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WINTER FUN

Whistler from a bird's-eye view

Zip lines, steeps and a photographers' challenge is all part of what's on offer

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Now I know how a snowy owl feels, launching into the darkness from its lofty perch.

We both get to soar at high speed on a winter's eve across the mountain valley and past the treetops of old growth forests in the backcountry alpine of Cougar Mountain near Whistler. Except I'm connected to a zip line in search of a nocturnal adrenalin rush, not my supper. One of Whistler's finest eateries has already taken care of that.

My high-flying evening sampling Whistler's newest winter adventure experience, Superfly Ziplines' Dinner Tour, starts with a sunset ride in a heated snowcat up an old logging road to a high altitude yurt that seats a maximum of 10 guests. Once there, a sprinkling of snowsuit-clad diners tucks into a gourmet meal of tomato and basil soup, short ribs with wine jus and toffee pudding with maple syrup, courtesy of the legendary Bearfoot Bistro.

Well stuffed, we're then let loose to soar back to the valley below on four side-by-side zip lines. One happens to be Canada's longest at nearly a mile from end to end and 600 feet above the valley floor. In the pitch dark I feel like Ray Charles falling into an elevator shaft.

Easily lit platforms, bridges, walkways and trees line the spooky route, draped in winter inversion fog.

"It's a very Zen-like experience," says my zip line partner, Kyleen Stanton, an air traffic controller from Vancouver. "The stars overhead, moon shining brightly, wind whipping past your face as you sail into the unknown."

Deep Winter Challenge

I've journeyed to Whistler to take in the 8th annual Arc'teryx Deep Winter Photo Challenge, a popular professional snow sports photographers' show down that pits six of the action sports industry's best against the mountains, the elements and the clock in a collective effort to capture the visual essence of "deep winter."

The photographers are all given the same 72-hour window to shoot inbounds at Whistler Blackcomb, capturing athletes in their natural habitat of powder-filled bowls, glades, and après bars.

But somehow along the way to Deep Winter's Saturday



Zip-lining in winter is an increasingly popular adventure activity at Whistler, which boasts one of Canada's longest zips at nearly a mile from end to end.

BISTA JESKOV

If you go:

- Whistler's Arc'teryx Deep Winter Photo Challenge takes place in mid-January. Get your tickets early as the show regularly sells out well in advance.
- Whistler-based Extremely Canadian offers two-day steep skiing clinics and private lessons throughout the season.
- Superfly Ziplines' evening Dinner Tour departs from their office in Whistler Village daily at 5 and 6 p.m. The approximately four-hour \$199 round trip includes dinner catered by Bearfoot Bistro.

Where to stay:

Nita Lake Lodge, an upscale boutique hotel located on the quiet pristine shores of Nita Lake, is a tranquil option, well away from Whistler Village's bustling nightlife. For the classic mountain lodge experience, the Fairmont Chateau Whistler is hard to beat. Crystal Lodge is an excellent choice in the heart of Whistler Village, just steps from the gondola and all the action.

Deep Winter show to roll, I decide to face my deepest downhill fears by signing up for one of Extremely Canadian's two-day inbounds Steeps Clinics.

Billed as a shortcut to discovering both the best of Whistler Blackcomb's insane steeps and the best of your skills, this masters in chute management involves dedicated coaches delivering a hefty

dose of technical instruction, steep skiing survival tactics and the insider's scoop on finding their favourite off-piste "stashes" of powdery perfection.

Steep and deep

"Hesitation is not your friend up here. Don't think about it. Just go," orders veteran Extremely Canadian coach and former pro free skier Chad Hendren as he urges me to make a rapid exit from between a rock and a hard place high up above the blue cruising crowds on Whistler's West Bowl.

Shimmying my skies to the edge of the abyss, I can only see one route to safety through a narrow, rocky snow track over the overhanging cliff face. Pointing my skies toward it, I utter something unprintable and launch diagonally across the snow and through the ledge, shooting round the corner and onto a dizzyingly steep but relatively safe slope. Hendren was right. He who hesitates up here is lost. Or at least, last.

Geared toward adventure to

expert skiers, Extremely Canadian's small group courses cover a serious amount of vertical, guaranteeing improvement, tired legs, and an unforgettable ski experience. Over the next couple of days under Chendren's tutelage I manage to make it safely — if not always stylishly — down infamously challenging Whistler favourites like Pakalolo couloir, Spanky's Ladder and Cougar Chutes.

"In two days my skiing ability has progressed much more than I expected," says fellow steeps rookie Daniel Edgumbe, a physician from Vegreville, Alta., as we toast to successfully completing the course at Blackcomb's après ski institution, Merlins. "I was skiing runs I thought I would never attempt, or at least not for many years," he adds.

The next night at the Fairmont Chateau Whistler the Deep Winter Challenge photographers' Cameron Hunter, Chris Brown, Erin Hogue, Jason Hummel, Nicolas Teichrob and Zoya Lynch enthrall the boisterous audience with their story-based slide shows.

Their often-brilliant montages range from sentimental to experimental, mixing astounding on-mountain action shots with creative, often humorous takes on Whistler Village life.

Revelstoke-based Lynch, who's story focuses on the relationship between Whistler's most inspiring fine artists and the mountains they love in her show, "Winter Canvas," wins the much-coveted "Queen of Storms" title and first prize of \$5,000. "It's crazy, I'm so excited right now," says Lynch as she accepts her award. "I considered myself a wild card competitor coming in so I am really happy to have won first place." I'm also excited watching the evening's stream of brilliant depictions of pros playing on these magnificent mountains of ours. Over the past few days of deep winter fun at Whistler I've challenged myself to get out of my comfort zone in some of the spectacular locations depleted in these talented photographers' stunning shots. Lofty perches I would never have attempted just a few short days ago.

Now I also know how an eagle feels.