

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Now it's fun to be a board member

Resorts start with baby steps, small slopes, big laughs

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WHISTLER — On a brisk bluebird day, a dozen little rippers practiced their moves at a new snowboard park located at 3,600 feet on the side of Whistler Mountain. The kids, between 3 and 6 years old, slid over snow and manmade ramps and other features in this wintry playground, having a blast as they unknowingly learned about balance, edge control, and timing.

“Cowboy position — bend your knees and stand tall,” Nick Verly, one of the instructors, said to my son, Sam, 3½, who promptly fell down. “Oh, you leaned back. . . . Let’s try again,” Verly continued. “OK, bend your knees, cowboy position. There you go!” and Sam nailed the stance, as he slid down a flat-topped hill, called a pyramid, in the new Burton Riglet Park, which opened to beginner snowboarders less than three weeks ago.

The park is one of nearly three dozen of its kind in North America, including nine in New England, two of which are also new this year: at Connecticut’s Jiminy Peak and New Hampshire’s Attitash Mountain Resort. Some Burton parks have themes — Vermont’s Jay Peak has a Toy Story Riglet Park, while Smugglers’ Notch has a Tree House Riglet Park — but they all follow the same philosophy, offering instruction to little riders and giving them a chance to learn the fundamentals of snowboarding in a lighthearted and fun environment.

“We tried to get away from the serious side of teaching,” says Jeff Boliba, Burton’s vice president of global resorts, who developed the Riglet program and has worked with Whistler Blackcomb and other resorts as they have created their learning areas. “The parks are based around play, discovery, and guided learning, and that’s when the magic really starts to happen.”

The park is designed for children 4 to 6, called Little Rippers, taking group lessons, but it’s also open to younger and

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Sam Wright, 3½, is towed over a small ramp by a snowboard instructor at Whistler Blackcomb resort.

Unexpected fees add up to dismay

By Jill Radsken
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Dale McCarthy anticipated her family’s planned February vacation to Grand Cayman would be expensive. Hotel rates are at a premium during school breaks. Ditto airfare.

But McCarthy still experienced sticker shock when the Westin Grand Cayman Seven Mile Beach Resort & Spa informed her there would be a \$150-per-night fee to guarantee connecting rooms. The family of four typically gets two separate sleeping areas at an activity-packed resort to accommodate their son who has special needs.

“I was totally surprised. It’s not like we don’t travel. We’ve been to plenty of other hotels, and I’ve never gotten hit with this charge,” she said.

Many industry experts said they hadn’t heard of connecting room fees before, but they agreed that hotels are tacking on fees at a heightened pace for everything from restocking the minibar to having the bellman hold your baggage.

“When there are a lot of fees, you feel nickel-and-dimed,” said Wendy Perrin, owner of the online travel advice site that bears her name. “As a mom who travels with her children all the time, it’s so expensive

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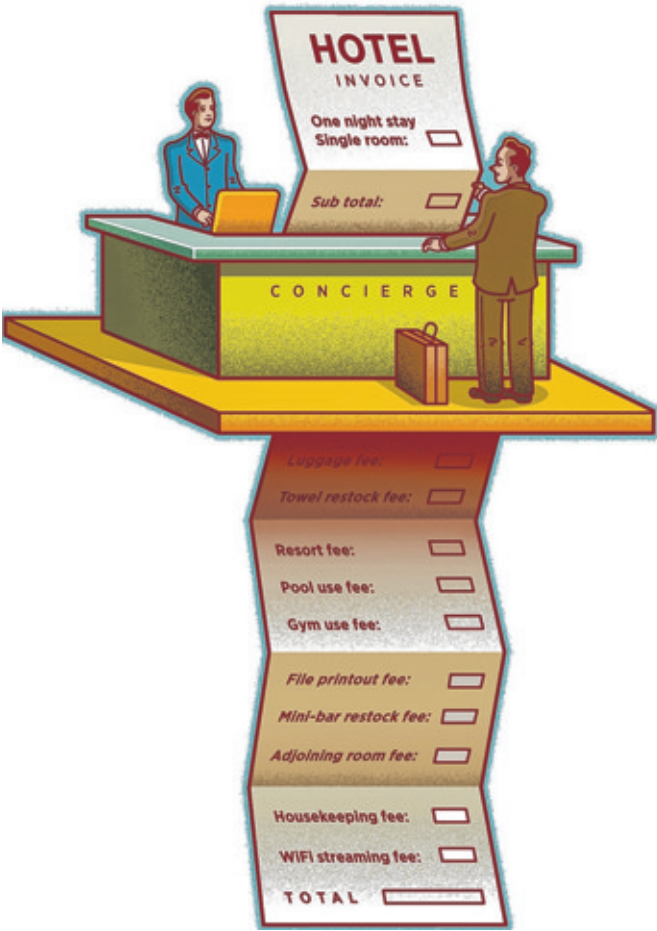


ILLUSTRATION BY PETER AND MARIA HOEY

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Learning centers and slopes

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older kids in group or private lessons. As of this year, Whistler has snowboard rentals for — and now offers private lessons to — kids as young as 2½.

“It’s really cool we have a dedicated zone because our Little Rippers snowboard program is really starting to grow,” said Sean Gilbert, supervisor at Whistler Kids, the children’s ski and snowboard school. “Today was the first day of Riglet Park and we had 11 Little Rippers sign up, and no one even knows this is here yet.”

The park has ramps, pyramids, and sliders that give mini riders plenty of spots to play and learn. As soon as the mountain gets more snow, the staff plans to build a couple of berms (banked corners), a longer ramp, and a mini half pipe for more experienced riders.

We signed up Sam and his sister, Grace, 5½, for ski lessons one day, and first-ever snowboard lessons another day, so they could get a feel for both sports (yes, one parent skis and the other snowboards). You bring only what your child will need on the slopes. We packed a bag with lots of extra clothes and snacks, none of which was needed. We stashed it in the village while the kids took off for their home base for the day at Olympic Station, located mid-mountain. Here, Whistler has a grand wooden lodge, called the Children’s Learning Centre, with several cafeterias, a quiet room where kids can nap or chill out, a big indoor climbing structure, and a full-scale kitchen that creates healthy meals for your hard-working skiers and snowboarders — everything from pizza, shepherd’s pie, and meatball subs to butter chicken with naan bread, even a full salad bar.

Beginner lessons take place in fenced-off areas surrounding the building (the fences keep kids contained and parents out of the way), where there are different level slopes, a new covered Sunkid magic carpet, and the Riglet Park. The kids’ learning area is tucked away, but the benefit of having it at mid-mountain quickly became clear, at least during our stay: It was slushy and rainy at the base, but colder temps, 395 feet above the village, created good snow conditions for learners.

Leave plenty of time for getting tickets and signing in your child at the base of the Whistler Village Gondola (kids say goodbye to you here and ride up the gondola with their instructor). It can be chaotic, especially during school breaks, as kids register, and get their color-coded Whistler Kids bibs and Flaik GPS, which gets strapped around each child’s leg (plenty of helpful staff guide parents through the process). The GPS not only enables the resort to

keep track of kids, but also records their movements throughout the day so that you can look up your child’s runs later to see where he or she went, and find out cool details like speed, vertical descent, and distance for each run. Since our kids are beginners, they didn’t venture away from the learning center, but older kids have plenty of terrain to explore with their instructors.

With 8,171 skiable acres and more than 200 named runs, it’s hard to figure out how to approach a mountain as big as Whistler Blackcomb, especially with children in tow — or even leading the way. The cool thing: Younger or less experienced skiers and riders can explore a vast area on green runs — the resort has 40 named beginner runs — the longest two of which meander 7 miles (look for Burnt Stew on Whistler and Green Road on Blackcomb mountains).

To make the mountain more digestible, the resort has created nine themed Wonder Routes, from The Steeps Sampler and the Powder Stashes Route to the Family Certified Route, which help you find terrain that interests and suits you. You can spend a half day or a full day doing the family-friendly route, which takes you to the Magic Castle and Tree Fort, fun play areas with climbing structures and slides tucked in the woods; through the Family Zone with its Enchanted Forest, a small gladed area where kids can learn how to safely ski in the trees; by three indoor Nintendo Game Lounges, where families can warm up and play video games; and through a mini terrain park.

The route starts on Blackcomb Mountain and then connects to Whistler Mountain via the Peak 2 Peak gondola, which is the highest lift of its kind worldwide, soaring 1,427 feet above Fitts Simmons Creek in the valley below, and has the longest unsupported span in the world — 1.9 miles out of the total 2.7-mile ride. The best part about the Family Certified Route: You can bail out and easily get down the mountain at any point, if you or your little one loses steam. Download the colorful kids’ trail map online.

My husband and I explored the mountain on snowboard and skis, and then stopped to watch our kids later in the day. They had progressed from the magic carpet to the Riglet Park, and were practicing sliding over the Rainbow Box, a man-made ramp, and riding from one pyramid to the next without losing balance. We soon waved goodbye and headed down the mountain to meet them at the pickup spot.

When I asked Grace what she did that day, she said: “Played and ate, played and ate.” It sounded like the perfect day.

Let your kids get a taste of snowboarding during one of Whistler’s free dry-land sessions. We attended one in the village’s Mountain Square, where kids with feet as small as 7C could strap on a snowboard and get towed around a little temporary outdoor play area by Whistler’s snowboard instructors. Our kids ducked under little arches and slid over a small ramp, gaining a sense of what it feels like to balance on a board. (The next free sessions are Jan. 18 and March 20.)

Whistler offered plenty of other family-friendly activities when we weren’t up exploring the beginner areas or taking lessons. We took advantage of the free ice skating at Whistler Olympic Plaza, where we slid around within view of the Olympic Rings. Little kids can strap double blades onto their ski boots for free; rentals for skates as small as 7C (for about 2½-year-olds) to men’s size 13 cost \$4.25 per pair for unlimited time.

Another evening, we headed over to the Coca-Cola Tube Park on Blackcomb Mountain, which has six 1,000-foot runs for speed-seekers, and a 500-foot lane suitable for smaller kids and apprehensive parents. Kids have to be at least 3 years old and 36 inches tall to go tubing in the shorter kids’ lane (small kids use smaller tubes), and at least 41 inches to join the big kids on the long lanes. Make sure you wear your snow boots (no ski boots allowed), and bring a helmet for safety and goggles in case it snows.

“We can’t let people make trains or hold onto each other’s tubes because it’s running too fast tonight,” one of the attendants told us.

That meant 3-year-old Sam had to go down the slippery slope all by himself, reaching speeds of up to 15 miles per hour. Both of our kids, like all the others around their age group, belly laughed and beamed all the way down, and popped up unscathed at the bottom.

“That was incredible!” said Grace.

“I’m ready to go again, I’m ready to go again,” added Sam, excitedly waving his arms, in case there was any chance it was a one-time deal (tickets are good for unlimited runs in one- or two-hour blocks).

We had hoped to go snowshoeing around Lost Lake, but ran out of time on this trip. We knew we would be back, though, with our little adventurers leading the way. When I asked the kids which activity they had liked the best, they both replied, “Skiing and snowboarding!” They sure know how to please their parents.

Kari Bodnarchuk can be reached at travelwriter@karib.us.

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Whistler, British Columbia
800-766-0449
www.whistlerblackcomb.com
Check Whistler Blackcomb website for special deals (starting at \$117 per person per day for lift ticket and lodging), or go to www.liftopia.com for lift ticket deals.

Coca-Cola Tube Park
800-766-0449
Starting prices range from \$11.90 for children 3 and under to \$18.65 for 18 and older for one hour; book tickets online 3 days in advance and save about \$2 per person, or save 10 percent off family booking in person at the ticket office, if you have at least two children.

Summit Lodge Resort
888-913-8811
www.summitlodge.com
Located near the Village Stroll and Olympic Rings. Shuttle runs every 8 to 15 minutes to the base areas. Rates start at \$150 per night; rooms include a kitchenette and dining area.

BOOMBurger Whistler
604-962-9022
www.boomburger.ca
Tasty burgers made from local ingredients and fries made from Prince Edward Island potatoes. A family of four can eat a meal for about \$35.

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Clockwise from far left:
The Peak 2 Peak gondola connects Whistler and Blackcomb mountains; the Coca-Cola Tubing Park; and an easy descent from the summit of Whistler.

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