

US travelers can finally visit this new Whistler hut — if they can handle the trek to it

By Kari Bodnarchuk

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

GARIBALDI PROVINCIAL PARK, British Columbia — My 10-year-old daughter and I skied through fresh powder in a wilderness area near Whistler. Our 30-pound backpacks made turning a lot trickier in deep snow, but I hoped my daughter Grace would appreciate the benefit of carrying overnight gear — if we ever reached our destination.

We skied down into a gulley and as we prepared for our longest climb of the day, I heard those words most parents know so well: “Are we almost there?” Grace asked as she flopped on her back in the snow and feigned death, indicating it was time for jelly beans. “How far is the hut now?”

WHISTLER, Page N16



KARI BODNARCHUK

Grace Wright and Jamie Selda backcountry ski behind the Kees and Claire Hut, a new wilderness hut in the Spearhead Range several miles from Whistler-Blackcomb Ski Resort.

Trekking Whistler with jelly beans and grit

►WHISTLER
Continued from Page N13

“Well, it’s about one minute if you’re a raven and four years if you’re a snail,” said our guide, Jamie Selda, and spoken like a man who has three young kids. He pulled out his stash of jelly beans and offered them to Grace. “Let’s focus on the things we see along the way instead.”

Our goal, assuming we made it, would be the Kees and Claire Hut, a wilderness hut in British Columbia’s Spearhead Range that had opened six months before our visit in February 2020. Since the US-Canada border closed in March 2020 for 18 months, few US travelers have had a chance to visit the hut, which has reopened for overnight stays.

The Kees and Claire Hut is the first of three planned backcountry huts in the Spearhead Range. The nonprofit Spearhead Huts Society intends to build a second hut in 2023, with a third coming a couple of years after that. Volunteers built the Kees and Claire Hut — financed entirely by donations — to make this stunning wilderness area more accessible to hikers, snowshoers, and backcountry skiers like us.

Though I’ve taken many avalanche clinics and guided hut trips, I don’t have the skills to lead a winter trip. That’s why I hired Selda, a guide for Extremely Canadian, a Whistler-based company that has run backcountry adventures for more than 25 years. Selda earned his ski guiding certification through the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides and has a degree in outdoor recreation and leadership from Unity College in Maine. He also spends upward of 60 days a year leading backcountry ski trips.

We planned to do a two-day, one-night trip, staying over on a Sunday night to minimize missed school days (Friday and Saturday nights fill up fast). The hut remains open year-round with backcountry ski season running from mid-December through late April, depending on conditions.

We brought our own backcountry skis and avalanche equipment (though the company rents gear) and Selda took care of the route planning and meals, gave us tips and information along the way, and kept us safe.

Skiers access the hut by either climbing up the Singing Pass Trail from Whistler Village (a long journey) or by purchasing a special ticket that lets them use certain gondolas and lifts to access backcountry routes with less climbing involved — our choice. We took the Whistler Village Gondola and Harmony Chairlift to make our way over to the resort’s Flute area. Here, we strapped climbing skins onto the bottoms of our skis (which prevented them from slipping backward on slopes) and skied up to Flute’s summit.

“The key is to be efficient,” explained Selda as we methodically inched our way up the slope. “Imagine having super big feet,” he added, as he took small steps to change direction. “You can’t make quick decisions — no big moves, no rushing. Just move slowly and efficiently.”

We left the resort’s ski boundary be-

hind and spent the next couple of hours making our way along a portion of the Spearhead Traverse, a 25-mile horse-shoe-shaped route that connects Whistler and Blackcomb mountains. We skied down slopes where the chunked-up snow made turning a challenge and through light, untracked powder that made us look like pros — or so we imagined. We also climbed up through forested patches of mountain hemlock and across snowfields that offered views of jagged mountains and Whistler’s distinct rocky pinnacle Black Tusk.

Along the way, and in kid-like fashion, Grace drew pictures in the snow with her poles, tried to blaze her own tracks and, when energy levels dipped, plopped on the ground until we refueled her with jelly beans or wine gum-mies — the perfect sugar hits for a fading child. Selda reminded us not to waste energy in the backcountry, though, and to tune in to how our bodies felt and what they needed.

“When you stop, always deal with yourself first and then your equipment,” he told us at our first transition, when we paused to put on skins. “Getting cold will make you slow and sloppy at what you’re doing.”

It didn’t take long for us to get into the rhythm: Stop, throw on or remove insulated jackets and hats, grab a quick snack, and then adjust gear, meaning put on or take off skins.

Temperatures hovered around 26 degrees Fahrenheit, but the effort of skinning up hills under blue skies and a blazing sun meant it was easy to overheat. “Who would have thought I could get hot in the snow!” exclaimed Grace as she shed layers. We passed other skiers in short sleeves — or even shirtless — along the way, but overall, we saw fewer than a dozen people after leaving the ski resort.

We soon climbed onto a ridge that offered views of snowy mountains glowing pink under the late-day sun. Off to the left, a modern-looking structure sat in a clearing with cone-shaped Fissile Peak looming overhead. We made it.

“Yayyyy!” said Grace as she threw her arms in the air. She had every right to be happy, after traveling 3.5 miles and 2,500 vertical feet over five hours to reach this idyllic spot — a wintry workout at any age, but an extra challenge for a kid.

The Kees and Claire Hut gets its name from two skiers who died while alpine touring in Canada’s Rocky Mountains: Kees Brenninkmeyer from New Bedford, Mass., and Claire Dixon of Kamloops, B.C. Their snow cave collapsed while they were on a 30-day ski trip along the Wapta Traverse, working as custodians in Yoho National Park’s hut system.

There are a few things Kees’s sister, Julie Brenninkmeyer, would like hut visitors to know about her brother: “He’d want you to have fun, be prepared, and always go for more,” she told me after our stay last year.

This building is no ordinary wilderness structure: The hut’s triple-pane windows and design features make it so efficient that body heat and a small pro-



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK

pane stove keep it plenty warm inside. Its slightly curved shape and intentional orientation — angled to shed snow under the scouring winds — make it a low-maintenance structure, while its metal and steel exterior make it extremely durable.

“It will still be there in 100 years,” said Jayson Faulkner, a member of the Spearhead Huts Society.

The hut sleeps 38 people in eight single-, double-, or triple-bunk rooms; just bring a camping mattress and a three-season sleeping bag. It has a drying room where visitors can put boots, skins, and other wet gear overnight, dozens of rubber hut shoes free to use, a

charging station with 16 plugs (and a few spare cords) available to guests, and a propane-fueled fireplace in the main lounge. It also has LED lights in each bunk room on the first floor, along floorboards, in the stairwell (no headlamps needed), and in the kitchen and dining area upstairs.

The kitchen comes fully stocked with dishware, pots and pans, coffeemakers, and two-burner propane stoves for guests’ use (sign up for kitchen time on a whiteboard). Pitch in and collect a few buckets of snow that can be melted and boiled for drinking and cooking water.

Huge windows offer perfect views of the surrounding mountains. I sat on a

Grace Wright (left) celebrates after trekking to the Kees and Claire Hut in the Spearhead Range several miles from Whistler-Blackcomb Ski Resort.

If you go . . .

Villa Hygge, 2906 White Mountain Highway, North Conway, N.H., 603-730-5606, villahyggehotel.com The Scandinavian hotel offers a welcome drink and serves a tapas menu. The private sauna at the Nordic spa is a must. Experiences, including wine tastings and outdoor activities, are also worth trying on the path to well-being and happiness. Prepare to have design envy, both in the moment and once you get home.

wide bench next to stacks of board games, books, and magazines and watched the sunset while Grace cut veggies for our pasta dinner and chatted with people from all over the world, including a few local families with kids around her age. And even though cell service works in this area (ever since the 2010 Winter Olympics, said Selda), no one pulled out a device.

“What was your favorite thing about ski touring,” Selda asked Grace at dinner.

“Everything!” she said. “That’s the thing about being in the mountains — you need a funny memory,” he said. “You forget all those moments of frustration and being tired and you remember all the fun parts.”

After breakfast the next morning, we left everything except our avalanche gear, water, and snacks and set off to ski wearing just light packs. Some skiers headed toward Cowboy Ridge and Fissile Peak —good options for intermediate to advanced skiers — while we shooshed down a moderate slope to a snow-covered lake and then skinned up to the top of an unnamed hill.

By the time we headed back toward Whistler a couple of hours later the sun had heated up the snow and formed surface hoar, a layer of feathery snow crystals that sounded like pieces of glass rustling as our skis and poles swept across it. On our long climb of the day, we cut through open fields and patches of trees with snow mushrooms, where mounds of snow perched on trees and stumps. Finally, we reached the Whistler resort boundary around 4:30 p.m. — an hour after the chairlifts had closed — and had the slopes to ourselves.

We dropped down a steep bowl, cut across to the Harmony slopes, and then hiked for 10 minutes while carrying our skis on our packs before completing a 5-mile descent to Whistler Village.

As we came to a stop at the base of Whistler Mountain, Grace said to us, “I can’t believe I did that!”

And if Grace can do it, you probably can, too — just track down a guide like Selda and bring plenty of jelly beans.

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