

# Whistler wonders

The Canadian mountain resort of Whistler offers accessible activities for all seasons, discovers **Matt Dennis**

**O**ver the noise of the wind rushing in my ears, I heard a shout: "Left turn! Use your core!" I twisted in the bucket seat of my sit-ski, using my body weight to slalom left and then right, kicking up clouds of powder snow as I careered down Whistler's Enchanted Forest blue run. This was my first time back on the slopes for 30 years, since I lost the use of one of my legs – and it felt like freedom.

In the world of adaptive winter sports, the British Columbia mountain resort of Whistler is the vanguard: in 2010, it hosted the Paralympics, and in February 2025, Vancouver and Whistler together hosted the first winter-sports edition of the Invictus Games. The tournament, founded by Prince Harry, sees injured, sick and wounded military personnel (active or veteran) compete in adapted disciplines.

## BARRIER-FREE SKI

Whistler's Olympic and Invictus Games legacy has created an adaptive sports haven, where the impossible becomes routine. At Whistler Olympic Park, my instructors Natalie O'Connor and Jen Brown from the Whistler Adaptive sports programme guided me into my first sit-ski, their fluorescent jackets bright against the pristine white landscape.

"Start with small movements," Jen advised as I dug the ski poles into the crisp snow. After I edged forward, the initial glide – a wonderful weightless sensation – sparked a feeling in me that I hadn't felt for a long time. I had a sense of uninhibited movement through this winter playground.

Along the flats, it felt as smooth as silk, and on downhills I gently slipped through the snow as gravity pulled me down, but the inclines challenged my arms. My burning biceps eventually betrayed me, and panic rose in my chest as I

Adaptive skiing  
in Whistler,  
British Columbia  
PICTURE: Andrew Strain



## NEED TO KNOW

✿ Once agents have booked holiday packages to Whistler, they can work with accessible providers in Whistler direct to arrange the perfect experience for their clients, ensuring all needs are met.

✿ Winter sports can be booked via Whistler Blackcomb ski resort. Email [wbadaptiveprogram@vailresorts.com](mailto:wbadaptiveprogram@vailresorts.com) and request 'adaptive lesson booking'.

✿ Summer activities include adaptive biking, kayaking, canoeing, paddleboarding and hiking. All equipment is provided, with advance notice. Bookings can be made via [info@whistleradaptive.com](mailto:info@whistleradaptive.com)

✿ For adaptive mountain biking, electric-assisted hand-cycles are available with certified instructors at both Whistler Adaptive ([whistleradaptive.com](http://whistleradaptive.com)) and Squamish Adaptive Mountain Biking ([squamishadaptive.com](http://squamishadaptive.com)).



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Trails in Whistler have been adapted to suit hand-bikes and wheelchair cycles; Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre ambassadors; getting out onto the lake **PICTURES:** Whistler Adaptive; Blake Jorgenson Photography; Matt Dennis

slid backwards, but the instructors stepped in seamlessly to steady me. This kind of practised intervention speaks to British Columbia's commitment to accessibility.

## CITY SLICKER

The 2025 Invictus Games also saw Vancouver host events including wheelchair basketball, rugby and curling. Clients travelling to Whistler will most likely fly into Vancouver, where it's worth adding a few days to explore the city. The SkyTrain, SeaBus and bus services are fully accessible and equipped with ramps, lifts and accessible boarding areas.

For summer stays, there are beach mats allowing for wheelchair access to English Bay and Kitsilano beaches, along with water wheelchairs at several pools and beaches. The city's sports facilities also provide extra options for those visitors with mobility needs – whether the sun is shining or there's a chill in the air.

Rolling cautiously on to an ice arena flanked by ex-Invictus Team Canada athlete Patrick Levi, I prepared to have a go at wheelchair curling. As my group cast our granite stones across the sheet towards a target, we laughed – largely at my ineptitude.

As he adjusted my delivery technique, Patrick explained: "Adaptive sports aren't just about independence, they're about discovering capabilities that you never knew existed – sometimes through spectacular failure." A timely sentiment, as my stone careened off-track and into another sheet.

In BC's winter-sports scene, thousands of instructors are trained in adaptive techniques and accessibility isn't an afterthought. Adaptive curling experiences can be booked with Vancouver Curling Club from September until April each year, from \$80 per session (for up to five people).

“Adaptive sports are about finding capabilities you never knew existed

## SPORTING SUMMER

In summer, clients will find Whistler has plenty of adaptive sports to get their blood pumping. When I spoke with Jen Brown, who doubles as both a coach and communications lead for Whistler Adaptive, she explained that as technology is advancing, so too is the availability of new accessible sports.

To complement the three adaptive-friendly mountain bike trails at Whistler Mountain Bike Park, trail signs and ratings are being updated to support disabled riders. New trails include the 0.6-mile South Coaster Adaptive Trail, a section of Alice Lake Provincial Park in Squamish, and the Flashback 1

trail along the Cheakamus River, which was widened in 2023 to 1.2 metres so non-standard cycles, such as hand-bikes and wheelchair cycles, can be used.

Whistler Adaptive also offers 'trail rider' hiking sessions – where coaches make alpine hiking available to all levels of ability – along with adaptive paddleboarding, kayaking and canoeing, launching from purpose-built pontoons for support.

## INDIGENOUS INSIGHT

Whistler lies across the ancestral homes of two of Canada's First Nations, the Squamish and Lil'wat. For a break from mountain sports, the wheelchair-accessible Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre offers visitors a fascinating insight into their story and explores their connection to the mighty landscape around Whistler.

During summer, a guided step-free walk on gravel paths through the nearby temperate

### What TO ASK

What specific accessibility or mobility requirements do you have?

What previous adventure travel experience do you have?

What activities do you enjoy most?

What is your level of comfort for physical exertion?

What accessibility requirements will you need at the hotel and for transport between activities?



rainforest is included in the ticket price, with Squamish and Lil'wat guides pointing out flora and fauna that ancestral First Nations peoples used for food and medicine.

In winter, visitors can enjoy a traditional welcome song, a short film and hourly guided tours of the permanent exhibits. As I pored over them, my Indigenous guide told me of the legendary Thunderbird that sits atop The Black Tusk mountain; its wings are said to flap thunder, its eyes blazing lightning.

Back on Whistler Mountain, I reached the bottom of Upper Whiskey Jack run, full of adrenaline and laughing with elation and liberation. A door had been opened to a world that, 30 years ago, was closed to me. Destinations with adaptive activities such as these are not just a change of scenery, but venues where the shackles of limitation can be loosened and, in some cases, removed. These experiences can be truly life-changing. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**Crystal Ski Holidays** sells a seven-night stay at Blackcomb Springs Suites in Whistler from £1,301 per person on a self-catering basis, based on two sharing a balcony studio. Includes transfers and flights departing December 8. [crystalski.co.uk](http://crystalski.co.uk)

**Premier Holidays** offers a seven-night Vancouver and Whistler Spring Adventure from £1,599 per person, based on two sharing. Includes room-only accommodation in three-star hotels in Vancouver and Whistler, a day pass for the Peak 2 Peak gondola 360 experience, a treetop canopy walk, transfers from Vancouver to Whistler and Air Canada flights from Heathrow departing May 13, 2026. [premierholidays.co.uk](http://premierholidays.co.uk)



Writer Matt Dennis enjoys the slopes



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