip

including après. I'm fortunate to travel and ski the world, Whistler Blackcomb's variety and scenery are second to none.

Whistler Blackcomb also boasts some of the world's most unique lifts including the world-famous Peak 2 Peak Gondola, connecting Whistler and Blackcomb. It's an engineering marvel, holding records for height at 436 meters and spanning 4.4 kilometers. The 11-minute ride offers jaw-dropping, 360-degree panoramic views of rugged, snow-covered peaks and glaciers. It's also a major attraction for non-skiers, with access to dining at lodges like Roundhouse and Rendezvous.

Roundhouse Lodge features an enormous cafeteria, expansive sun

decks and relaxed dining at Steeps Restaurant. Rendezvous Lodge offers some of the best international cuisine I've seen at a ski resort, including Mexican, Thai featuring my fav chicken with vegetables with green curry, Ramen, Black Diamond Burgers, Coop for chicken, Ramen asian corner along with quick grab-and-go options. Christine's is a full-service fine dining experience worth visiting.

On the Whistler side, here's a tip: Gondola lines can be long in the morning, so I start with the Village's Fitzsimmons Express, then Garbanzo Express, followed by Emerald 6 Express to reach Roundhouse Lodge. From there, Peak Express takes you to the summit at 7,160 feet, where you'll

find the iconic Inuksuk from the 2010 Winter Olympics.

BLACKCOMB OPEN UNTIL MAY 18

Spring skiing here is unique. Mornings are cold, while afternoons are mild and sunny. Snow conditions vary dramatically—from fast runs to slow, heavy patches — covering everything from mashed potatoes at the base, to corn snow mid-mountain, sugar snow near Roundhouse, and even powder at the peak. There's still plenty of time to enjoy this world-class resort with Blackcomb open until May 18 and Whistler and shutting down April 18.

As Tania Sear, manager of travel media at Tourism Whistler, informs me, there's still plenty of time to enjoy the ski resort, with Blackcomb having one of the longest ski seasons in North America after opening Nov. 21, with Whistler opening the following week.

As for accommodation, the options are endless. I stayed at Aava Whistler in the Village, an adventure seekers lodge offering great value with a heated outdoor pool, sauna, gym, and whirlpool. As operations manager Rebecca Emms told me, it's known as a basecamp for adventure, with perks like complimentary bike and ski valet, wash/tool stations, boot dryers, lockers, and dog-friendly rooms. While it doesn't have a restaurant, the Village — with over 200 shops, restaurants, and cafés — is just a two-minute walk away.

World-class dining in Whistler Village is exceptional. My favourite is the Bearfoot Bistro in the Listel Hotel, a five-star experience known for creative dishes, liquid nitrogen ice cream made

Whistler Blackcomb is celebrating its 60th anniversary.

GUY FATTAL/TOURISM WHISTLER

tableside, and the Grey Goose Ice Room — the world's coldest vodka tasting room at -32°C. It also boasts a 15,000-bottle wine cellar, and a memorable champagne sabering presentation by one of the best marketing managers I've ever met, Marc Des Rosiers along with a luxurious presentation for a \$65,000 bottle of Louis. The Bearfoot Bistro has also renovated the 3rd floor of the hotel, Cedar Floor with a large collection of local Indigenous art and artefacts.

Another standout is Il Caminetto, offering relaxed fine dining, excellent service, and a lively outdoor patio with flaming heaters. Balam is another option for vibrant Latin dining, known for its bold cuisine, drinks, and atmosphere. It's not just a restaurant — it's a celebration of the spirit and soul of Latin American cuisine, located in the Crystal Lodge.

Après-ski is a huge part of the culture here, with Whistler base hotspots such as Longhorn Saloon for high-energy parties, live DJs, champagne bottles and then Dubh Linn Gate for Irish fare and live music and Garibaldi Lift Co over top the Whistler gondola. This area is often dubbed the "Bermuda Triangle" for how easily people lose track of time. Other great spots include Dusty's Bar & BBQ in Creekside and Merlin's at Blackcomb base.

WORLD-CLASS RESORT

All in all, Whistler Blackcomb continues to impress as a world-class, four-season resort. It's easily accessible from Vancouver airport via a scenic two-hour luxury coach ride with Whistler Connection. Epic Pass holders should take note: it's time to buy your next season pass at the lowest prices, with new pricing for ages 13–30. You can also take advantage of early-season deals, including 20% discounts on food, lodging, lessons, rentals, and more through Epic Mountain Rewards — which also applies to Whistler Heli-Ski and Dawn Patrol. Visit epicpass.com for more details.

What truly stands out is the level of service across the resort — from lifts and lodges to hotels, restaurants, and shops. It's an ingrained culture of excellence and attention to detail that few resorts in the world can match.

This was my fourth trip to Whistler Blackcomb, and it once again delivered world-class skiing, accommodations, service, dining, and — most importantly — a truly world-class experience.