

Stay for some peak

SKI SPECIAL:

Yvonne Gordon has lots of fun at the Canadian resorts of Whistler and Blackcomb

'STRAIGHT down Upper Whiskey Jack, then Pig Alley and then we'll take Ego Bowl to the Emerald.' It sounds like a mix between a pub crawl in the back streets of an American city and a day at a funfair but this is what our ski instructor Dick is telling us is planned for the morning – the names are the ski runs we'll cover on Whistler Mountain.

I'm in a ski class on a crisp sunny day in Canada with a selection of super cool New Yorkers and Brazilians – and doing my best to keep up with the speed of the parallel turns. We're half way up the mountain but the good news is that some of the best beginner and intermediate runs are up here (unlike in some European resorts where the easier slopes are at the base of the mountain) so we get all the views – plus the snow, wind and weather.

After an exhilarating few hours on the long mountain trails which run through forests and open out at times to give expansive mountain views, our final run of the day is down Pony Trail, on to Banana Peel and then Bear Cub to Expressway.

Visibility becomes poor halfway down the mountain – it starts snowing hard so we take the gondola down to the village.

Over on nearby Blackcomb Mountain the next day, I find the run names equally delightful (Jersey Cream is a particular favourite), though I don't think I'm quite ready to tackle Rider's Revenge or the double black run Spanky's Ladder – and I hope I never come across the Secret Chute.

Whistler Blackcomb is the largest ski resort in North America and is located 125 miles north of Vancouver in Canada – a great way to travel up to the mountains from Vancouver is by the 3.5-hour Sea-to-Sky train. It's an impressive resort covering 8,171 acres and was home to the Alpine skiing events in the 2010 Winter Olympics.

European resorts might be nearer to Ireland but Whistler is an experience. It's based on two side-by-side mountains, Whistler and Blackcomb, and has more than 200 runs as well as

glaciers, Alpine bowls, terrain parks and pipes. The mountains are so big, they pass through three different climate zones and the temperature drops a degree for each 150m you go up. The resort is also well organised.

The average snowfall is 34ft per annum, but there are 220 snowmaking guns, just in case, plus 17 different mountain restaurants and 37 lifts, which give a combined capacity of up to 70,000 skiers per hour.

For skiers, Whistler Blackcomb offers two huge mountains full of scenic beginner, intermediate and advanced trails, and there is so much variety, you can explore somewhere new every day. Thanks to the Peak 2 Peak Gondola, an impressive feat of engineering in itself and an 11-minute journey covering 4.5km, you can get straight from the top of one mountain to the other. (Even non-skiers should try it out – it takes about 25 minutes by gondola to get up to it from the base of either mountain).

WHISTLER is big but it never feels crowded – there are so many runs for so many levels, you can happily find yourself on a snowy forest trail with just the odd skier passing by. The village itself is a purpose-built ski haven with plenty of bars, restaurants, hotels and apartments.

Services are excellent and the centre is small and therefore easy to get around. Après ski is a little quieter than European resorts, but it's home to various festivals and outdoor concerts during the season, which goes on until April or May (much later than in Europe).



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For the adventurous skier who likes fresh powder, there's heli-skiing and backcountry skiing. For non-ski activities, there's lots of choice including dog-sled tours, show-shoeing, sleigh rides, zip-trekking across the forest and snowmobiling. Or you could just chill in an outdoor hot-tub, surrounded by snow, ideal for relaxing tired ski muscles and dreaming of jersey cream-smooth ski runs.

Whistler and Blackcomb mountains both open for the winter season on Nov 28. Whistler closes on Apr 21, 2014 and Blackcomb on May 19. For more information, visit www.whistlerblackcomb.com.

GETTING THERE

Various airlines fly from Ireland to Vancouver – KLM flies to Vancouver from Dublin or Cork via Amsterdam for €622.36 return (incl taxes), fares valid from Nov 1 to Dec 17 and from Jan 5 to Mar 31. To book, visit www.klm.com.



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Once you've decided to learn to ski or board, the first question is where to go. Not every resort is ideal for beginners. Choose somewhere with easily accessible nursery slopes plus plenty of confidence-boosting easy pistes.

As a beginner, you'll typically need no more than ten pistes in your first week, so don't waste money on resorts with vast ski areas and high lift-pass prices. Bansko in Bulgaria (www.bansko.org), for example, will easily keep you occupied for a week but costs less than chic resorts such as Val d'Isère. Other good beginner resorts are Lech (www.ski-lech.com), Flaine (www.flaine.com), Les Carroz (www.lescarroz.com), Cortina (www.cortina.dolomiti.org) and Livigno (www.livigno.com). If your friends have already chosen a bigger destination such as

Slopes that suit



Courchevel, don't worry: most people fall in love with the resort they learn to ski in.

Next you need to think about clothes. Our advice is to borrow everything until you know whether you're going to like skiing or not. Waterproof trousers and gloves are essential

as you'll be sitting on the snow as you learn. If you prefer to buy, TK Maxx has reasonably priced, good-quality gear.

Don't try to save money by not booking lessons. You'll progress more confidently in a ski school than by trying to follow your friends down a red run on day one.

Finally, make sure you enjoy yourself. Inevitably you'll have a few bruises (use arnica cream) but don't forget you're on holiday and this could be the start of a life-long love affair with the mountains.

■ See page 23 for details of Ski Centre Sandyford.



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