

# First Nations get Olympic boost in B.C.

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SPECIAL TO TORONTO SUN -- At any given moment it's rain, sun and snow here in Whistler, B.C., during the 2010 Olympic Winter Games, but no one inside the local Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre (SLCC) seems to notice. Men, women and children from all parts of the world sit transfixed as Aboriginal peoples dance, sing and tell their stories -- vivid, rousing performances that capture the hearts, minds and respect of cheering audiences.

It's all in a day's work at this Centre, a new and strikingly beautiful cedar-and-glass structure set amid Whistler's tall trees, snow and mountains. It has been built as an Olympic legacy to showcase the heritage and culture of Canada's First Nations.

The SLCC is an opportunity for Olympic watchers and future ski resort visitors to realize the connection the Lil'wat and Squamish First Nations have to Whistler. Squamish territory is to the south and Lil'wat territory is to the north; the two meet at Whistler, and have peacefully shared the land long before they shared it with skiers.

The museum is a hugely open space filled with the art, clothing, transportation and tools these two nations have used for centuries. There's a massive hand-carved cedar canoe dug out from a single tree, ceremonial masks, weavings and house poles -- tall, carved structures that resemble totems. There's a traditional Squamish longhouse and a Lil'wat pit house. Gigantic, hand-carved cedar spindles whirl overhead. When they're not dancing and singing, guides wander about in traditional regalia, banging their drums, greeting visitors and answering questions.

"We lead a red cedar life," explains Gerald Paul, a cultural interpreter and member of the Squamish nation, as he shows off a 12-metre canoe dug from a single cedar tree. "The red cedar tree cradles our babies and our elders, we use it for clothing, transportation and shelter. Nothing from it is wasted."

## DEERHIDE DRUM

Paul takes his own deerhide drum down from a nearby wall and proudly explains it was made for him by his grandfather. Paul -- an artist -- has decorated the drum himself, creating a design that incorporates the human eye. "It is meant to remind us to keep ourselves humble," he says. "Someone is always watching."

Whistler is not the only B.C. community to benefit from Olympic exposure to First Nations communities. "A number of other cultural centres have also opened in the last few years," says Paula Amos, spokesperson for B.C.'s Aboriginal Tourism Association. Those centres include the Haida Heritage Centre at Haida Gwaii along B.C.'s northwest coast, as well as a museum attached to the St. Eugene Resort near Cranbrook, BC.

Amos says dozens of galleries featuring First Nations art have popped up across Vancouver, as well as several tourism projects throughout B.C. that offer everything from canoe trips to seminars in First Nations art and culture. During the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, Vancouver's Pan Pacific Hotel has created an Aboriginal village called Kla-how-ya, meaning "welcome from the heart" in Chinook, a traditional trading language among First Nations. The exposition features aboriginal fashions, traditional dancing, cedar bark weaving, birch bark chewing, moose hide tufting, jewelry making, carving and, of course, storytelling.

Vancouver 2010 marks the first time Aboriginal peoples have fully participated in an Olympic Games right from the bidding process. "The experience has rejuvenated our culture," says Amos. "It's not just about revitalizing our economy, it's about having the opportunity to share and celebrate our traditions." Adds Amos: "British Columbia now leads North America in Aboriginal cultural tourism."

For more information on Whistler's Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre (SLCC), visit [slcc.com](http://slcc.com). For more information on British Columbia's Aboriginal tourism, visit [aboriginalbc.com](http://aboriginalbc.com).

LORI KNOWLES IS COVERING THE OLYMPICS LIVE FROM VANCOUVER AND WHISTLER FOR THE TORONTO