



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

No off-season from iron intensity

Canadian resort adds fun to wild mix of activities

By Kari Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WHISTLER, British Columbia — Heavy wet snow shot out in front of me and seeped into my hiking boots as I kick-stepped across a glacier at 6,300 feet. Obsessing over why I had worn shorts instead of pants for the day’s adventure helped settle my nerves and keep my mind off what lay ahead.

“Go at your own pace or you’ll be spent before the energy-intense part of the trip,” cautioned our guide, Ryan Angus, as we tackled a 500-foot vertical hike up a melting snowfield and then the Whistler Glacier, which was so steep in places that we had to grip an ice ax in one hand and use it to balance ourselves with every step.

The “energy-intense” section Angus referred to was a 660-foot climb up a rock wall using rebar steps that had been set in the rock, a series of fixed cables, two carabiners that were attached to our climbing harnesses, and sheer mental strength.

Of the eight participants in our group, only two had climbing experience. Four of us had tagged along with friends or partners, or had simply signed up for the thrill of it, but were not wild about heights, including myself.

Hundreds of Via Ferrata (Italian for “Iron Road”) routes exist throughout the Alps, and many have started popping up in other countries worldwide. Whistler’s Via Ferrata became one of the first in North America when it opened in 1992. It’s geared to people like me who have no mountaineering experience and want to get a taste of climbing in a relatively safe scenario (any activity like this involves some risk).

I volunteered to go third in line to “get it over with,” I reasoned, as I started climbing a 24-foot ladder at the start of the route. At the top, I scrambled over a ledge and onto a steep rock wall, clipping my carabiners onto different safety cables along the way. Then I was supposed to start climbing by stepping onto the rebar rungs or finding foot- and handholds in the rock. Instead, I froze.

“I don’t think I can do it,” I said, bear-hugging the wall and



trying to fight back panic.

No chance I could climb back down — just the idea of that made me dizzy — yet the series of endless pitches overhead looked beyond scary.

Note-taking wasn’t possible with my fingers jammed into crevasses in the rock, but I recall Angus saying something like, “Of course you can do it. Just take it slow, find your footing, and remember to push yourself up, not pull.”

Whistler Village, where my two little children and a friend had stayed to watch a parade and go swimming, now seemed so far away — and exactly where I wanted to be right then. With so many fun activities available, why had I chosen such a high-adventure option?

Whistler-Blackcomb consistently ranks as one of world’s top winter destinations, with more than 8,100 acres of skiable terrain — including 16 alpine bowls and three glaciers —

backcountry ski tours, heli-skiing, and such events as the World Ski and Snowboard Festival. However, this alpine village actually draws 56 percent of its visitors in the summertime when there’s a wider variety of activities, from heli-hiking and zip-lining to free local concerts, farmers’ markets, and miles upon miles of pristine walking, running, hiking, and biking trails. Add to that golfing on world-class courses designed by Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus.

Big events include children’s art, yoga, mountain bike, and music festivals, IRONMAN Canada, and GranFondo Whistler, a Vancouver to Whistler bicycle ride on one of the world’s most scenic roadways, the Sea to Sky Highway. Hotel prices also drop, free overnight parking becomes available, and it stays light out until well after 10 p.m., meaning you can pack a lot of fun into a day.

Top down: The author uses rebar steps, carabiners, and fixed cables to climb a wall on Whistler’s Via Ferrata (Iron Road). The Whistler Alpine Guides-led tour group crosses a snow field at 6,200 feet elevation. One way down after summiting Whistler is in the Peak Chair.

TIPS FOR TACKLING THE VIA FERRATA

- Bring sturdy ankle-high hiking boots
- Bring more water than you think you need; you get dehydrated quicker at elevation
- Pack lots of snacks: nerves and exertion can cause you to burn calories
- Wear long pants to keep knees from scraping the rocks and snow out of your boots
- Lather on the sunscreen to protect from the sun’s intensity as it reflects off snow and rock
- Bring your Red Sox hat for extra sun protection; it will fit under the climbing helmet
- Have layers that can be added or peeled off easily
- Even if it’s in the 80s in the valley, bring a hat, gloves, a rain jacket, and a warm layer
- Grab your daypack with the ice ax loop, or borrow one from Whistler Alpine Guides
- Don’t leave your camera behind; our guide offered to carry and use ours

KARI BODNARCHUK

“It’s like summer camp for adults,” Mike Sousa, a local mountain biking guide, said to me. “My sister was visiting from Toronto and one day we went for a glacier flight, on a zip-line tour, snowboarding, and mountain biking, and then after dinner, we went swimming in a lake to cool off.”

Many visitors come for three days as part of a grand tour that often includes Vancouver and Seattle. I made the mistake of planning just three days, too, but we experienced many of the highlights. My friend Lisa and I took our kids, ages 3 to 7, on the Peak 2 Peak gondola, one of the longest and highest in the world. None of the kids seemed to mind as it whisked us 2.73 miles over a forested valley with the glacier-fed Fitzsimmons Creek 1,400 feet below. It took 11 minutes, or several breakfast bars and bananas, to travel from Whistler Mountain to Blackcomb Mountain, where we played in the snow and hiked around short trails overlooking Blackcomb Bowl. Those up for more rugged hikes find trails that go through old-growth forest, and by glaciers and alpine lakes.

At the base of Blackcomb, we took the kids to the Family Adventure Zone, probably the most “touristy” attraction in Whistler, but one that the kids loved. We rode down the West-coaster Luge, a 1,033-foot sled on wheels that zips down a snaking hillside track, and watched other kids as they jumped 25 feet into the air on a bungee trampoline, and climbed through suspended mazes of ropes and webbing. Then we wandered along the pedestrian-only Village Stroll, stopping to take photos with the Olympic rings (the Winter Games were here in 2010), hang out at a playground with tree houses, slides, and a water play area, and poke around in

the shops — you can buy everything from fine jewelry (get a Whistler Pandora charm) to top-of-the-line outdoor gear to local artwork to kitschy souvenirs.

“Why do they have their skis?” my 5-year-old daughter asked, as we sought shelter from the sun and the 86-degree heat.

“They’re going to ski on a glacier,” I explained, pointing to Blackcomb, where skiers and snowboarders make turns on the Horstman Glacier until late July.

Don’t miss the Squamish Lil’wat Cultural Centre in Whistler’s Upper Village, where you can learn about the area’s First Nations tribes. To get there, walk along the Valley Trail or hop on one of the area’s free hydrogen buses. Squamish and Lil’wat guides offer tours of the building in between drumming performances and a short film that discusses modern-day First Nations’ culture and lifestyle. The museum, built to look like a traditional Squamish longhouse, contains ceremonial blankets, authentic clothing, cedar totems, and dugout canoes, and has a special hands-on kids’ area. The cafe serves traditional dishes, such as smoked salmon chowder and tacos with venison.

While Lisa and the kids went for a swim one night, I joined 125 other women for Women’s Night at the mountain bike park. This popular program started in 2006, drawing a couple of dozen women once a week. Now it runs every Monday and Wednesday and averages 120 women each night. It provides lessons and group rides for novice to seriously hardcore riders in the Whistler Mountain Bike Park, which has nearly 5,000 feet of lift-served downhill trails. (Check out the DFX Kids Pro-

Continued on next page



KARI BODNARCHUCK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Continued from preceding page gram for children 6 and older, or the Testosterone Tuesdays men’s program.)

“If we don’t see a bear, it will be a first,” Ralph Forsyth, one of our guides, said as we put on our body armor and full-face helmets.

Our guides showed us how to load our mountain bikes on the chairlifts, and then took us down a series of beginner and intermediate runs, stopping to give pointers on technique and how to handle each section. By the end, all of us — mostly beginners — could tear down blue runs, banking around steep berms, dropping down big hills, crossing corrugated terrain, and navigating narrow singletrack trails with rocks, roots, and, yes, two black bears (seen in a field from a distance).

Another day, I tried zip-lining with Ziptrek Ecotours, which has a new 2,400-foot zip line that crosses over Fitzsimmons Creek while dropping the equivalent of 30 stories. The tour includes crisscrossing between Whistler and Blackcomb mountains on five different zip lines, walking through 10,000-year-old temperate rain forest, and exploring a series of canopy walkways.

We soared along at about 60 miles per hour on the fourth zip line and then tried flipping upsidedown and spinning around on the last zip line,

A guide on a Ziptrek Ecotour at Whistler Blackcomb, the resort in British Columbia known best for its ski and snowboarding attractions. Fair-weather months offer biking, hiking, zip-lining, climbing, and all sorts of kids’ activities.

which deposited us right at the base of Whistler Mountain.

All of that seemed super exciting — plenty to write home about — until I found myself clinging to a rock slab at 6,500 feet on the Via Ferrata. Words of encouragement from my fellow climbers filtered up from way down below.

“You got it, Kari, no big deal,” someone said — I’m not sure who because I refused to look down.

I decided to focus on the rock immediately in front of me and on what I needed to do to survive, mentally and physically. I slowly peeled myself off the wall and began climbing up the metal rungs, grasping for steel bars or secure notches in the rock where I could get a good grip. Occasionally, I forgot to move my carabiners up to the next section of cable and I’d have to climb back down a step or two.

Later, on a steeper section, I

heard soft whimpering below me.

“I’m shaking,” a woman said, and we helped talk her through it.

The mental challenges of the route proved way more difficult than the physical.

After a short break, when we sat on a ledge, took a few deep breaths, and had a bite to eat, we tackled the final three pitches. This involved climbing up several sheer vertical sections, maneuvering over a deep crevasse, and side-stepping around a bulging rock.

Eventually, one by one, we scrambled over the lip at the top of the route at 7,200 feet and unclipped from the cables — our lifelines. Then our group of friends, relatives, and total strangers hugged, high-fived, and had an epic snowball fight, fueled by pure joy and relief.

From the summit of Whistler Peak, we could see a sea of mountains rippling into the distance, and clear views of the Tantalus Range with its jagged peaks and the sprawling Pemberton Ice Cap.

With scuffed knees and soggy boots, I headed back down to the village 5,000 feet below, where the rock would remain underfoot and the only ice would be in my celebratory drink.

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Beaded beauty, perseverance for generations in New Orleans

By Clea Simon
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

You can’t wash a culture away. That’s the lesson, Ronald W. Lewis wants to impart to visitors at The House of Dance and Feathers, a nonprofit museum in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans. As its colorful name implies, the museum — a jam-packed building in Lewis’s backyard — documents the ornate and often beautiful rituals of the city’s African-American marching groups: the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, its Skull and Bone Gangs and Baby Dolls, and, perhaps most notably, the Mardi Gras Indians.

A visit to the House of Dance and Feathers can cause sensory overload. Stacked up against each other in the long narrow building are the intricate beaded panels that by tradition Indians must sew anew each year for their suits, which are debuted on Mardi Gras day. Hanging above these are the banners and fans of Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs. These groups, originally conceived as benevolent societies to provide health services and funerals, make up the second line behind the brass marching bands at parades — representing their neighborhoods, each with its particular wild style. Add in pictures and testimonials, Mardi Gras “throws” tossed from parade floats, and other memorabilia, like a trumpet from Lewis’s nephew, musician Shamarr Allen, and it’s almost too much to take in. Together, it’s a picture of a people that have flourished and distinguished themselves despite segregation, poverty, and disaster.

“I want people to understand our history,” says Lewis, 62. “From the 1800s up till now, through all that adversity.” A lifelong resident of the city, Lewis had a career with the transit authority as a streetcar worker and a union rep. But he was also always involved with his community’s subcultures, making the elaborate bead and feather outfits worn by the Mardi Gras Indians. (His son masked — or paraded — with



PHOTOS BY RACHEL BREUNLIN



Visitors peruse the displays in the House of Dance and Feathers in New Orleans. Ronald W. Lewis (seated above) and Gilbert “Cosmo” Dave make fans for the Big Nine Social and Pleasure Club parade.

the Choctaw Hunters.) The Indian tradition, as the Mardi Gras Indians tell it, grew out of respect for the Native Americans who took in escaped slaves before the Civil War. Their intricate ornamentation also recalls Carnival costumes from Brazil as well as older artistic traditions from Africa.

These days, Lewis arranges visits to his collection, and can explain each piece, whether it’s a feathered flag from the Duaine Gang or a particularly festive second-line umbrella. It seems like a lifetime’s work, packed in here. The truth is, however, that this is Lewis’s second time assembling such an array. The original House of

Dance and Feathers, opened in 2003, was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina — or, more accurately, by the failure of the levees after the hurricane struck. After the flood, Lewis partnered with Tulane City Center and other neighborhood groups to rebuild. One result is the book, “The House of Dance and Feathers: A Museum by Ronald W. Lewis,” which was published by the Neighborhood Story Project and University of New Orleans Press in 2009.

Rebuilding, says Lewis, was never in question. “Once history is lost, you can’t bring it back. It was important to rebuild it so it can continue to live. This is who we are,” says Lewis. “We are a people of perseverance.”

THE HOUSE OF DANCE AND FEATHERS 1317 Tupelo St., New Orleans. 504-957-2678, houseofdanceandfeathers.org. Call in advance to arrange your visit.

Clea Simon can be reached at cleasimon@mac.com.

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