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Extreme summer fun in Whistler

Crankworx mountain bike-fest turns hot Whistler impossibly cool



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This year's Crankworx (Aug. 10-19) is expected to draw almost 140,000 people to Whistler. A popular concert series rounds out the extreme mountain-biking events. BLAKE JORGENSEN PHOTO/Special to QMI Agency

For a village that was little more than a chairlift and a garbage dump a few decades ago, Whistler, B.C., sure has a way of drawing a crowd.

First with its Telus World Ski and Snowboard Festival every April, then with a little thing called the Olympics (February 2010), and now with a growing bike festival called Crankworx -- sports fans just keep coming to Whistler.

The mountain town 125 km north of Vancouver is prepping for up to 138,000 of those fans to roll in Aug. 10-19 for the ninth-annual Crankworx Whistler, the world's largest free-ride mountain bike (MTB for short) festival.

Perhaps fans are lured by a rare chance to witness 1,400-plus go-for-broke athletes as they roll, crash, and sometimes burn, on what have morphed into some of Canada's craziest MTB courses.

Slopestyle's FMB World Champion Brandon Semenuk will be there, along with Anne Caro Chausdin, a French downhill rider who was crowned Queen of Crankworx last summer.

Others might be lured by the fest's weirdo event names such as the UnOfficial Whip Off World Championships and the Fat Tire Crit (more on both later).

But we bet most show up in possibly Canada's hippest community simply to soak in its summer cool. During an event like Crankworx, Whistler has free outdoor rock concerts, impromptu parties in the village, an artsy action-photographers' showdown -- even a cheese-rolling contest down the rough, rock-strewn ski slopes of nearby Blackcomb.

"Crankworx has become the most popular time outside of Christmas to visit Whistler," festival GM Darren Kinnaird says.

"It's exposed more people to the area's wide variety of mountain biking. When people around the world think of mountain biking they think Whistler."

Here's a taste of what's to come for Crankworx 2012:

-- New on the schedule is the aforementioned UnOfficial Whip Off World Championships on Aug. 14. Take note, there are no rules to this event, and the biggest, most stylish "whip" will take home a \$1,000 cash prize. What's a whip? In MTB World it's a revered move inspired by motocross, where the rider "airs" and throws the rear of the bike to one side. Apparently, getting the bike flat, sideways and dragged out earns major style points.

"This is one event that is truly for anyone," says event organizer Sven Martin. Then he adds in true hip-Whistler-speak: "Well, anyone who has style."

-- Crankworx organizers grandly call the annual Fat Tire Crit "the nearest thing Whistler has to a Running of the Bulls."

That's because crowds press themselves along the edges of a cobble-stoned circuit to watch MTBers wind enmasse through a series of sharp chicanes. No, there are no snorting bulls. But there are plenty of spills. The event, taking place Aug. 10, is always a crowd pleaser.

-- Those who've skied Whistler will at least recognize the name of the Garbanzo DH, a downhill MTB race Aug. 12 that starts at Whistler Mountain's Garbanzo lift hut and descends 12 km down a root- and rock-covered track. It follows, in part, skiing's World Cup Dave Murray Downhill -- some of Whistler Mountain Bike Park's most aggressive terrain.

-- Darren Kinnaird says Whistler's Heckler's Rock is the spot to watch the annual Jeep Canadian Open Downhill on Aug. 19.

"As the name suggests," he says, "heckling is the name of the game and no one is spared."

-- The biggest event of the festival is the Red Bull Joyride Aug. 17-18, which Kinnaird boldly calls "the Super Bowl of slopestyle." There's \$25,000 in the pot for the first place prize.

-- All this mojo and still, there's little doubt a good portion of that 130,000-strong Crankworx crowd won't take much notice of the shirtless, dirt-covered MTBers. These will be the ones who show up simply to take in the free Bud Light Crankworx Concert Series Aug. 10-11. On this year's bill: Arkells, Young Empires, Jets Overhead and Said the Whale.

-- Others will arrive Aug. 15 to partake in the Deep Summer Photo Challenge -- an artsy slideshow competition in Whistler Olympic Plaza that pits five pro outdoor photographers against one another. Tame-sounding stuff compared to the bike action, for sure, but Whistlerites take their art very seriously.

-- Then again, maybe, just maybe, these hot summer crowds will descend on Whistler during Crankworx to watch giant cheese wheels roll and rumble their unpredictable way down Blackcomb Mountain. It's all part of the annual Canadian Cheese Rolling Festival at Crankworx, and it's happening Aug. 18.

Sound cheesy? Impossible. Nothing uncool ever happens in Whistler.

NEED TO KNOW

The Crankworx Whistler runs Aug. 10-19. If you can't attend you can still watch the action as festival webcasts and videos appear online. See crankworx.com.

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