

weekender

The other side of the mountain

Whistler is more than a
snow lover's playground

WORDS SUSAN LUNDY

Scandinave Spa in Whistler.



Whistler
Village.

PHOTO BY MIKE CRANE

It's a wintery Monday morning and each of my five senses zings with life as I move between warm, cold and relax cycles at the outdoor Scandinave Spa in Whistler. Sitting in the hot pool, I feel a brush of breeze on my face and hear a whisper of wind in the spruce trees above me. Moving indoors, and now relaxing on a cushiony recliner, I take in the beauty of lush foliage seen through floor-to-ceiling windows. And the moment after I run through an icy cold waterfall, my skin tingles with an electric-like buzz. There's the heat of a firepit, the cosy embrace of a blanket, the sound of a running stream, the scent of essential oils and the sensation of steam and sweat lingering on my skin. Most important—the experience of every sense is heightened due to the mandatory silence. People move between the various stations without a word. And I understand completely: silence is golden. This is our last stop before my husband and I head home, and as I revel in the all-encompassing sensory experience, my mind wanders back over the past few days. I realize that beyond everything else, I'm surprised by the diversity of our Whistler adventure.

The mountains themselves, Whistler and Blackcomb, have loomed large in my other trips here: I've ridden the slightly terrifying Peak 2 Peak Gondola, zoomed up Blackcomb in exhilarating jeep ride; I've zip-lined and I've explored off-road on an ATV. But on this weekend getaway, we hiked, played, feasted, learned about local First Nations culture...we've had a wealth of experience that hasn't involved the mountain playground.

Arriving mid-day Saturday, our Whistler adventure begins with a stop at Function Junction, an industrial neighbourhood

10 minutes south of Whistler's main villages. With a totally different vibe than Whistler main, Function Junction emerges like the beer-drinking sister to the more coiffed, upscale villages. After tucking into a delicious vegan lunch at the highly recommended The Green Moustache, which has two locations in Whistler, we sample beer at Coast Mountain Brewing and Whistler Brewing, and then land at Montis Distilling, Whistler's only craft spirit maker. A tasting reveals a flourish of local flavours and, although we purchase a bottle of Winter Spirit, the distillery's answer to young whiskey, we could easily have chosen one of their tasty gins or super-smooth vodka.

Checking into the Four Seasons Resort Whistler, we're immediately welcomed by the warm staff and our luxurious-yet-cosy room. We take advantage of in-room service for dinner (the resort also offers midnight feasts, early-bird espressos and chilled Champagne at any hour), but the ultimate crown on the experience occurs the next morning, with the hotel's signature, year-round Balcony Breakfast: a multi-tiered tower stacked with savoury and sweet breakfast treats—pastries, avocado toast, sausage, bacon, pancakes with warm maple syrup. This is a must-do: everything from the perfectly poached eggs and fluffy pancakes unfolds like a dreamy taste adventure, and it all occurs overlooking a misty-morning valley of snow-tipped trees. This resort is truly a destination in itself.

Satiated, we head out to explore on foot this remarkably walkable community. Located near the Four Seasons is the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, offering a chance to explore local First Nations, view a spectacular exhibit by Lil'wat artist Ed Archie NoiseCat, step into a replica longhouse and wander along a forested educational trail. This is also where, from May to October, you'll find a Sunday farmer's market.

From the upper village, we follow the connector path to the lower village, grab coffees and wander around the pedestrian-friendly village. Eventually, we pick up a snowy forest trail that takes us back to the hotel.



Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre.

But there's no time to rest! For our next adventure, we meet up with our daughter, also visiting Whistler, and embark on a new-to-us-all escape room experience. After choosing one of Escape! Whistler's six escape room options, we arrive, get a quick briefing, and set to work solving a series of riddles and puzzles in order to escape a cottage buried in snow. This is a lot of fun!

Next, dinner at Il Caminetto, with its extraordinary Italian cuisine and excellent service, marks the perfect segue to our nighttime Whistler experience—one which surpasses all of our expectations. After driving 10 minutes north of the village, we turn off the highway, drive up an obscure road... and re-emerge in another world. Vallea Lumina is a stunning, immersive multimedia show that is truly spectacular. We cap our evening with warm apple cider, sitting outside around a firepit.

And so it is the next day that cocooned in the pools at Scandinave Spa, I come to an easy conclusion. Whistler and Blackcomb mountains—with their combined 8,171 acres of terrain and abundant annual snowfall—are indeed a wicked winter destination for snow enthusiasts. But there's a lot more going on, and visitors should definitely check out the other side of the mountain. **B**

SCAN



VALLEA LUMINIA.



MONTIS DISTILLING.



IL CAMINETTO.



FOUR SEASONS RESORT WHISTLER.

see.

Vallea Lumina is an absolute must-do on any visit to Whistler, but it's best not to know too much ahead of time. This dazzling multimedia experience invites guests into an enchanted universe, inspired by Whistler's natural beauty. Expect to have your breath taken away around each corner on this mesmerizing forest walk. Created by Montreal-based Moment Factory and brought to life by The Adventure Group in Whistler, Vallea Lumina offers two experiences—one in the winter months (bundle up!) and one in the summer. vallealumina.com/

do.

Escape! Whistler presents a real-life gaming experience, where patrons are given puzzles, riddles and clues to solve within 45 minutes in order to "escape" their situation. We choose the Buried Cabin experience—one of Escape! Whistler's six escape rooms—and, although we don't quite solve it in time, we're close, and have so much fun trying. Another must-do Whistler experience is Scandinave Spa. Moving through the hot, cold and relax cycles promises to soothe tired muscles, eliminate toxins and improve circulation. escapewhistler.com, scandinave.com/en/whistler

eat.

Located directly on Whistler's Village Stroll, Il Caminetto is *the* spot in Whistler for an upscale Italian il pasto. Renowned Executive Chef James Walt offers an inspired menu that features mouthwatering Italian and local products. A 41-page wine list creates a major conundrum but, no matter, the sommelier swiftly leads us to a divine Amarone. Its silky smooth flavour provides the perfect complement to my husband's rigatoni Bolognese, and my seared tuna and roasted cauliflower. The food, the ambiance, the service and the wine are the ingredients for a spectacular dining experience. ilcaminetto.ca

sleep.

The Four Seasons Resort Whistler is one of North America's top year-round mountain resorts. Following a sweeping renovation, it combines sleek, contemporary design with the warmth of a classic chalet. This winter, the resort is premiering two new culinary options: the all-new Braidwood Tavern and the re-imagined SIDECUT restaurant. In addition to the must-do Balcony Breakfast offering, the resort has launched another feature through the Four Seasons app, where patrons can order ahead to have a homey, crockpot meal awaiting in-room. Resort recreation includes a full-service spa, a fitness centre, an all-season outdoor pool with three heated whirlpools. Other winter specials and packages can be found online. fourseasons.com/whistler.