

Family adventures at Sun Peaks: A journey from snowshoes to snowmobiles

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SUN PEAKS, British Columbia — My husband and I took our kids to Sun Peaks Resort years ago to explore interior B.C. and enjoy the area's renowned light and fluffy snow. We went snowshoeing and sledding and took the kids on a horse-driven sleigh ride — the sparkle in their eyes reflecting their 2- and 4-year-old sense of wonder.

Our son — not yet on skis — played with trucks in the day care center while our daughter learned to ski from an Australian instructor, and my husband and I went on mountain tours with volunteer Sun Hosts so we could find the best snow stashes before day care and ski school let out.



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Sun Peaks Resort near Kamloops, British Columbia, got its first chairlift in 1961 and is now Canada's second-largest ski resort — and three times the size of Killington in skiable acres.

Fast forward just over a decade: We returned to Sun Peaks last month for another family adventure with our teenagers in

tow. This time, we took the kids fat biking and snowmobiling, and on sled rides pulled by excit-

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ed huskies. Our son Sam, now 13, led the charge as we tackled experts-only sidecountry runs and 15-year-old Grace, now with her learner's permit, drove our two-person snowmobile miles through the forest on a guided tour — in the dark.

What we love so much about Sun Peaks, then and now, are the many activities for all ages that make a family adventure here so much fun. Add to that the ski-in/ski-out access and a passionate year-round community that's helped make this a world-class destination — the resort has served as an official training center for Austria's Olympic ski team and hosted international ski races — while ensuring it retains its small-village, welcoming vibe.

Sun Peaks is located about 35 miles northeast of Kamloops (you can fly here direct from Calgary or Vancouver) or a five-hour drive from Vancouver. It ranks as the second-largest ski resort in Canada — only beaten by nearby Whistler-Blackcomb — and measures nearly three times the size of Killington in skiable acres.

The small village, incorporated in 2010, feels like a cozy European mountain town with its Alps-style architecture (including landmark clock tower), slopeside lodging, and mix of accents that add an international flare — many of the guides and hotel staff we met were from Australia and New Zealand, and we shared chairlifts with visitors from England, Germany, and Japan.

You won't find Pandora and Gucci stores here — shops carrying Patagonia and The North Face are as high-end as it gets — but rather local galleries, gear stores, and one-of-a-kind restaurants. Here, ax throwing replaces bowling as a fun family activity (after all, nothing says family bonding more than tossing sharp objects at cottonwood planks) — and the Cleavage Axe Company welcomes visitors to give it a try and organizes local leagues for teens and adults.

The ski area, which opened its first chairlift in 1961, has grown into a top-notch four-season resort thanks to input from the community and from legendary Olympic medalist Nancy Greene Raine and her late husband, Al Raine, who moved here in the mid-1990s. Greene Raine (Canada's Female Athlete of the 20th Century) served as Sun Peaks' director of skiing for more than 25 years, while Raine was Sun Peaks' mayor until last year and instrumental in developing the village and ski area.

The purpose-built, well-thought-out resort is easy enough to navigate that we didn't worry when each kid — at separate times — called it a day and left us mid-mountain to go find our lodge. Three mountains funnel skiers and snowboarders down into the village — Tod and Sundance mountains on one side of the road and Mount Morrisey on the other — so it's virtually impossible to get lost. The new Orient Express chairlift also connects both sides of the road.

Since we last visited, Sun Peaks — now part of the Ikon Pass — has added a new quad Crystal Chair, which brings more people than ever to its



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new terminus at the Top of the World (where you have 360-degree views of the Coast and Monashee mountains, and of the area's renowned "snow ghosts" — trees encased in snow that droop over from all of the weight). It's also installed "loading conveyers" at two of the chairlifts (these "moving carpets" help skiers onto chairlifts without having to slow the lifts — you get used to it after a couple of tries), added a new Ski Limo service that takes anyone from adaptive athletes to non-skiing grandparents onto the slopes using a sled with two ski-like runners, and created a new ski and snowboard cross course, where people of all ages and abilities can try out this sport — and enjoy the fun rollers and banked turns on this winding course when it isn't closed for races.

This season's new West Bowl Express — a high-speed, detachable quad — gives skiers and snowboarders easy access to 169 acres of intermediate terrain with a mix of big open runs and pockets of trees to explore. From here, it's also an easy hike to access Gil's, a controlled sidecountry area (a favor-

Sun Peaks feels like a European mountain town with its Alps-style architecture (top) and international workers and visitors. Above: Fat bikers share a wide trail with a Nordic skier; Sam (left) and Grace Wright in an ax-throwing competition.

ite among locals) with tight tree sections and open hillsides — and, the day we visited, plenty of untouched snow.

We also loved the cruisy intermediate trails off the Morrisey Chair. Here, we skied narrow runs such as I'Dunno, Out of the Woods, and Still Smokin', which had fun little "tree islands" to swoop around and few — if any — other skiers (locals often head to Morrisey when the main resort gets busier).

The Morrisey side of the village also has more than 20 miles of groomed Nordic and 10 miles of fat biking trails. We arrived too late to alpine ski our first day at Sun Peaks, so we went on a short fat bike ride on snowy trails to stretch our legs after

many hours in the car. We didn't get too far before it got dark, but it's possible to bike or cross-country ski out to a couple of lakes.

I grew up skating on ponds in Central Mass. — and loved it — so I took my daughter to the ice rink one night during an open public skate. Sun Peaks' new National Hockey League-size rink (which replaced an outdoor rink nearly half its size) had warming rooms, lockers for all the unnecessary layers we brought, fun teen-approved music, and a mix of abilities that made us less self-conscious about our unpolished skills. The rink hosts local and semi-pro hockey games and, thanks to its removable sides, turns into a venue come summertime for concerts and other shows.

Another day, we went on a nighttime snowmobile adventure with Mountain Man Adventure Tours, a roughly two-hour trip on brand-new Expedition Sport Ski-Doods (meaning quiet, not stinky, and easy to maneuver even for a teenager learning to drive). The tour took us through a dense forested wilderness — thankfully on a wide track — to a prewarmed wood cabin beside McGillivray Lake. Here, we enjoyed a charcuterie spread from Ohana Deli (included with the tour — and a nice touch) that included fresh olives, meat from local ranches (like elk salami), and international cheeses.

It turns out Ohana Deli can even deliver breakfast to your door — from the tastiest homemade granola and pastries to fresh fruit — which is great if you want to eat in your room and don't feel like cooking, or if you arrive at Sun Peaks too late to grab groceries from Bluebird Market. Locals and visitors also buy premade home-cooked meals from Ohana Deli (located in a new shopping area about a mile south of the village — next to Cleavage Axe Co.) to cook in their lodge kitchens or at home — anything from sweet potato enchilada stack to chicken-bacon-leek pie.

Last time we visited Sun Peaks, we cooked in our rental condo or grabbed quick eats at places like Mountain High Pizza — based on the attention span of young kids. This time, we mixed it up with Ohana's home-cooked meals followed by mini doughnuts from Baby Dohs (made on the spot while you wait) to an unhurried and delicious sushi spread at Oya Japanese Cuisine. Our favorite lunch spot: Vertical Café, where you can eat outside by heat lamps and enjoy, for instance, a fresh cranberry-orange scone, caramel macchiato, and smoked turkey club sandwich with a spread made from haskap berries (a hardy winter berry grown on a farm just down the road).

We ran out of time to try snow tubing and night skiing (a few runs at the base area stay open until 7 p.m.), or to even go sledding on the tobogganing hill. We'll be back, I'm sure, before another decade goes by — maybe even in the summertime, since we hear Sun Peaks has become a mountain biking mecca and is known for its amazing hiking trails, alpine yoga, and summer concerts.

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