

Retreat locations: Five of B.C.'s best

By Susan Van Dyke

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Choosing a geographic location for your firm's retreat is not a simple task. The decision gets even harder if you're choosing a spot in British Columbia.

Getting away from the office will keep distractions at bay and ensure your firm members are immersed and productive, so a retreat is useful. Sprinkle in some fitness, leisure activities, sightseeing, and some great cuisine, and your retreat experience will be complete.

Here are five suggested locations that can accommodate a firm numbering 20 to 900, are easily accessible, offer a variety of extracurricular activities and provide a magnificent backdrop to your retreat.

Vancouver

Vancouver is a dynamic, multicultural city set in a spectacular natural environment. It consistently rates among the top 10 meeting and convention destinations year after year. Vancouver will host the 2010 Olympic & Paralympic Winter Games, so stake out your hotel while you're here.

With quick and easy access to a number of great locations including Whistler, the Canadian Rockies, Victoria, Vancouver Island, a personal vacation could easily follow your retreat.

Catering to any interest throughout all four seasons, your firm will enjoy outdoor adventures, gourmet meals, live entertainment, sporting events, theatre, outstanding sights and great attractions. Outdoor activities between November and April may necessitate rain gear -- otherwise, spring, summer and early fall are beautiful seasons here.

Give your firm their bearings of Vancouver with a bird's eye perspective. The Grouse Mountain gondola will take you to the peak overlooking Vancouver for a breath-taking mountaintop view. The mountain is open all year for unique dining experiences or meetings and is a 15-minute drive from downtown.

Prefer the water perspective? Step onto a harbour cruise and enjoy a narrated tour of the inner harbour, a luncheon cruise through a secluded mountain fjord, or an excursion to tranquil Bowen Island. If you're pinched for time, hold an on-board meeting en route to a private BBQ or picnic.

On land, you have a boatload of dining choices. Cuisine in Vancouver rivals the best in the world. Bridges Restaurant at Granville Island offers great seafood and views. It's also a short stroll to the world-renowned Vancouver Theatresports where improvisational comedy will have you howling with laughter.

The Fish House Restaurant, nestled in the spectacular gardens and forests of Stanley Park, boasts panoramic views of English Bay. Their award-winning wine list makes tastings, led by their expert wine director, a unique and special event. Dinners here – for up to 250 people – are also excellent. Its website is very helpful in planning your event (see resources list for the link).

Waterside dining in the heart of Yaletown, a trendy part of downtown, is exceptionally lovely at Provence Marinaside. The warm ambiance, fresh local seafood, extensive wine list and beautiful views make dining here a fully sensory experience.

The Vancouver golfing season lasts at least eight months of the year, the longest season in Canada. Tee off from a multitude of courses located within the city or a one-hour drive from downtown. But, be forewarned: the spectacular scenery may throw you off your game.

For something more stimulating, get your heart rate going with a walk across the swaying planks of The Capilano Suspension Bridge, a 15-minute drive from downtown. Here you'll be surrounded by a 300-year-old west coast rainforest and cedar-scented air. Breathtaking.

Or consider the nearby Treetops Stroll. Get a squirrel's eye view of a thriving coastal forest, as you venture from one magnificent Douglas fir tree to another via a series of elevated suspension bridges, high above the forest floor.

The award-winning Vancouver Aquarium is where some of the city's most memorable corporate events are held. For instance, "Breakfast with the Whales" is a unique way to start the day, and you won't need a towel. You'll enjoy a buffet-style breakfast while viewing more than 7,000 species of sea life. The galleries are available for meetings, including a boardroom that backs on to the beluga-whale tank. Cool.

Mid- and large-sized firms should book their hotel early. Peak months (June-September) are busy here. Whether you choose a service-oriented boutique hotel such as the Wedgewood Hotel or the Metropolitan Hotel Vancouver or a large chain hotel -- the Fairmont Waterfront hotel, Four Seasons Hotel Vancouver or Hyatt Regency Vancouver are all excellent choices -- you can be within walking distance of most attractions. Sheila Beveridge of Portfolio Conference Planning and Event Management suggests, "If you

need a few break-out rooms for your retreat, it's best to book with a large hotel. Otherwise a firm may find it awkward to find these smaller spaces in conference centres." For customized retreat planning, Portfolio Conference Planning and Event Management operate on a fee basis – no commissions or mark-ups.

Most conference facilities -- including the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue (their Asia Pacific Room is where you'd expect to see the United Nations meet), the Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre, or the Art Gallery Rotunda -- are within walking distance from downtown hotels.

Whistler

The excitement will build as you take in the scenery traveling up the Sea to Sky Highway from Vancouver to Whistler Mountain (about two hours). Charter a comfortable coach, hire a tour guide and use some travel time to set the stage for an extraordinary retreat while gazing out your window in awe. Novices to this winding highway should avoid driving it themselves at night or during wintry conditions. A train and float plane will also get you there in comfort.

Whether you arrive amid snow or sun, there's plenty to do with your spare time. Mountain biking, golfing (choose from one of four championship courses), rafting, canoeing, bungee jumping, hiking, zipping (thrill seekers, read on), heli-touring, and of course, skiing (November to August) to name a few. Zipping is sure to give you a thrill of a lifetime. Zipline Ecotour guides help you dangle from a series of five zipline cables spanning more than ½ mile through Whistler's ancient forests.

To make Whistler even more appealing, consider the many festivals and events, restaurants and the variety of hotels and resorts. Incidentally, 9,000 hotel rooms are already reserved between Whistler and Vancouver for Olympic support staff and VIPs. Book your hotel now for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games (February 12 - 28, 2010)!

There are several hotels of varying sizes and locations from which to choose. The new Four Seasons Resort Whistler, opened in June 2004, is a special property. The signature brand of Four Seasons luxury is ever-present, and its Whistler property has a touch of alpine charm. This resort offers unique semi-private dining options – including one on manicured grass in its beautiful courtyard during the warm weather. Gather around the outdoor fire pit for aperitifs, after dinner cocktails or even s'mores. Its spa, fitness centre, slope-side ski concierge (complete with boot warmers) will keep everyone recalling this retreat for years. Meeting space is designed for up to 350 people. So, a firm of 250-350 people will take over the resort – wow! Guest rooms are gorgeous, and you'll bounce out of bed, ready to enjoy genuinely cheerful Four Seasons hospitality.

Another great choice is the award-winning Fairmont Chateau Whistler. Situated at the base of Blackcomb Mountain, the Chateau Whistler accommodates small and large firms beautifully. Meeting and guest rooms are lovely, and the health club and fitness centre will inspire you to sweat. Book the "Canadian Wine Discovery" one-hour seminar or consider the "Wild for Bears" three-hour 4x4 tour of local bear dens, daybeds and

feeding sites (mid-May to end of October). The Chateau Whistler has preferred tee times on its golf course and discounted rates for guests.

The Westin Resort & Spa is warm and inviting, and another large award-totting resort. Located at the foot of Whistler Mountain, the Westin can accommodate a whopping 900 people in its largest ballroom. Unique among the large resorts, all the Westin rooms have kitchens. Nice for a spouse or kids in particular. If the kids tag along, The Westin Kids Club provides a great “home away from home” environment.

Smaller boutique hotels offer an intimate setting without compromising comfort. Nestled in the heart of the charming Whistler village, the Sundial Boutique Hotel and Pan Pacific Lodge are both a snowball’s throw from the Whistler and Blackcomb gondolas. Meetings will need to be held elsewhere but, conveniently, the impressive Telus Conference Centre is just a three-minute meander away.

Tourism Whistler, a resource for all things Whistler, is poised to get you started and help make your retreat memorable. Large firms should book early to get the whole firm accommodated in one location; Whistler fever is spreading among corporate groups and space can get limited. If you’ve never visited Whistler, get on the next flight or bus. Just go.

For the complete story CBA members can access it at

www.cba.org/cba/practicelink/bwl/bcretreats.aspx

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