



Westin Bear Mountain

SEA TO SKY GOLF

CANADA'S WHISTLER AND VANCOUVER AREA IS CARVING OUT A NAME FOR THE JOY OF ITS EXPANSIVE GREENS. STORY BY ANDREW MARSHALL. PICTURES PAUL MARSHALL

Bear Mountain Resort



It's a sunny mid-September morning in British Columbia. At precisely 8:30am the Whistler Mountaineer chugs gently out of North Vancouver railway yard, on its daily run to the alpine resort of Whistler, three-hours and 120-kms away, along a track with more twists and turns than an Agatha Christie novel. With our golf clubs stored safely on board we settle down in the first class Glacier Dome car – all white linens, waiter service and unobstructed views, and toast the trip with glasses of Okanogan bubbly while tucking into hearty cheese omelettes with Canadian back bacon – a tasty beginning to our week-long British Columbia golf journey by 'trains, ferries and automobiles', teeing it up on some of the best tracks around Whistler, Vancouver Island and Vancouver.

Since its launch in May 2006, the Whistler Mountaineer has carried tens of thousands of passengers along this scenic strip that cuts through canyons and past snow-capped mountains to the southern edge of Whistler. We enjoy spectacular views of Vancouver and the early morning mists slowly lifting off Howe Sound (the most southerly fjord and glacially carved inlet in North America), as the train trundles through pine forests, past Horseshoe Bay and climbs up alongside the serpentine Sea-to-Sky Highway. After breakfast, we join other rail passengers in the historic Henry Pickering 1914 observation car and it seems there's other golfers on board judging by a few upturned Titliest and Callaway baseball caps.

SKI & GOLF Whistler is consistently ranked the number one ski, snowboarding and mountain biking resort in North America, and has won numerous awards. In recent years, Whistler has gained a reputation for activities on the green stuff as much as the white, with four championship designer courses providing classic mountain golf. There's Arnold Palmer's first ever Canadian design at the Whistler Golf Club (the area's first course built in 1983) a Jack Nicklaus design at Nicklaus North Course, Robert Trent Jones Jr's mountainside Chateau Whistler Golf Club and 30 minutes drive north at Pemberton lies Bob Cupp's Big Sky Golf and Country Club played at the foot of the soaring granite outcrop of Mount Currie.

Alas, we only have time for two of the quartet: Nicklaus North and Chateau Whistler. Distinctly different from the other Whistler golf properties, Chateau Whistler (a comfortable stroll from the five star Fairmont Chateau Whistler Hotel) is carved from the side of Blackcomb Mountain with dramatic elevation changes of over 400 feet. Most people playing here opt to take a power cart, but we want to walk. "Are you sure you are up for it guys," says the starter with a look on his face as though we planned to walk blindfolded across a minefield. Making things easier are the snazzy state-of-the-art 'pull trolleys' sporting huge mountain bike wheels and a handy metal basket for odds and ends. Chateau Whistler is a heart-pumping golf workout not to be missed; marching along pristine fairways that climb and plummet, through massive granite outcroppings, glacier-fed creeks and majestic centuries-old Douglas firs.

*...Marching along
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THE BEAR ESSENTIALS Surrounded by mountains on the shores of Whistler's Green Lake, the par-71 Nicklaus North (the only design to bear Jack's name) was voted 'Best New Course in Canada' by *Golf Digest* in 1996. It's eminently playable from five sets of tees, and on the nine par-4's and four par-5's, the water features and distinctive Nicklaus bunkering and landing areas are set up to invite players of all abilities to use drivers. Yet, for all the potential drama the long holes offer, it's the five par-3's that will linger in the memory, especially the 226-yard 17th played to a peninsula green.

Everything at Nick North seems to revolve around bears – the black variety that inhabits the region. For starters, the pro shop is stuffed with enough Golden Bear gear to keep Jack Nicklaus clothed for a lifetime without visiting a laundry. "There's definitely a few black bears in some of the wooded and marshy areas on the course, but they are usually harmless," says the guy at the desk as we check in. "In fact one has been spotted out near the snack shack today." When we reach the tee block at the par-3 10th surrounded by trees there's not a soul around and even the snack shack is shut. Bear reminders such as bear-shaped tee markers; bear-proof litterbins and a 'Bear Essentials' sign (a guide to black bears) don't help the tenseness of the situation. After constantly looking over his shoulder and re-gripping more times than Sergio Garcia, my playing partner Paul proceeds to stiff a 6-iron to 2-feet and his first birdie of the day; must have been all that adrenalin! For the remainder of the round we keep an eye out for the local wildlife, but alas the closest we come to a David Attenborough moment is discovering what look suspiciously like bear droppings next to the 14th green.

After two days in Whistler we drive our hire car down the picturesque Sea to Sky Highway (Route 99) towards Vancouver and a tee time at Furry Creek – 'British Columbia's Most Scenic Golf Course' and where the golf comedy *Happy Gilmore* was filmed. One glance from the first tee, with its striking 165-foot plunge towards the tranquil waters of Howe Sound, and we quickly understand we've arrived at a course like no other. There are precious few courses that can generate a genuine sense of awe for several holes at a stretch. Exceedingly rare is a layout that can sustain the feeling for an entire round; Furry Creek is such a place. One of the classics is the par-3 14th that dares you to drive over a beach littered with bleached driftwood logs to an emerald green jutting into Howe Sound.

After munching on juicy '5-iron' steak sandwiches washed down with a couple of Arnold Palmers (half lemonade and iced tea) at the Sea to Sky Grill, we continue on to Horseshoe Bay for the 95-minute ferry crossing to the port of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. BC Ferries is known for showcasing British Columbia's spectacular scenery and proud maritime history, and travelling this way is like a mini-cruise in itself. Nearby Victoria is the capital city of British Columbia with a fascinating history preserved in the city's many museums and heritage buildings. The picturesque Inner Harbour is the hub of downtown activity and bustles with kayaks, yachts, whale watching boats and ►



Canadian icons

floatplanes. Located 20 minutes away, is our home for two nights, the Westin Bear Mountain Resort – a master-planned community built around Vancouver Island’s first Jack and Steve Nicklaus designed golf course. The resort offers a complete lifestyle experience combining the secluded luxury of a rural mountainside wellness resort with world-class golf. There’s no question of roughing it here, with sumptuous suites so spacious you need a map to find your way around.

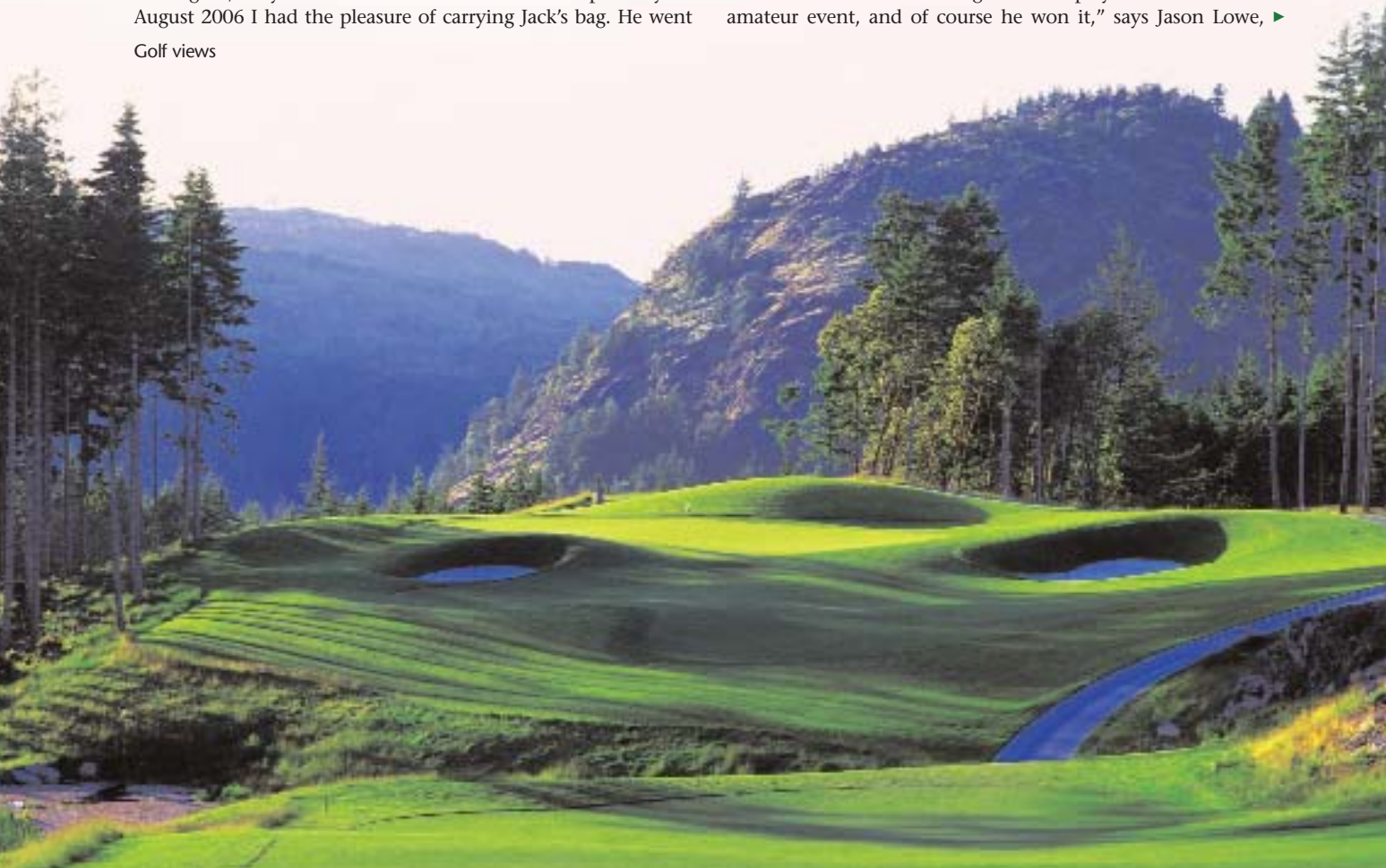
The following morning we join Associate Professional Steven MacPherson to tackle Bear Mountain, which bizarrely has 19 holes on the scorecard, with an extra par-3 situated between the 14th green and the 15th tee with stunning views of Victoria. “It was Jack’s son Steve who suggested it, figuring it would make a fun hole for a friendly wager,” McPherson tells us after expertly splitting the fairway on the 549-yard Par-5 first from the Golden tees. “When Bear Mountain opened in 2003 it was the first new course on the island in 12 years and it created a lot of interest in the region,” says MacPherson. “On the official open day in August 2006 I had the pleasure of carrying Jack’s bag. He went

Golf views

straight to the ‘golds’ and boy did he hit the ball well that day.”

Everything about Bear Mountain is top-end; a stunning forested mountainside design, tee blocks good enough to putt on, fast undulating greens and thick US Open-style greenside rough that will test lob wedge skills to the max. To assist all golfers, GPS computerised, satellite-linked systems on each power cart relay yardages to pins and hazards, even allowing you to make lunch orders ready for pick-up before the back nine. A highly recommended order is the lobster sandwiches.

OLYMPIC GOLF A short drive from Bear Mountain lies Olympic View Golf Club, another island must-play. Here, it’s all about tranquillity, seclusion and nature, with the magnificence of the Olympic Mountains, soaring bald eagles, grazing deer and two waterfalls including a spectacular 60-footer tumbling behind the green of the par-4 17th – one of the most photographed holes in BC. “Olympic View was the first course in British Columbia that Tiger Woods played in 1994 in a US amateur event, and of course he won it,” says Jason Lowe, ►



Chateau Whistler Golf Club



president of Golf Vancouver Island, as we enjoy lunch in the clubhouse restaurant after our round. We also learn from Lowe that if you make par or less on the 107-yard par-3 16th, you're better than Tiger Woods, who bogeyed the hole two days in a row even though it's rated the course's easiest hole.

Lowe is excited about Vancouver Island's emergence as a genuine hotspot for British Columbia golf. "There are around 50 courses here and the Vancouver Golf Trail showcases 11 of the best, that start in Victoria and go up to the Campbell River, with about three hours driving between them," he adds. "Along with Olympic View and Bear Mountain, my pick would also include Arbutus Ridge, Storey Creek and Fairwinds." Lowe continues: "There are big things happen-

ing here in 2008-9. There's Greg Norman's Cliffs Over Maple Bay, a second course at Bear Mountain designed by Steve Nicklaus, and Wind & Sea another Jack Nicklaus Signature course which is going to be the first top-quality golf course on the rugged west coast. It's an amazing chunk of property, right on the ocean and will rival Pebble Beach for drama."

After a late afternoon ferry crossing from Swartz Bay to the Tsawwassen Ferry Terminal, we arrive back in Vancouver, set against a stunning natural backdrop of mountains and ocean. This gateway to the Pacific Rim is known for its resident's quality of life and has recently been voted best place to live by the Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU). Vancouver is sassy, sophisticated and outdoorsy, a city with a cosmopolitan attitude offering

superlative shopping, lavish dining, top-draw theatre, funky districts, galleries, great nightlife and beautiful Stanley Park, 1000 acres of greenery that hugs the downtown area and provides a playground or an oasis for everyone.

If you still have enough time and energy for teeing it up, other courses in the Vancouver area include: Northview Golf & Country Club featuring two Arnold Palmer championship courses (Canal and Ridge), Mayfair Lakes near the airport, a Lee Trevino public course at Swan-e-set Bay Resort & Country Club, and be greeted by the stylish caddies dressed like Payne Stewart at Westwood Plateau Golf Club, which offers glorious views of Lower Vancouver from several holes.

It's been a long way to come for six rounds in eight days, but packing away our clubs for our plane trip back to Europe, we're already discussing another British Columbia golf trip – with images of the stunning scenery, local wildlife and well-struck drives soaring towards a backdrop of forested mountain slopes etched firmly in our minds. ■

LUXE LIST

Canadian Air offers return flights from Sydney direct to Vancouver, www.aircanada.com; BC Ferries, www.bcferries.com; Whistler Mountaineer, www.whistlermountaineer.com

STAY: Westin Resort & Spa, www.westin-whistler.com; Westin Bear Mountain Victoria Golf Resort & Spa, www.westin.com

PLAY: Fairmont Chateau Whistler Golf Club, www.fairmontgolf.com/whistler; Nicklaus North Golf Course, www.golfbc.com/courses/nicklaus_north; Olympic View, www.golfbc.com; Bear Mountain, www.bearmountain.ca; Furry Creek Golf & Country Club, www.golfbc.com/courses/furrycreek; Northview Golf & Country Club, www.northviewgolf.com; British Columbia, www.golfbc.com; Vancouver Island, www.golfvancouverisland.ca; Whistler, www.golfwhistler.com

TOP TEN

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