

Sea, Ski, and See

By Johannes Schweikle

The microclimate on Canada's West Coast promises a maximum of fun. You can get from the beach to the mountains in just two hours on Highway 99, which links Vancouver and Whistler. The two very different cities will be the center of the sporting world February 12–28, 2010, during the upcoming Olympic Winter Games. We took the Cayenne for a sneak preview.

Photos by Matthias Hangst

Travel

Vancouver is the economic hub of British Columbia, one of Canada's ten provinces



CANADA

Vancouver

USA

CANADA
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Whistler

[99]

Vancouver

Surrey

Nanaimo

PACIFIC OCEAN

Victoria

Seattle

USA



What's up, dock? The way to the heart of downtown Vancouver is hard to miss

Rod McNeil clearly remembers the first time he drove to Whistler. It was winter 1966, and he played hooky from school and set out on a single-lane gravel road that had been cleared through the woods for loggers and their trucks. A tough drive, but McNeil kept thinking the new skiing area had to turn up eventually. And indeed, after two hours, the young adventurer finally reached his destination—and found one gondola, one chairlift, and two T-bars. The slopes are still there, but they are no longer tranquil. This February, Whistler will be the center of the sporting world's attention as the site of the skiing competitions of the upcoming XXI Olympic Winter Games. The former gravel road has long since become Highway 99, known as the Sea to Sky Highway. An enticing name that piques curiosity.

Two Olympic venues, a host of contrasts. The stunningly beautiful area around Vancouver on the Pacific Coast is home to 2.2 million people. Due to its unique geographic situation, Vancouver residents in the mood for some exercise in the fresh air have the choice on

winter weekends between going sailing and going skiing. It's only a little over 75 miles (120 km) to North America's largest skiing area. Whistler itself sits about 2,200 feet (670 m) above sea level; the ski lifts go up to 7,200 feet (2,200 m). The lifts were the idea of an immigrant from Norway named Franz Wilhelmsen: "There was so much snow the first winter that you could reach the wire cable with your bare hands. That summer they built higher poles."

McNeil has meanwhile gone into retirement, albeit a very active one. Today he is wearing a red ski uniform that marks him as a Mountain Host, one of 160 volunteers who help guests find their way around Whistler's over 200 ski runs. When asked for advice by a man with decidedly average skiing skills, he recommends a run called Rock 'n' Roll. "It's been freshly prepared today, so it's smooth and soft as silk." Those in a more adventurous mood might prefer Rider's Revenge, a Black Diamond run that slaloms in between spruce trees. But caution is advisable: the snow can be frozen

into solid ice. Whistler is notorious for its fickle weather. The heavens might dump three feet of powder snow overnight, and then it might rain the day after next.

Winter frequently shows off its capricious side here in the coastal mountains. We get an impressive sense of its might on the new peak-to-peak cable railway spanning the deep gorge between Whistler and Blackcomb Mountain. Its central span of nearly two miles is the highest and longest unsupported cable-car span in the world, with the gondolas dangling 1,430 feet (436 m) above Fitzsimmons Creek. Two of the cars have glass bottoms. If you can stop quaking long enough to look down, you're rewarded by a sight of bizarre beauty. From this height, the trees look like giant flowers frosted in white by the icy wind. The valley is shrouded in fog; about halfway up, the sky is blue, and the peak of Blackcomb Mountain above disappears in the clouds. The mood on the ski runs below is much more laid back than in Europe. People ski less aggressively and patiently wait their turn in line for the ski lifts, with hardly any pushing and shoving. If your nose starts to run from the cold, you can just head for the "sniffle station" at each lift, where there are plenty of tissues.

Highway 99 connects the best of two worlds. The four-wheel-drive technology in the Cayenne finds it no challenge at all, leaving driver and passenger free to concentrate on the panorama. On the drive from Whistler, we pass rocky cliffs and waterfalls that have frozen into wildly shaped sheets of ice. Halfway to Vancouver, the mountains open up, and from now on the ocean dominates the scene. The landscape reminds me of Scandinavia. Like a fjord, Howe Sound cuts deep into the coastal mountains, and the road snakes along the bluffs lining the steep coast. A white ferry stands out against the deep blue of the sea, and the lush forest extends right down to the beach. Ancient cedars, mossy trunks, dense undergrowth—thanks to the nearby ocean, the humidity is so high that everything is green here, even in the winter.

The cedars grow right down to the high-rises of Vancouver, a city that resembles a giant resort more than a metropolis. A verdant peninsula extends just beyond downtown: Stanley Park, one of the largest city parks in North America. A six-mile-long path encircles the park. Indeed, jogging and cycling seem to be almost *de rigueur* in Vancouver. The path leads past the picturesque clubhouse of the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club to Hallelujah Point, where the ▶



Sleeping Beauty: Vancouver can settle in for the night in the secure knowledge that she is beyond compare



XXI Olympic Winter Games February 12–28, 2010, in Vancouver

The Games in Numbers

In 2003, **64 percent** of Vancouver's over 610,000 inhabitants voted in favor of holding the Games in their city.

Four Native American peoples, jointly known as the Four Host First Nations, are officially hosting the Winter Olympics along with the City of Vancouver.

The distance between the two Olympic venues, Vancouver and Whistler (Alpine competitions), is about **80 miles** (125 km).

Three official mascots named Miga, Quatchi, and Sumi were designated to represent the people, the region, and the spirit of British Columbia.

The expansion of the Sea to Sky Highway between Vancouver and Whistler cost about **\$CAD 750 million**. The overall budget for the Games amounts to over **\$CAD 1.7 billion**.

1.6 million tickets will be issued for the various Olympic events.

Around **12,000** torch bearers will carry the Olympic torch for more than 100 days and over 28,000 miles (45,000 km) before the flame is lighted February 12 in Vancouver, marking the official commencement of the Games.

About **5,000** participants and officials from more than 80 countries will be in Vancouver for the Olympics.

Approximately **10,000** reporters and cameramen will be covering the Games.

Three billion people worldwide will watch the Games on television.

An average of almost **360 inches** (914 cm) of snow fall annually in the mountains around Whistler.

Winning **three** gold medals and one bronze in short-track speed skating, Ahn Hyun Soo from South Korea was the most successful male

athlete at the 2006 Winter Games. Vancouver will see a new top medalist: Ahn failed to qualify for this year's Games.

Athletes will vie for medals in **86** competitions in **15** sports.

The **XXII Winter Olympics** will be held in 2014 in the city of Sochi (Russia) on the Black Sea coast.

www.vancouver2010.com



Whistler lies in the heart of North America's largest skiing area—a winter wonderland with guaranteed snow and lifts taking visitors up to 7,200 feet.

Salvation Army used to sing. Seaplanes take off in the bay; in the background you can see the cranes and container ships down by the docks and brightly colored totem poles towering above the park's trees. At the pier in Horseshoe Bay is Canada Place, with its distinctive, tent-like roofs.

The Salish Indians lived along the coast before the white settlers forced them onto reservations. As an act of atonement, Canada included the First Nations (the term used in Canada to designate Native Americans) among the official Olympic hosts. They will perform their traditional dances during the opening ceremony.

The railroad followed in the wake of the white settlers; the first train of the Canadian Pacific Railway reached the end of the line on the Pacific Coast in 1887. With its imposing dark brick facade and white columns extending over several stories, the train station might be mistaken for a grand old hotel. Indeed, the railway company built a number of luxurious hotels along the line to lure travelers onto its trains. When the British monarch inaugurated the hotel in 1939, it was the highest building in the city, crowned with a copper roof that is now covered with a patina. Sixty years later, the railway renamed its hotels, which are now known under the name Fairmont. ▶

“People in Toronto and Montreal don’t take us seriously,” says Barry Stutz. “They always joke: ‘Don’t bother calling in Vancouver. They’re out sailing anyway.’” Stutz, who immigrated to Canada from Switzerland 33 years ago, makes a living showing tourists around the city. There are 56 marinas around Vancouver. Located just off the coast, Vancouver Island—which is larger than the state of Maryland—shelters the city from the force of ocean storms, producing a microclimate so mild that most people don’t even put winter tires on their cars.

Unlike many other cities in North America, downtown Vancouver is alive with people even at night. Countless restaurants and music clubs have settled into the old warehouses of Yaletown. But the

Granville district is perhaps the best place to get a taste of the eclectic Vancouver experience. The small peninsula is lined with designer houseboats, and you’ll find everything from a concrete plant and a microbrewery to an acting school, a film studio, and art galleries tucked in between the many sheds with corrugated roofs. The stalls in the covered market offer everything from abalone and oysters to lemongrass and zucchini, and if you’re up for a snack, you can choose between sushi and burgers. Brightly colored little ferryboats like something out of Legoland link Granville with downtown.

Vancouver is most stunning at night, when the lights of the skyline are reflected in the ocean and, right behind Lions’ Gate Bridge, the dark shapes of the mountains are illuminated by the floodlights of the city’s three skiing areas. The Olympic snowboard competitions will be held at Cypress Mountain; the halfpipe is only 20 minutes from downtown.

Vancouver’s residents just smile at the widespread prejudice that they’re always out sailing. To get away from that stereotype, all they have to do is take the highway and head for the snow.

Despite all the bridges that were built and tunnels that were carved into the rock for the highway to Whistler, it takes McNeil just as long today as it did the first time he drove the distance, due to increased traffic and the 50 mph (80 km/h) speed limit. He is looking forward to the time after the Games, when all the traffic jams and construction sites are gone. “Then I might be able to get there in fifteen minutes’ less time.” As if that really mattered. After all—the journey is its own reward. ◀

