



BIG VERTICAL, BIG SNOW, BIG PERSONALITY, BIG CORPORATION – Whistler is about pushing things to the limit. There are those who love it and those who love it even more.

Whistler Blackcomb is a titan among resorts in the world of holiday resorts, drawing over 2 million visitors a year. Celebrating its 25th anniversary this year (Whistler Mountain itself is turning 40), Whistler Blackcomb has become an icon of corporate strategy as *Intertown*, the self-proclaimed "world leader in destination resorts and adventure travel," focusing upon delivering an experience that is about much more than simply the mountain.

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IT'S WHISTLER



"Oh yeah, we pushed harder to make up for it," this is Whistler, after all.

It is this kind of heartache that *Intertown* has made time, effort and to fuelled over and over again to keep the Whistler experience running with no exceptions. Last year Whistler showed the industry what could be done despite the odds. This year there is an almost audible sigh of relief as the nightmare of 2004/05 melt away.

WHILST IT IS BOTH FITTING AND ENTIRELY NATURAL that *Intertown* is a Canadian company (friendliness being such an integral part of the formula), I had been getting into a tangle over the seemingly paradoxical relationship between supposedly laid-back locals and the success of the corporate machine.

Riding up the quad chair on a fresh powder day (12cm, clear conditions, just a handful of tourists), a big cheese from the world renowned Whistler Blackcomb ski and snowboard school encapsulated the secret of Whistler for me.

"The thing," he said, "is that Whistler is only 25 years old; we have no traditions, no systems looking back. If something needs changing and modifying, we change it, we modify it."

In other words, work with it, not against it.

It's the lack of ingrained local philosophy that serves to create such a fervent ground for success. Happily for *Intertown*, laying business foundations upon an enthusiastic

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AFTER A VERY MEDIOCRE 2004/05, with temperatures well above average and snowfall well below average (a dismal 62% of the average 514 metres), Whistler looked set to become the latest casualty of unpredictable winter weather patterns, the likes of which have battered the eyes of many a European resort in recent years.

Talking to locals about last winter is like bringing up the death of a relative.

"It was bad. The whole town was miserable; there was no one around," said Kim. "I only went up the hill 4 times last year," she claimed – oh, the smug joy of a complimentary season pass.

Keeping Whistler running last winter was an epic display of hard work and diligence on the part of the community as a whole. The shock of last year has not fully dissipated but recent record snowfall (the snowiest January for 25 years) has quelled worries and boosted the town's morale. Questioning why she returned for yet another season, I ask Kim whether she had had a good time last winter.

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"THE RESULT IS A BACKCOUNTRY EXPERIENCE IN A FRONT-YARD SETTING,"

and willing platform is simpler, less bureaucratic and less bound in political quagmires than doing the same thing in a place where people aren't united by a passion.

The same spirit is all over town; if you don't have change for the bus, it's fairly likely that the driver will give you a free ride or a fellow passenger will shout you the buck fifty. For winter that way than leave you standing out in the cold.

PRETTY MUCH ALL RELATIONSHIPS IN WHISTLER are mutually beneficial. That's just the way it always has been. If you'd like me to tune your skis, no problem, but may I borrow your transceiver this weekend? You'd like a free season pass? That's fine as long as you show up for work each day. It's a form of problem solving and the result is an atmosphere of friendliness and progression.

It is not all sweetness and light, however. Two decent mountains and an impressive snow record is lost, but where is the atmosphere? Where is the Alpine charm? The

shops? The "Panic Intensify" signs? It's just not the same.

No, it's not. You're right. But it's not trying to be and it certainly doesn't want to be.

You see, in Whistler you never have to queue for the lifts; there are complimentary boot dryers at each mountain restaurant and there are massage stations in the main mountain lodges. Lift queues are veritably charming and 'sniffle stations' adorn the mountain, little beacons of moxy solidarity. Things are orderly, lift passes are refundable, rental gear can be dropped off 5 miles down the valley or 1800 metres up the mountain.

But I digress; whilst all these points make for an easy holiday, there is the small point of geography that really makes Whistler, and Whistler.

The laid-back attitude here belies the position of the local skiing and snowboarding community, as anyone who has been shovelled about in the queue for the first lift on a powder day can testify.

I once spent 6 months doing my best to ski absolutely all of Whistler Blackcomb and never managed to cross off every run. In fact, I didn't even take all 38 of the lifts. The trouble is that once you start witting off the marked runs, picking your own favourite lines, carving your own territory, designing your own paths – punctuated by drops, trees, flowing lines, speedy corners, combinations after combinations of pure bliss, you just won't run back. And in Whistler, that's a lot of land to get to grips with.

The ski area, delineated by the ski area boundary, is 8,371 acres squared. Constantly patrolled and monitored, many areas are left unpatrolled, avalanche-checked and blatted. The result is a backcountry experience in a front-yard setting; very little effort is needed to experience off-piste conditions, with the huge bonus of knowing that your safety is still within the hands of the patrollers.

IT IS A FORTUNATE TWIST OF FATE that such a progressive attitude was on the receiving end of such poor conditions last year. The happy ending may have been somewhat further out of reach had *Intertown's* solution not been driven by the infection, all prevailing energy with which Whistler normally thrives. It's a triumph, that guarantees the returning holidaymaker unparalleled quality, year after year.

It's starting to seem like you can't live with them and you can't live without them. Like I said, mutually beneficial. ■

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Thinking of spending a season in Whistler? Here are a few websites to help you get started:

www.bunac.org.uk

student & young person's working visas

www.whistlerblackcomb.com
the official website

www.snowpro.com
Canadian ski and snowboard instructors' official site