



by glowing a luxurious bright blue from deep within.

We remain at the mercy of *immaqa*, a Greenlandic term for wild weather, nevertheless; when the ship's weather stations promise fresh ice and snow, Captain Garcia – mindful of the adage that "A ship in the harbour is safe, but that's not what ships are for" – opts to leave the safety of the fjord and head along the remote Blossville Coast, the wind whistling, the sleet sleeting, the occasional growler – a small chunk of floating ice – crunching noisily below us.

All elegant life goes on inside Le Charcot, a veritable *haute bohème* of it: there are afternoon servings of pavlova, macarons and French Kaviar caviar, and a cocktail of the day that includes The Explorer (tequila, mango juice, lime and ginger).

There are salsa classes, dance evenings and musicians playing Bach on piano and bossa nova on guitar. There are 300 contemporary artworks and 123 suites and staterooms including the 115-square-metre Shipowner's Suite, with its butler, dining room and terrace with jacuzzi, its resident's initials embroidered onto pillow slips.

"But the real show," Captain Garcia tells us often, "is outside."

This may, at a push, include our polar plunge, which we do off an ice shelf into minus 2-degree water, within view of an applauding promenade deck, for a buzz that lasts into evening. Or kayaking through the narrow channels of an ice and snow forest, the only noise the whoosh of our paddles as we pass shapes sculpted by the elements, previously unseen by human eyes.

But it's the entertainment provided by the Arctic itself, unfolding organically, spontaneously, that gets us double-taking: a sighting of a rare beaked whale, the curving back of a huge fin whale, and a pod of orcas, diving and leaping and flashing their white undersides. In the skies, northern fulmars, the gull-like petrels that spend most of their lives in the open ocean, survey the pole, taking it all in.

Then of course, there is the ice, which we have learnt can be fast, shelf or drift; white, grey or blue; freshwater (from snow melts) as well as seawater. That ice can manifest as crystals, ripples or in pancake shapes; as icebergs calved from glaciers or in thick impenetrable sheets (causing the captain to swivel Le Charcot's azipods and reverse).

Continuing along the remote Blossville Coast, our path eased by Charcot's route-scouting helicopter, we sail in pack ice: smaller pieces of ice driven together into a large mass.

It's easy to spend hours in a sort of meditative wonder, absorbed by the sparkle of the snow. The shapes that loom out of the fog. The telescoped iridescence of the sun as it ducks behind a frosted horizon. The silhouette of the ship as it moves across ice that roils, stands still or after watching, gives up its secrets.

"There are flowers in the ice, but you have to look with your heart," says the captain, back on stage, to a chorus of sighs.

There are also bear pawprints in the snow – easy to spot in the soft powder when, after lookouts have been stationed and the all-clear called, we leave the ship to stretch our legs. The tracks, bigger than our boots, head away, padding off into the white until unseen, a portal to a world we'll drift to sleep dreaming about.

That is, until another tannoy announcement wakes us in the wee hours. "Mesdames et messieurs, my dear guests, there is a bear..." **L&L**

The writer travelled as a guest of Ponant.

TRAVEL CANADA



Cold comforts

Carrie LaFrenz visits Whistler's newest luxury lodge.

Wedge Mountain Lodge & Spa is ideal for large groups wanting a refined stay close to the ski resort of Whistler-Blackcomb.

Snowboard with an Olympian for the day or heli-ski in the back country. Then retreat to your private villa for a sauna or spa under the stars while your chef prepares dinner. Sound nice?

It's on tap at Wedge Mountain Lodge & Spa, a new 1114-square-metre luxury property 10 minutes north of Whistler in Canadian British Columbia.

I'm here late in the winter ski season – it's April 9, yet it snowed all last night. Fresh powder is everywhere as I meet Olympic snowboarder Darren Chalmers at the base of Whistler Mountain. You wouldn't know it's been the resort's worst snow season since 1993.

"These days, there is better snow making, so the groomed runs are still awesome," Chalmers says. "But on big powder days in the trees, Whistler is where you want to be."

Chalmers competed in the 1998 Nagano and 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics in the giant slalom. With 30 years' riding at the dual mountain resort of Whistler-Blackcomb, he is the best private guide any day of the week.

Skiing or riding with an Olympian is just one of many activities Wedge Mountain Lodge concierge can arrange for guests. I also sign up for an exhilarating 3½-hour snowmobiling tour in the forest with Canadian Wilderness Adventures.

For decades, Australians have flocked to Whistler, famed for its powder dumps and lively après-ski vibes. At the turn of the century, it was known as Alta Lake, but prospectors began calling it Whistler due to the sound made by marmots living among the rocks. The dual-mountain resort is now owned by Vail Resorts, which also owns Australia's Perisher and Falls Creek/Hotham.

Around town, when I mention Wedge Mountain Lodge, there is plenty of curiosity: some people have not heard of it, others say they hear it is impressive. And they are right.

The three-storey lodge is on the site of an old granite quarry, tucked away from the hustle of Whistler village. The wow factor begins in the foyer with its large climate-controlled wine room showcased behind a glass wall. Guests can grab a champagne bottle, but otherwise the room's contents are an additional cost.

Up to 20 adults and six children under 12 can be accommodated in 10 spacious en-suite bedrooms with blonde-oak floors and neutral furnishings. Staff are always moving about in the background tending the fire, making coffees and cocktails – pre-empting your needs. Guests have a driver and van available 24/7, and on day one, Black Tie Ski Rentals comes to fit your rental equipment.

The lodge is owned by English natives, husband and wife duo Keltie and Dan Holdsworth, and his sister Anna. Local

entrepreneur and developer Ian Doddington is a fourth partner.

It cost \$CA12 million (\$13.2 million) to build – no easy task through the pandemic years – and Keltie admits she took on more of the interior design work than planned, along with engineer Dan.

Keltie grew up one of nine children and loved the chaos of a big family, so she wanted to create a space where big gatherings could occur easily. "We focused on lovely soft textiles," says Keltie. "Robes and Freedom Moses sandals are in each room, which also have individual heat and air-conditioners and heated floors."

Hitting the slopes is not your thing, you don't need to leave the house to have a good time. There's a gym, massage room, reading and relaxation areas, movie theatre, games room, sauna and steam rooms, swimming pool and cold plunge. You can even do yoga looking out towards the mountains.

Dining options are plentiful in Whistler, but the private chef option, at additional cost, is worth it at least once. While you hunker down by the fire with a cocktail, in-house chef Bill Grimshaw can whip up a baked shokupan (Japanese milk bread) followed by seared scallops with

miso mirin and green pea and wasabi purée. Or a simply delicious – and fun – cheese fondue.

The prospect of spending a white Christmas in exclusive accommodation is so appealing, that even with the peak rate of \$CA28,000 a night, next Christmas is already booked out. **L&L**

The writer was a guest of Wedge Mountain Lodge & Spa.



Above: The writer with Olympian snowboarder Darren Chalmers. Left: Owners Ian Doddington (left), Dan and Keltie Holdsworth, and Anna Holdsworth. Below: Spacious living quarters.

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Need to know

Getting there Whistler/Blackcomb is two hours' drive from Vancouver.

Rates Wedge Mountain Lodge & Spa starts at \$CA6250 (\$6900) a night in the spring and autumn low seasons.

Inclusions European-style breakfast with barista services; pantry stocked with essentials; champagne sabering in the wine cellar; a driver and van on call.

Exclusions Lunch, après and dinner.

Extra Skiing with an Olympian costs \$CA1249 a day in peak season, which is slightly more than the price of a full-day private lesson.

Contact wedgemountainlodge.com

