

# Travel



Thursday, February 19, 1987 O&E

(T-6D, R6-6A, #7D, W, G-4C) #A6B

## Skigri-La

### This ski resort has slopes for everyone

We entered Whistler Village in sunshine, winding up the mountain road through the great trees from Highway 19, the Sea and Sky Highway. We came down three days later in picture postcard snow, snow that weighed down trees and slowed down skiers who drove 70 miles northward along the coastal road from Vancouver, here on the Pacific coast of Canada.

In the few days between arriving in sunshine and driving out in snow, we explored the skiers' Shangri-La at the end of the road: two ski mountains with the highest vertical rise and the second highest vertical rise in North America, tied together like Siamese twins by a European-style village at the base of the hills.

Blackcomb Mountain, which rises 7,484 feet above sea level and has a 5,280-foot vertical above base elevation, is like Mount Tremblant piloted on top of the slopes at Aspen. The longest run from the top of Seventh Heaven to the village at the bottom of Haulback is about five miles. Whistler Mountain, 7,146 high, with a 5,006 foot vertical, also has a five mile run.

When we drove into the parking lot on that first day, Blackcomb and Whistler towering over us, and snowcapped peaks all around us, a com-



**1-of-a-kind traveler**  
**Iris Jones**  
contributing travel editor

mon chorus rose from all the different kinds of skiers in our group: "O my god, I can't ski that!"

They could and did. These mountains are awesome, but their statistics are skied one slope at a time. There are 133 ski runs on the two mountains, some for every level and taste.

Those of you who followed my first ski lesson in northern Michigan a few weeks ago may wonder what I am doing here. I'm wondering the same thing myself. Here is my diary. I call it a non-skier's diary, or What Is A Nice Girl Like Me Doing In A Place Like This?

**WEDNESDAY:** When I walked into the Village Square, my first thought was "theme park" and then "Disneyworld" because new buildings had obviously been designed to look like an "olds world" village. The skiers carrying their skis down the village streets had the same look, like somebody had dressed them up to look like skiers and set them on a stage.

That was, of course, a non-skier's first impression. Then I saw the first lifts on each of the two mountains, set 100 yards apart at the edge of the village, and the snowy runs going up, up to the mile-high mountain tops, and I remembered that this was no movie set.

The lifts start at the base of the rise just behind Carlin Lodge, one of the first places built in this pedestrian-only village when the grand plan was started seven years ago. The first Blackcomb triple chair lift is 2,900 feet long and takes you up 331 feet of vertical, which is about equivalent to the vertical rise and

the longest run at Shanty Creek. There are five more lifts and a T-bar above that, accessing the mountain's 46 runs.

The village lift, which accesses the 84 ski runs on Whistler Mountain, is 1,330 feet long and goes up vertically 347 feet. There are 11 more chair lifts, two T-bars, two handle tows and a gondola available from there.

**TRAVELERS HAVE** been coming to Whistler, B.C., since the Indians and goldseekers followed these mountain trails in the 19th century. By the 1940s, it was one of the most popular Canadian summer resort areas west of the Rockies. There was no road; they came by steamship and steam train. Eventually they stopped coming.

Inspired by the success of the 1980 Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley, Utah, Canada's Olympic Committee started surveying western mountains for a potential Olympic site. The Sea and Sky Highway and the first Whistler lifts were opened in 1980, but it is only seven years since Blackcomb was developed and this village was built at the joining of the two great hills.



Travel writer Iris Jones puts on the boards. . . again.

**THURSDAY:** I am sitting in the jacuzzi at Powder Lodge, letting the hot bubbling water take the ski knots out of my legs. I skied on Blackcomb Mountain today, the highest ski mountain on the continent. I was only on the beginners slope, but don't scold yet.

You can't usually go up chair lifts without skis, because you are expected to ski down. Foot passengers are allowed to go up and down the first lift on Blackcomb, however, so I rode in sunshine to Rendezvous Lodge, where the lessons, rentals and action begin. My two-hour lesson began and ended behind the lodge.

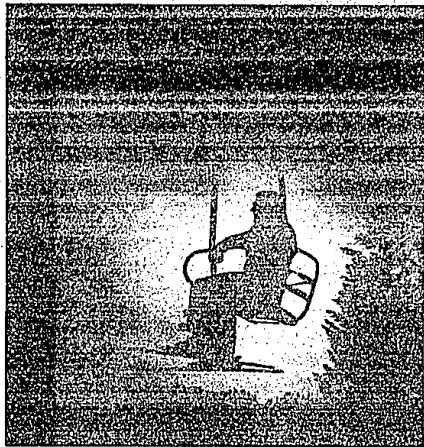
The rest of our group took Chair No. 3 up 4,890 feet past the Cruiser to the bottom of Lift No. 5; that is a 1,275-foot vertical rise about three times the height of Boyne Mountain. Chair No. 3 took them up another 5,130 feet, a 1,626-foot vertical. From there they either skied right to Lift No. 4 or left to No. 6. Both ended at the Summit Restaurant.

Most of our party stopped there. Three hardy souls took the T-bar to the real top of the mountain, well beyond the tree line, and skied down across the glacier. That's where they take all those photographs of good-looking skiers raising a cloud of powder as they skim by.

Meantime, back on the nursery slope, I was learning again the things I learned at Nubs Nob in Harbor Springs: how to snowplow and turn.

I thought the class was over when Tony, our young instructor, announced that we were going up chair No. 5, the beginners chair, and skiing down. I'm afraid of heights, and I have never jumped off a moving ski lift with my boards on, so I agreed only on condition I could ride the lift with him. He literally eased me off the chair and on to the top of a slope that looked like the Himalayas to me.

Now just to give you a perspective, the beginners chair lift is 1,350 feet long and rises up a 200-foot ver-



Photos by MICKY JONES

A skier rides one of the hang chair lifts at Whistler Ski Resort near Vancouver, British Columbia. Several of the lifts are a mile long.

tical, which is about the same vertical rise, and the same length as the longest run, at Mount Brighton.

I was contemplating spending the night up there, when Tony grabbed the tips of my skis and started stiling backwards, towing me after him. I have seen them do this with 3-year-olds; at that moment, however, all the 3-year-olds in sight were whizzing by me like experts.

I finally arrived at the bottom, took off my skis and went to the bar. (My doctor had advised me to spend the day in the bar, with a blood-soaked bandage wrapped around my leg.) It wasn't yet 4 p.m., but the bar was full. The lifts stop running at 5:30 because it takes you the rest of the afternoon to ski down to the base of the mountain.

There were crowds of skiers in the Longhorn Pub, crowding around pizza-sized tables and swapping horror

stories. My travel companions, the brave ones who skied the whole mountain, said what I have heard many times today. When you look at the mountain as a whole, it looks formidable. When you take it piece by piece, it can be scary but manageable.

Two beers later I clomped home (that's the hardest thing to learn how to walk in ski boots) and headed for the jacuzzi. Now that I have braved the baby slope, I am looking forward to going on to one of the many good restaurants in the village for dinner, and maybe on to one of the night spots.

The question is, can I stay awake long enough, after a hard day on the highest ski mountain in North America? I say tuned. Next week, my ski diary continues and the real skiers speak.

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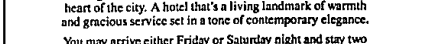
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