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## TRAVEL

# Whistler area will likely be the star of the Vancouver Olympics

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BY ELISE CORONEOS

Special to the Star-Telegram

VANCOUVER — With the Winter Olympics in Vancouver beginning Feb. 12, all eyes are set to gaze upon the jewel of the Canadian west coast. Those among us who never ski, snowboard, ice skate or luge, will — for two weeks — be transformed into fleeting experts in the world of winter sports.

Vancouver might get all the glory that comes with hosting the games — the games are being marketed as Vancouver 2010 — but it is the charm of Whistler that most viewers will see when they tune in.

For the uninitiated, Whistler, just 75 miles north of Vancouver, is to Vancouver what Aspen is to Denver. The hamlet, with a permanent population of fewer than 10,000, feeds the ski fantasies of Vancouver locals and visitors alike and will play host to alpine skiing, bobsled, luge, skeleton, biathlon, cross country skiing, Nordic events and ski jumping.

In addition to the magnificent peaks of Whistler's snow-covered mountains, possibly the most iconic image that viewers of the Games will take away will be man-made — the thrilling Peak 2 Peak Gondola, which links Blackcomb and Whistler mountains, the two main mountains that cradle Whistler.

The Peak 2 Peak Gondola opened in December 2008 and is essentially an enclosed chairlift that takes riders on a heart-stopping 11-minute journey, traveling almost 26 feet per second, between the mountain peaks. The breathtaking views — white peaks in the winter and wildflowers in the summer — are viewed in their splendor from above, as you glide across an unsupported stretch nearly two miles long, at heights reaching almost 1,427 feet.

Holding the world record for the longest span between two ropeway towers, the impressive length of the Peak 2 Peak is outdone only by the now-defunct Feldmoos-Chli-Titlis Aerial Tramway, used in Switzerland between 1979 and 1986.

For folks looking for more evidence as to why they should respect the considerable heights of achievement reached by the Peak 2 Peak Gondola, consider that Blackcomb and Whistler mountains possess the two longest vertical ski runs in North America, at nearly 5,000 feet apiece, thus setting the stage for a truly magnificent ride that won't easily be topped.

### Two mountains, one ticket

Blackcomb and Whistler mountains came under the same ownership in 1997 — they are owned by Intrawest — so you need only one lift ticket. That enables skiers to fulfill their dream of skiing both mountains without having to descend all the way to Whistler village.

At capacity, the Peak 2 Peak Gondola can transport up to 4,100 skiers or sightseers per hour in its 28 gondola cabins, each of which seats 28 people. So it is not surprising that the gondola's terminal buildings are the two largest lift terminals in the world —14,000 square feet on Blackcomb Mountain and 12,000 square feet on Whistler.

To make it possible, each cable had to be winched down Blackcomb, then up Whistler, a process that took 12 weeks. To further complicate matters, Blackcomb Mountain's existing chairlift terminals — Wizard Express and Catskiner — had to be relocated in order to better position them for the crossing to Whistler.

As you watch the Olympics, you may keep in mind these beautiful vistas the next time you visit Vancouver. Invest the time to rise above it all at Whistler, no matter what time of year. A one-day winter lift ticket is currently \$90.



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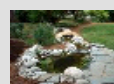
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Longtime Film Star Jean Simmons Dead at 80

Sightseers who only want the thrill of the ride from the safety of the Peak 2 Peak Gondola pay around \$39. These prices can be reduced by having tickets included as part of an accommodations package.

And there's plenty to do in the summer as well. Hiking, biking, glacier walks, rock climbing and ATV rides are among the activities that families can enjoy at Whistler.

Whistler-Blackcomb Average snowfall: 360 inches per year

Total terrain: 8,171 acres

Trails: 200-plus

Mountain restaurants: 17

Whistler Village elevation: 2,214 feet

Number of lifts: 33

Hourly lift capacity: 59,007 skiers per hour

Temperatures: In January, average ranges from a low of 18 degrees Fahrenheit to a high of 28; in July, the range is between a low of 52 and a high of 80 degrees.

Source: [www.whistlerblackcomb.com](http://www.whistlerblackcomb.com)

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