

Whistler's daughter!

How a mystical underground world of caves seduced a winter enthusiast more used to adventures above ground

BY CATHERINE MURPHY

I'm bathed in blue, transfixed by an aqua marine chamber of ancient ice when I notice a small movement nearby.

In a remote ice cave beneath the largest southernmost ice field in Canada, a young man is down on one knee proposing to his girlfriend. They're wearing sweatshirts, jeans and sneakers and have flown by private helicopter to experience the moment.

It's a once-in-a-lifetime scenario for me too. Within a year, this cave, formed beneath the Pemberton ice cap near Whistler ski resort, may be too unstable to explore. There will be no anniversary chopper ride for those young lovers to recall their happy engagement. It will become a moment melted in time.

Following cursory admiration of the fiancée's rock, my attention turns to the fascinating structures and colours created by water melting along the bed of the glacier during thousands of years. Our guide Doug Washer points out

trapped sand and air bubbles in the ice, and explains how worms live in it.

For well-heeled adventure lovers, Doug can organise a range of custom experiences in this icy wonderland – from BBQs, rounds of golf, paragliding into hot springs and private observatories to pro photo-shoots and private snow hotels – like the one in which singer Seal proposed to his nowex Heidi Klum.

Alongside the customised glory, there's a more serious aspect to Doug's ice cap helicopter excursions. Part of his work is to assess and record the movement of the caves for research purposes.

My ice cave research consists of standing, staring and marvelling at the ice blue wonder of it all.

Afterwards, having retraced our steps through a narrow tunnel leading onto the ice field, Doug pulls out a lawn table – in the snowy middle of nowhere – and treats us to a picnic. The only other humans visible in this vast wilderness are a couple of Sled Necks powering snowmobiles through pristine British Columbia powder.



The Great Indoors (and Outdoors): The cave beneath the Pemberton ice cap, how to get there, and the JW Marriott Parq Vancouver Hotel, Vancouver



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IN a scene that never fails to thrill me, a Blackcomb helicopter hovers above, ready to fly us back to Whistler. The experience doesn't end when the chopper lands though. In the bar at the Four Seasons Resort, a mixologist creates cocktails using a chunk of ice Doug chipped off in the cave. 'We say the ice is 15,000 years old' he says. 'But in reality, it's much older than that.'

At that moment I realise money re-

ally can buy you anything. The Heli Ice Cave Explore excursion has taken me to one of the world's natural wonders on a city-to-snow trip that's filled with all kinds of natural and man-made designs. This is the kind of holiday that should be savoured for a very special occasion with a budget to match. Whistler Blackcomb is something of a wonder itself. The largest ski area in North America, it offers diverse terrain across two moun-

tains with steeps, deeps, chutes, bowls, glades, long corduroy cruisers and gentle rollers with a vertical mile drop, three glaciers, 16 high alpine bowls and a world record breaking gondola.

The Peak to Peak gondola connecting Whistler and Blackcomb mountains travels a span of 4.4km with glass floors built into a number of cabins. At the top of Peak to Peak you get to enjoy the kind of high alpine terrain loved by European skiers and boarders. Expert skiers will enjoy the double and triple black diamond runs that Australian ski instructor and DJ Max Isaac shows me.

One of the best things about Whistler Blackcomb, apart from its famed buzz and quality of service, is that while the skiing is high altitude and snow-sure, the resort is set at just 675 metres. The low altitude means you don't have to spend a day acclimatising before hitting the slopes.

Now owned by Vail Resorts, Whistler recently announced a \$60million investment which will see the creation of the world's first gondola to gondola to gondola.

The rustic Four Seasons Resort will also benefit from major investment in 2018 with a refurbishment programme in time for next winter.

Whistler is home to many famed skiers including the late racer Dave Murray, Freeride World Tour champion Logan Pehota and freeski film stars Sean and Callum Pettit. It's also home to Olympian Robbie Dixon who skis with Four Seasons guests as part of the 'Ski with an Olympian' programme.

Robbie competed in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics and as he glides around the mountain, speaks frankly about how he was

Dropped from the Canadian team following a period of injury and team management change.

Now in his 30s, he gets to start afresh in the ski industry.

ONE of the things that many skiers



marvel at is the great quality of food available in mountain resorts and Whistler doesn't disappoint.

From luscious steaks and seafood in Sidecut restaurant at the Four Seasons to tapas in Bar Oso, from sabering champagne bottles and sipping vodka in the ice bar at Bearfoot restaurant to fine dining at Christine's on Blackcomb, eating out is a luxury. Just don't be surprised when you see a C\$40 price tag on your breakfast buffet in the morning.

There's one more luxury to enjoy in Whistler – the Scandinave Spa which is set on the edge of the Lost Lake spruce and cedar forest.

The spa has a rule of silence, allowing guests to unwind on its hot, cold and relax circuit with eucalyptus steam baths, wood burning Finnish saunas, outdoor hot baths Nordic waterfalls and cold baths.

Driving back along the beautiful Sea to Sky highway, I arrive in Vancouver and check into an urban resort that can only be described as a man-made wonder.

The Parq Vancouver – encapsulating the JW Marriott Parq hotel and its boutique sister The Douglas – cost a whopping C\$800m to construct and features

two floors of gaming, 60,000 sqft of event space, eight restaurants, an elevated sixth floor park and 466 bedrooms.

It's a new style of hotel accommodation in laid-back Vancouver and for this traveller, its greatest wonder is the Sky Suite which offers stunning views of the city's waterways on one side and a bird's eye view of the whitedomed roof and architectural structure of BC Place Stadium on the other.

Double bedrooms at the JW Parq cost from C\$249 but a night in the Sky Suite will set you back a cool C€7,500 in low season.

From the Parq, it's just a short ferry ride to the markets at Granville Island, perfect for buying local produce and admiring the city's glittering towers.

Afterwards, I pick up a free bike to cycle around Stanley Park, brunch on delicious waffles in Robbie Kane's Medina restaurant (no, he's not Irish) and take a taxi across Lions Gate Bridge – bankrolled by the Guinness family and opened in 1938 – to visit the city's oldest attraction, the Capilano Suspension Bridge Park.

Every year, a dedicated team spends three months installing a million light bulbs in the park's magnificent trees in time for Christmas, then spends another three months removing them.

It's a spectacular sight in First Nations territory and one that compliments the many wonders of a city to snow trip in British Columbia.

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