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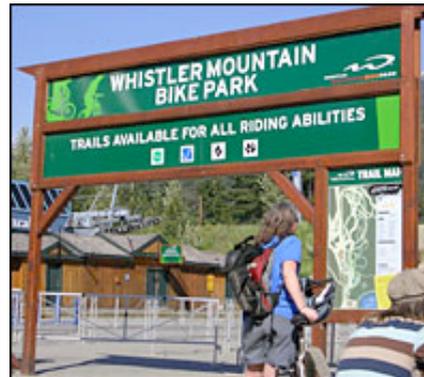
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Discover the new meaning of "downhill" at Whistler Bike Park

By *Lori Hinton*

Special to NWsource

When most people refer to great "downhill" and thousands of vertical feet at Whistler, B.C., images of snow-swept slopes, skiing and snowboarding come to mind. But come springtime, downhill has an entirely different meaning here — especially to hardcore mountain bikers.



Whistler Bike Park chair lift entrance.

Now, in its seventh year of operation, Whistler is home to North America's largest chairlift-accessed, freeride downhill mountain-bike park from May through October, and it's growing in size and popularity every season (quickly becoming as well-known for its bike park as it is for its snow park).

Riders use the same incredibly steep Canadian Rocky terrain as skiers to get the most out of gravity, and riders even follow the same trail rating system (with green runs being easiest, blues being intermediate and double black diamond meaning "expert only"). But heading downhill on two wheels also requires storm trooper-like body armor including full face helmets, elbow and knee pads, and gloves, not to mention good bike-handling skills and a dose of adrenaline. Featuring a mix of tree sections, twisty "old school" single tracks, rock drops, root gardens, wall rides and jumps, these trails challenge even the most experienced riders.

But the beauty of the park, in addition to the jagged peaks, old growth firs and an occasional black bear, is the growing range of riding options for all ages and



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abilities. While the park continues to expand up top with more pure downhill terrain (including steep single track sections, jumps, table tops and step-ups for die-hard pros), the lower park is also increasing in size and popularity with a new group of riders.

Sure, the downhill dudes who built the scene still rule the mountain. But each year, more and more feminine ponytails are seen popping out of helmets, and entire mom, dad and kid combos are now seen lingering in lift lines and winding down twisty trails.

In fact, to help introduce new riders to the sport, Whistler Blackcomb plans in 2005 to add a new lift-accessed section at the base of Blackcomb called the Magic Park, purpose-built for beginners and families. And the rental shops are prepared to outfit anyone with gear.



Scott Matual and Wesley Meyer encourage wee Henry Meyer (age 4).



Riding the pine's a good thing at Whistler Bike Park.

Similar to snow sports, downhill riding requires some mandatory equipment (like a beefy bike and full face helmet), but there are also highly recommended extras (like plenty of pads and chest protectors). So, for riders who have yet to invest in the goods, rentals are ideal (as long as you don't mind dropping a few loonies and toonies).

Downhill bike rentals generally run around \$70 Canadian for a half-day and \$100 for a full-day (youth bikes go for about half that). Safety gear (body armor, pads and helmets) easily adds on another \$20. Park passes are \$41 per day for adults, \$36 for youth and \$21 for kids (age 10-12), and the Magic Park day pass is a flat \$10 fee per person, or \$30 for the whole family. To save some dough, decide how long you want to ride, pre-pay for lift tickets online and check for package deals. (Rumor is, certain Bellingham bike shops can hook you up on your way north.)

And if you feel you need some guidance before suiting up and bombing down the mountain, another way to give downhill a go is with Whistler bike camps such as the [Spokeswoman Bike Camp](#) for ladies, [Richie Schley's Freeride Camp](#) and [Summer Gravity Camp](#), all taught by expert riders. So if you're up for some downhill, Whistler Bike Park awaits.

If downhill simply isn't your deal, don't worry about being bored at Whistler. Mountain biking is just the tip of iceberg in this scenic mecca for outdoor fun. Hike into the wild backcountry or take a dip in the pristine alpine lakes. Make a splash with whitewater rafting or sail through the tree tops on a zip-line tour. World-class golfing, fishing and spring skiing are also available, as well as a



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virtually endless supply of dining and party options. Hit the village for open-air cafés and shopping by day (with a stop at many a gal's favorite soap store, Lush). And quench your thirst for nightlife in the wild Whistler bar and club scene by night. For overnight accommodations, visit www.whistlerblackcomb.com.



Whistler Village is the hub for pre and apres bike fun.

Don't forget to bring your passport for crossing the border. The five-hour trip from Seattle becomes much longer if you have to pull a U-ie at the Peace Arch to retrieve appropriate ID.

Lori Hinton is a free-lance writer based in West Seattle.

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