

Times Colonist (Victoria)

Home for the holiday: Swapping houses paved the way for a Victoria family's Vancouver ski vacation

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Cypress Mountain / Staying at a ski resort can be expensive. But you can cut the cost of skiing at places such as Cypress Mountain, above, by exchanging homes with someone who lives within an easy driving distance of the slopes.

Perhaps you've resigned to stay at home this Christmas season: you'd like to go skiing or snowboarding, but you've left it too late to find accommodation on the slopes or you simply can't afford to ski over the holidays when resorts command peak prices.

A couple of years ago our family was pining for snow and wanted to make the best use of our daughter's school vacation, but didn't want to spend the big bucks involved in staying at a resort over the Christmas holidays. Day-tripping to Mount Washington wasn't very appealing. "Where," I wondered, "could we easily drive to a ski resort and not have to pay to stay there?" That's when I remembered some friends on the mainland boasting about how they could leave their home in West Vancouver and be at the top of Mount Cypress in 15 minutes. The solution: a home-exchange in North or West Vancouver.

Most home-exchangers wouldn't think of arranging an exchange within their own country let alone within their own time zone, but I figured, why not? A home exchange holiday doesn't have to be somewhere abroad or for a long period of time to make it worthwhile. So in late November two years ago, I got on the Internet and started searching house exchange websites. I sent e-mails to about a dozen people in North and West Vancouver, asking if they would be interested in doing an exchange from Boxing Day to New Year's Day. Within a week, we received two offers, both from families in North Vancouver who were pleased at the prospect of visiting Victoria for a week. We chose to exchange with Janet and Rob, since their home was close to the Capilano River, with easy access to trails in case we wanted to do some hiking. We each agreed to leave our Christmas trees and decorations up for the other family to enjoy.

Our fairly last-minute plan worked out as if it had been in the mill for months. Our home-away-from-home was conveniently located about half-way between Mount Seymour and Grouse Mountain, about a 10- to 15-minute drive from either. Cypress Mountain was 20 minutes away. Janet and Rob's home was about the same size as our own and with the same amenities, but instead of an inefficient wood-burning fireplace, it had two gas fireplaces that could warm us up after a day on the slopes.

Over the course of the week we leisurely explored each mountain, starting with the biggest, Cypress Mountain. Having never lived in Vancouver we were

surprised to find such a large resort so close to a city: little wonder it has been chosen to host the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic snowboard and freestyle skiing competitions. How come we hadn't thought of coming here before, we asked ourselves, as we glided down run after snowy run and enjoyed the spectacular views over downtown Vancouver, English Bay, Georgia Strait and Howe Sound.

Billing itself as Vancouver's premier winter playground, it was easy to see why Cypress is so popular: 38 runs covered by three quad chairlifts and two double chairlifts make for lots of skiing and short line ups.

But while Cypress is the highest of the North Shore mountains with the most runs and the most lifts, it was the cross country skiing there that we relished the most. According to the resort's website, Cypress is the most popular cross-country ski destination in Canada and can accommodate more than 2,000 skiers a day. It was certainly popular the first day we attempted to ski there and got turned back because they had run out of rentals. A couple of days later we returned and discovered why the locals -- and visitors -- flock here: 19 kilometres of groomed trails meander through an evergreen forest and over frozen lakes covered for the winter in blankets of snow.

When your toes get cold or your stomach starts to rumble, the rustic but lovely Hollyburn Lodge offers a warm hearth in front of an open fireplace and hot soups and sandwiches. Outside the lodge, whiskey jacks fly down from the trees to nibble breadcrumbs from your hand. In the fading sun of a December afternoon, it is truly an enchanting place.

We were tempted to return to Cypress and Hollyburn Lodge on the last day of 2003 for their annual New Year's Eve barbecue, but decided instead to save that special night for Grouse Mountain. Cypress would likely have been delightful, but Grouse was out of this world.

We walked onto the Skyride in the parking lot at the base of Grouse Mountain in a slight drizzle late in the afternoon. Eight minutes later and 850 metres higher, we emerged into a winter wonderland with the biggest snowflakes I have ever seen. Nearby-by, people were skating to music on an outdoor pond in a scene that would have made Norman Rockwell reach for his paints. Beyond the skaters, a sleigh load of people came into view through the heavily falling snow. Others were coming and going from the Peak Chalet, the imposing stone and fir lodge with

towering yellow cedar columns that is Grouse's dining and entertainment centre.

We could have stood and watched, entranced by the beauty and busyness of it all. Instead, we snapped on our downhill skis and took off for the closest chairlift. As evening progressed the snow kept coming. After a couple hours of skiing, my husband and daughter decided to check out the skating pond while I stayed on the only slope that was still skiable in the nearly white-out conditions. When I joined them later, I laughed to watch them shoveling snow off the pond while they skated; it was coming down so hard the Zamboni couldn't keep up.

An abundance of snow is something that especially applies to Mount Seymour. While smaller than Cypress and Grouse, Seymour gets three or four times as much snow due to its eastern exposure. In a typical year, this amounts to 55 feet of snow! Seymour tries to cater to families and seems to succeed. The day we went, lots of families with young children weren't bothering to ski, but simply enjoyed the great tobogganing hill.

Our house-exchange in Vancouver worked so well, that we decided to do another one last year. After casting around for opportunities, we decided to exchange with Christine and Ron, a couple of retired teachers at Miracle Beach, about 45 minutes from Mt. Washington. It was on this exchange that we particularly appreciated the value of such an arrangement. While others were desperately trying to decide whether to cancel their accommodation on the mountain in the face of snow conditions that were going from bad to worse, we barely gave it a second thought. Since we weren't paying and could relax in a comfortable house with big windows looking over the Strait of Georgia, there was no question that we would go. So while the skiing was disappointing, the house exchange still worked beautifully. One day, instead of skiing we borrowed our hosts' bicycles and cycled to Miracle Beach Provincial Park.

And this year? Well, the ground is already white on the north shore mountains and at Mount Washington. I think I'll check out the latest house exchange listings.

SKI FEVER

- Getting the itch to go skiing? Cypress and Grouse Mountain are both open already this season, and Mount Seymour is scheduled to open Dec. 3.

- Here on the Island, Mount Washington near Courtenay is scheduled to open Dec. 9, and Mount Cain, just north of Campbell River near Woss, is scheduled to open in December as well.