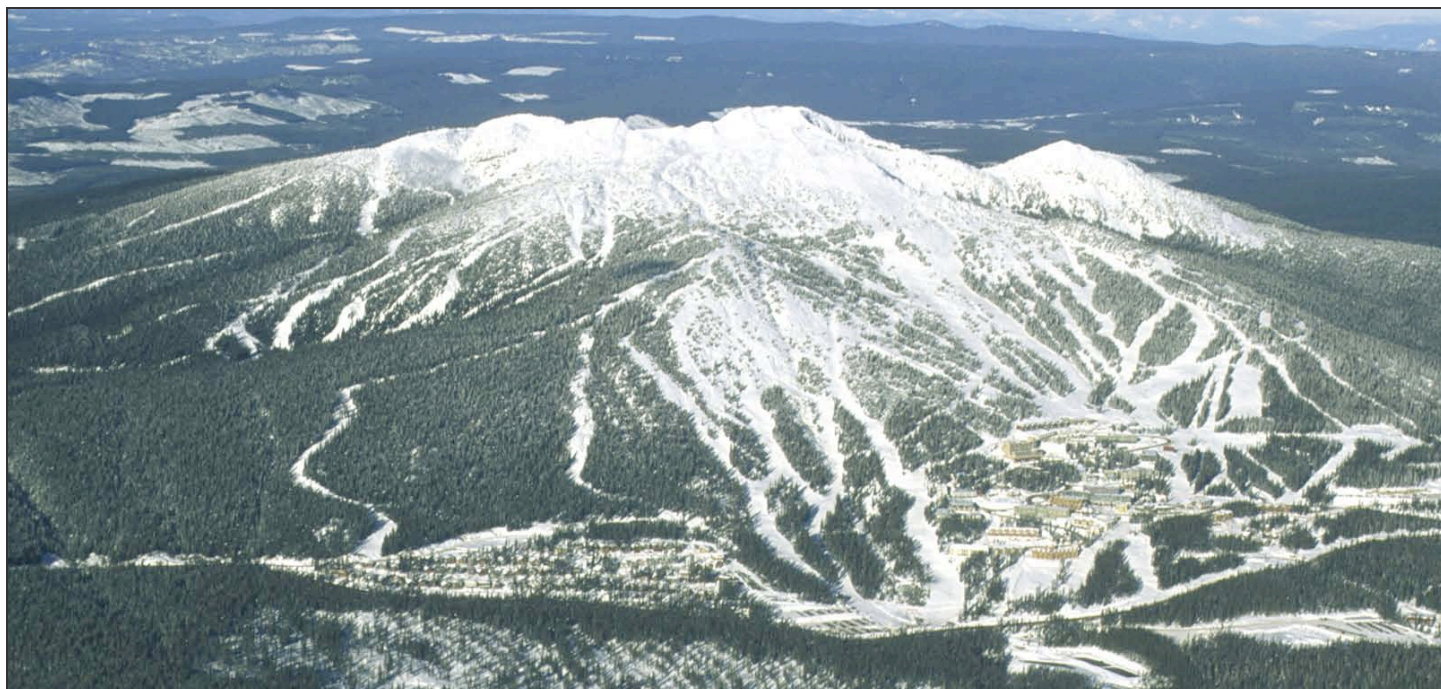


Big White Expansion Unveiled

A homespun community and a proposed expansion could make Big White the next smart buy.

by Ken Castle, Contributor, SKI Magazine



A winter weekend at Big White resembles a multicultural block party. The snow is cold and bone dry at British Columbia's second-largest ski resort, and a warm community spirit flows—aided, no doubt, by the ample supply of Okanagan Valley wines and Canadian beers. When the lifts close at Big White, the welcome mats roll out. Stroll through almost any neighborhood, and you'll likely find a family hosting dinner for neighbors or an all-comers poker game.

Aussie-owned Big White is still largely unknown to American skiers. But with 16 lifts, 118 runs and 2,765 acres of skiable—largely cruisable—terrain (nearly as much as Steamboat, Colo.), the area is quickly attracting an international cast of residents and regulars. Australian lifties help guests—many from Italy, Germany and Great Britain—onto the chairs with a lively “G'day.

“To us, the magic of Big White is the diversity of the people who come here,” says Renee Wasylyk, a 30-something transplanted Californian from Orange County who, with her husband, Jason, built a 3,000-square-foot ski house here a year ago. With a full-time home 45 minutes down the hill in Kelowna, the Wasylyks and their three children spend most winter weekends at their mountain hideaway. “The community is amazing,” Renee says. “Sit in a hot tub, and someone will strike up a conversation with you. Next thing you

know, you're being invited to dinner.”

Like the people, the architecture in Big White is diverse. The ski area “just sort of grew organically over the past 25 years,” says local builder Blue Griffiths, a one-time African safari guide who is now developing High Forest, a project of prefabricated log cabins imported from Finland. Another area developer with a colorful past, Christopher Sherriff, spent six years in the British Army, fought in the first Gulf War and worked for the United Nations and NATO before finding his way to Big White. Now, he's unveiling The Edge, a single-family home community that's, well, edgy. Its narrow three- and four-story houses have 25-foot picture windows capped by exaggerated roof overhangs.

The houses here aren't what you'd expect in a destination ski resort, and that reveals something about Big White. The Schumann family, the resort's owners, aren't what you'd expect, either. Unlike many corporate resort owners, the Schumanns foster an entrepreneurial approach, eschewing large-scale developers in favor of small builders with big ideas. Thus the residential community is a patchwork of condos, townhouses, cabins and luxury homes that run the gamut of shapes, sizes and themes. One common denominator, though, is easy access to the ski trails. Many are ski-in/ski-out.

Big White's low profile is about to change. Last summer construction began on what will be the tallest ski resort hotel in North America—the 17-story Chateau Blanc, rising from what was once a parking lot. Scheduled to open by 2010, the hotel will include 600 guest rooms, a convention center, multiple restaurants and bars and a casino. Local property owner Ralph Berezan—whose company, Berezan Management Co., is based near Vancouver—is backing the \$200 million development.

The hotel will be the third of three resort “nodes,” as Paul Plocktis, vice president of resort development at Big White, explains. The first is the original village, where most of the restaurants, bars and shops are located. The second is Happy Valley, with a skating rink, children's snow play area and more restaurants. The three nodes are connected by lifts, making vehicle travel unnecessary and—it is hoped—creating a sense of discovery and variety.

The construction at Big White looks to be outpacing many other destination resorts, and the real-estate boom could soon be matched by an equally ambitious skiing expansion, tentatively called East Peak. According to Plocktis, the resort is about to unveil a master plan that proposes the addition of 2,000 acres of intermedi-

ate and advanced terrain on leased provincial land, with construction of the first lift on East Peak to begin in 2010. Plus, the plan makes room for a second base, another residential community and even a golf course. Plocktis notes that the expansion of Kelowna International Airport—which will accommodate direct flights from Europe—makes Big White's growth initiatives viable. The area can absorb the additional skiers and still keep the skiing experience uncrowded, he says.

According to Gary Turner, with Royal LePage Big White Property Group, there's plenty of inventory for prospective buyers. “People can find virtually anything their finances can support, from under \$100,000 to over \$1 million,” he says. “What you would pay for a fractional at Whistler gets you a wholly owned unit here.”

Big White doesn't have Whistler's nightlife and amenities, but it does offer families plenty of room to roam in a friendly community. Turn your kids loose? No worries, mate.

SNAPSHOT: Big White, B.C.

Population: 250 full-time residents, 2,100 residents in winter. The nearest city, Kelowna, 45 minutes away, has a population of 180,000.

Median single-family home price (August 2008): \$545,000 Canadian

Annual taxes on median single family home: Approximately \$3,000

Number of properties sold August 2007 TO August 2008: 125

Access: Kelowna International Airport, 35 miles away, with direct flights from Seattle and seasonal service from several international destinations

NEW DEVELOPMENTS:

Chateau Blanc: 17-story, full-service luxury hotel under construction. Ownership opportunities—including condominiums—are possible. Info: 604-882-0808

The Edge: Architecture inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright embellishes 25 single-family homes with 25-foot floor-to-ceiling windows, butterfly roof lines, elevators and “living zones,” i.e., living/dining zone, activity zone, privacy zone and sleep zone. Info: solido-group.com

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