

TRAVEL

B.C.'s Big Moment: Celebrating Gay Pride at the Olympics

By ANDREW COLLINS

I've been asked a lot if I'll be attending the Winter Olympics this year—after all, Vancouver and Whistler aren't terribly far from Portland. I answer the same way as I do when asked about attending most big events: "I won't be there while the Olympics are happening, but I was just there." In writing about travel, it's often handier to conduct research ahead of an event, whether it's the upcoming Gay Games (I toured Cologne last summer), this month's Sydney Mardi Gras (I checked out the sites there in September), or the Olympics.

I road-tripped to B.C. in November, not only to dig up details on what to do in Vancouver and Whistler during the Olympics, but also to find out more about one of North America's foremost gay parties, WinterPride, also known as Whistler Gay and Lesbian Ski Week. There's a ton going on right now, and never before has an Olympics event had its very own GLBT pavilion (called PRIDE House, gaywhistler.com/pride-house.php), set up inside the Pan Pacific Whistler Village Centre. Even cooler—the very day following the Olympics closing ceremonies, Whistler's WinterPride (gaywhistler.com) kicks off, running March 1-8.

I hadn't been to Whistler since the '90s, and I was happy to see plenty of improvements without any loss of its friendliness and ski-town charm. The once slow, heavily trafficked Sea to Sky Highway is still absolutely stunning, but now it's widened and straightened, making the drive far quicker (just be sure to carry snow tires and chains in winter).

Whistler Village (whistler.com) has also expanded significantly, but for such a vast and bustling ski community, the contemporary—if idealized—Alpine-meets-Rockies design is still handsome and free of kitsch and excessive commercialism. It's well laid out, simple to navigate on foot, and rife with high-end hotels, restaurants, bars, and sporting and outdoors shops. Whistler is unapologetically spendy, but no more so than other lauded U.S. ski towns.

I checked into the Fairmont Whistler (fairmont.com/whistler), actually in the smaller Upper Village neighborhood (a paved, creek-side footpath connects the two base camps), which is nestled in the shadows of Blackcomb Mountain, one of the resort's two hulking peaks, the other being Whistler Mountain. Fairmont runs all of the elegant Canadian railway hotels, clear across the country to St. Andrews-by-the-Sea in New Brunswick, and the castle-like Whistler property is every bit as posh and visually arresting as the others. Of the other lodgings I inspected while in town, I most recommend the Pan Pacific Mountainside and Village

properties (panpacific.com/panpacificwhistler) and the more affordable Holiday Inn SunSpree (whistlerhi.com).

Here's the biggest change I discovered at Whistler: in 2008, Peak 2 Peak opened. This dramatic gondola ride carries passengers some 1,200 feet above Fitzsimmons Creek, connecting the mid-mountain ski areas of Blackcomb and Whistler. In the past, you had to choose one mountain each day and stick with it—now you can shuttle between

exhibits that raise awareness about GLBT rights around the world. Be sure to take a look at PRIDE House's official work of art *Slapshotolus*, a Leviathan bronze sculpture of a naked hockey player executing a slapshot. Although it may be difficult on short notice to visit during the Olympics, tickets for WinterPride are available, and hotel rates are surprisingly attractive (starting around CN\$125). Lastly, WinterPride is about far more than skiing—snowmobile tours,



The Base 2 Zone at Blackcomb Mountain in Whistler, where you'll find Rendezvous Restaurant, the Peak 2 Peak Gondola Station, and a convergence of several lifts and ski runs.

the two. I spent my first full day in town skiing (whistlerblackcomb.com), in the morning at Blackcomb and then over at Whistler for a few afternoon runs. I was hustling around, trying to experience as much of both mountains as I could. Blackcomb offers generally more advanced fall-line skiing, but you'll find impressive terrain on both. All Olympic ski events take place on a relatively small section of Whistler Mountain, meaning that most of the resort's more than 200 runs (including all of Blackcomb) are open to the public the entire time.

For apres-ski, I met WinterPride organizer Dean Nelson at one of Whistler's favorite (and most gay-popular) nightlife options, Garibaldi Lift Company, which lies at the base of the Village gondola. While successfully convincing me to try the famously Canadian Caesar cocktail (similar to a Bloody Mary, but with clam juice, and crisp bacon as a garnish), Dean told me about PRIDE House and WinterPride.

Here are some key things GLBT travelers should know about attending: Throughout the actual Olympics, WinterPride, and the Paralympics, you're invited to use Pride House Pavilion as an all-around clubhouse, social hub, and resource center—it has a full bar, TV monitors airing winter sports, and

cooking and mixology demos, yoga classes, zip-lining and dog-sledding adventures, and myriad parties are held throughout the week.

I spent a final day in Whistler exploring the sites and eating absurdly well—can't say enough good things about the stellar contemporary cuisine at Bearfoot Bistro (bearfootbistro.com), a must if you're planning a special-occasion meal (it's a likely venue for celeb-spotting, too). I also liked my lunch on the lively patio at La Bocca (labocca.moonfruit.com), and heard great things about gay-friendly Tandoori Restaurant (tandooriwhistler.com).

I next drove to Canada's third-largest city, Vancouver, the official Olympic host, where I spent the next three nights ensconced at the Metropolitan Hotel (metropolitan.com/vanc). It's low-key and tasteful, with with an understated, almost residential feel, and I appreciated the central downtown location (plus I had a fantastic cheese plate in the hotel's hip restaurant, Diva). Other Vancouver hotels I like: the Opus (opushotel.com/vancouver.html), in the ultra-trendy Yaletown area; the more moderately priced Sandman Suites Hotel (sandmanhotels.com), steps from the West End's gay bars; and the gay-friendly, historic O Canada



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