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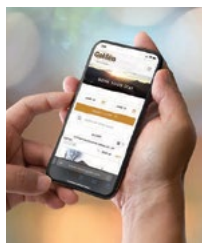


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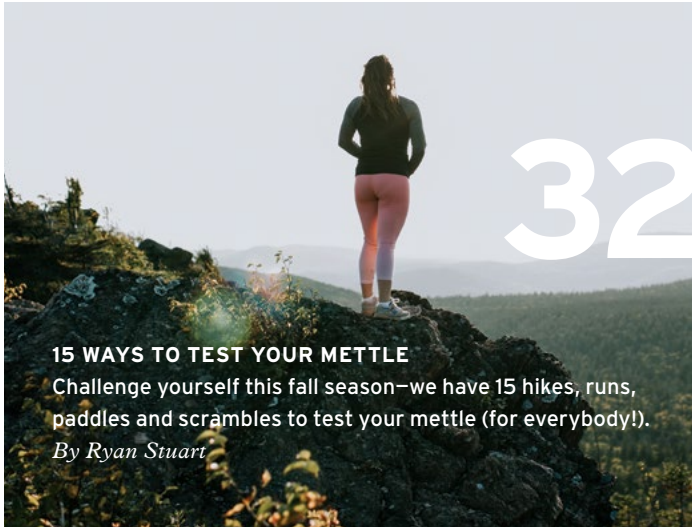
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FEATURES



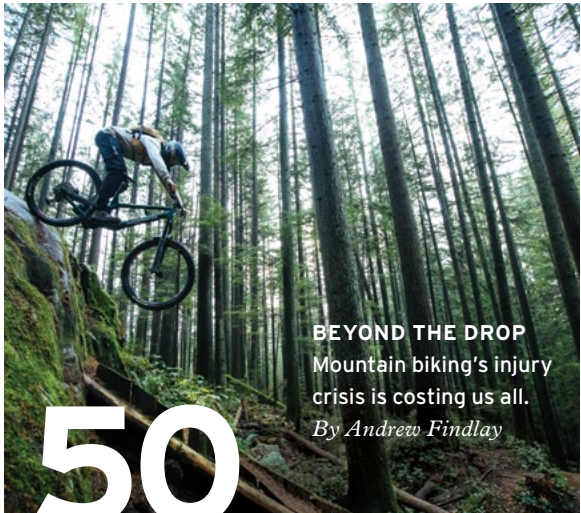
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BY DAVID WEBB

@davidebwebb



CHALLENGE ACCEPTED!

Last summer, I climbed Sky Pilot Mountain, near Squamish, British Columbia. As a full day adventure, which involved a steep forested trail, glacier travel and even Class 4 and 5 scrambling—it was a big challenge. (You can read about it at explore-mag.com.)

At the time, it had been my toughest day-hike since my kids were born, five years earlier. I credit a lot of shorter hikes, cycling, SUPing and dog walking to my ability to complete the trek. But I was absolutely *gassed* after that day. In fact, I likely failed to enjoy certain parts as much as I could have—I was focusing more on putting one foot in front of the other.

So, when the chance to trek in Patagonian Chile came up, a few months later, I knew to get the most from the experience I'd need to supplement my regular activities with some dedicated training. Squats. Lunges. Planks. Walks and hikes with 20 kilos of dead weight in my backpack. I was going to not simply *complete* the 73-kilometre, four-day hike. I would *revel* in it!

If you want to see how that worked out—just flip to page 58. And if you want to challenge yourself in a similar fashion this fall, well, you've opened the right issue. Because alongside our usual seasonal hiking content, we've stuffed this issue with a selection of inspiration to help you test your mettle. Start with the so-named feature on page 32—but also check out

Jim Baird and Frank Wolf's epic paddling journeys on pages 28 and 42, respectively. Or the amazing feats of Leanna Carriere and Timm Döbert on page 22. Or use Kevin Callan's tips on page 16 to do an overnight trek. Or strive to be a buff woodcutter, like Nicole Coenen, on page 14.

Since "challenge" means different things to different people, we varied the levels throughout. We're inclusive here at Explore—we don't want anyone to feel their individual "mettle" isn't enough. (Not sure where you fit in? Take our quiz, page 64.)

After my Patagonia trek, I vowed to keep the momentum going. I wanted to ensure that I kept my strength, cardio and mobility in a place I was happy with and that allowed me to participate in all outdoor pursuits with vigour, not exhaustion. I even bought a sport watch and built a workout plan. Yep, I'm one of those Garmin guys now, with the tan lines to prove it. The results? This past summer has been one of my most active in years.

It's a mindset I don't plan on changing. But as I age, achieving my fitness and adventure goals requires a bit more preparation than before. However, I'm not slowing down. Thanks to my training, while I was one of the older people in my Patagonian hiking cohort, I consistently arrived at camp each night before most. That was a challenge I was proud to rise to.

How will you test your mettle this fall? ✕

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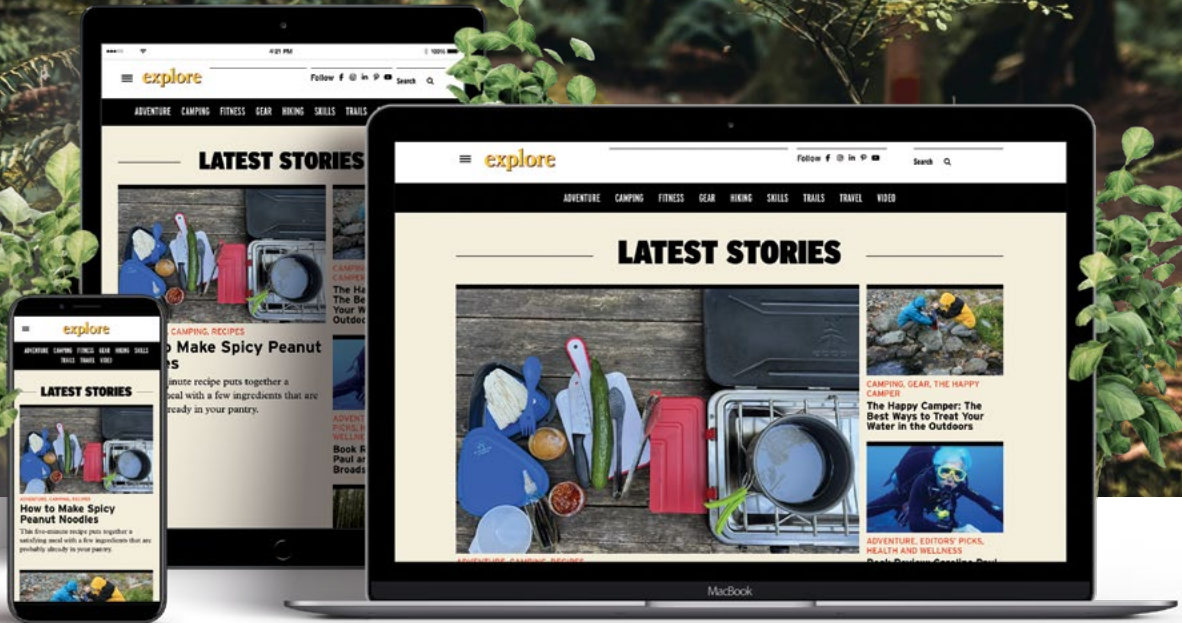


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THE LOW DOWN



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HAMILTON, ONTARIO

The Waterfall Capital of the World splashes with flowing cascades to discover

BY KENDRA SLAGTER

When most people think of Hamilton, Ontario, the first things that come to mind are usually smokestacks and steel. Once the industrial heartbeat of Canada, Hamilton earned nicknames like “Steel City” and “The Hammer” for its gritty reputation and working-class roots. But look a little closer, and you’ll find a city that’s far more dynamic than its tough exterior suggests.

Today, Hamilton is a place where creativity thrives and community runs deep. My hometown is home to bustling farmers’ markets, intimate concert venues and galleries tucked into old factory buildings. It’s the kind of city where baristas know your order, local art lines the walls of busy breweries and neighbours turn sidewalks into front-porch gatherings.

But perhaps Hamilton’s most surprising quality lies just beyond those vibrant streets: more than 100 waterfalls are tucked within city limits and forested ravines. Thanks to its position along the Niagara Escarpment, Hamilton has rightfully earned the title of Waterfall Capital of the World.

For me, these waterfalls are more than just a fun local claim—they’re woven into the fabric of my life. Growing up in Hamilton, Sundays often meant post-church hikes, dress shoes swapped for

sneakers in the car. My brothers and I raced down dirt trails, chasing whatever surprise might be waiting around the corner. Twenty years later, I set off to revisit a few of my favourite waterfalls—not to discover something new, but to remember myself as the kid who listened for magic in the trees.

First: Webster’s Falls, located in the Spencer Gorge Conservation Area. It’s the biggest waterfall in the region and arguably the most iconic—the kind people drive in from out of town to see. For me, it’s simply home.



The falls are just a brief stroll from the parking lot along a wide gravel path that curves gently towards the lookout. As I draw nearer, the sound of cascading water grows louder—until finally, the view opens up: a dramatic fan of water spills 22 metres into the gorge below. The air here carries a cool dampness that clings to my skin and settles into my clothes in the most welcome way.

Standing here now, time collapses. I recall walking this trail with my brothers, our parents calling after us to stay back from the edge. We’d stand there wide-eyed, breathing in the mist, taking in the sheer force of nature.

Though the park is well maintained, the falls itself still holds a wildness that I witnessed as a child. I linger, letting the memory and the moment braid themselves together for just a little longer.

With nostalgia settling in and sunlight warming the gravel path, I make my way back to the car and down the road to Tew’s Falls. A quick 500 metres from the parking lot and tucked into a wooded gorge, this slender ribbon of water drops 41 metres into a lush ravine framed by thick forest. The trees hum with insects and the air smells of moss and stone—familiar scents that remind me of simpler times and the raw wonder of my natural surroundings.

I stroll along the well-worn path toward Dundas Peak, where the escarpment drops away and the treetops blend seamlessly with the city below, houses peeking through the foliage. Even with the city in sight, the world feels calm here.

A short drive takes me to Smokey Hollow Falls—also known as Grindstone Falls, Waterdown Falls or Great Falls, depending on who you ask. Though it’s a beloved and



well-trodden trail, it's noticeably quieter than the two previous waterfalls. The web of trails and thick forest makes the area feel more immersed in nature—less polished, more wild.

From the viewing platform, the water spills about 10 metres into a rocky creek bed before twisting through the woods. But the real magic begins when I follow the trail down. A wooden staircase leads into the forest, where the path narrows and roots twist like ropes across the dirt. The Grindstone Creek rushes beside me, cutting through mossy boulders and carving a channel into the escarpment.

I remember standing barefoot on a smooth boulder, nearly swallowed by the river's reach, staring at the foam collecting in quiet pockets of still water between the rocks. My brothers flipped over stones nearby, hunting for salamanders. We could spend hours there, climbing over logs and wading in calmer waters.

The deeper I go, the more the trail invites me to slow down. The forest arches overhead like a cathedral and ferns spill over the trail's edge. Fallen trees span the creek like bridges from a fairytale. These

trails are a favourite of mine for good reason—easy to access, rich in natural beauty and just far enough off the beaten path to feel like a little escape from the city.

After completing a seven-kilometre route, I loop back up the trail, passing Smokey Hollow one last time. Despite the full parking lot behind me, I find myself alone on the platform, looking down from the top of the falls. I breathe deep, lungs full of warm, humid air, and let out a long sigh. I feel incredibly lucky to live where I do and to call these trails home.

It might seem strange that a city known for steel and grit can also be home to delicate, wild spaces like these. But that's exactly what makes Hamilton so special. It's a place of contrasts—where industry and wilderness exist side by side.

Hamilton's trails are home. They've seen me grow up, wander off and return again and again to reconnect with myself. They're reminders of where I come from and proof that some of the most beautiful places are the ones you already know—found in the quiet memories and moments that shape you. ✕



BRING THE RV!

Offering a mix of urban access and natural wonders, Hamilton has it all for RVers. Visit the Fifty Point Conservation Area (conservationhamilton.ca), with its lakefront sites, electrical hookups and pristine hiking trails.

Check out Emerald Lake Trailer Resort (emeraldlake.ca) if you're travelling with your family, featuring a water park with something for everyone and family-friendly amenities. After a peaceful, nature-forward camping experience? Head to Valens Lake Conservation Area (conservationhamilton.ca), with access to swimming, boating, fishing and miles of scenic hiking trails. Most sites are open seasonally and book up fast—especially in summer—so reserve early.

Want to explore more of Hamilton's waterfalls and trails? Here are a few more routes:

FELKER'S FALLS TO DEVIL'S PUNCHBOWL

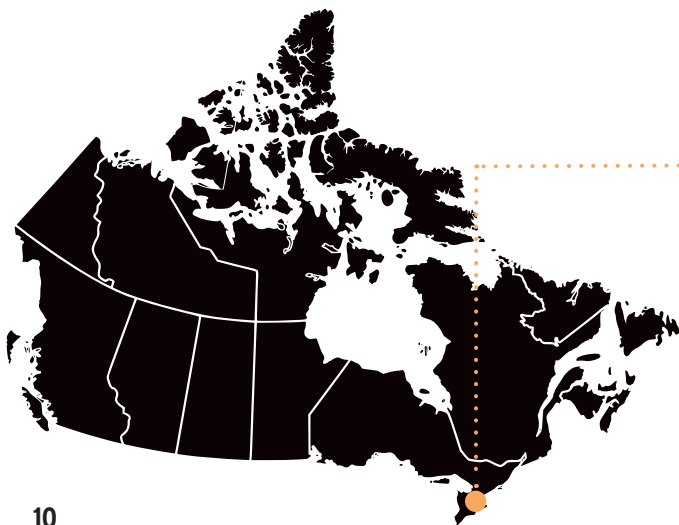
Trail Type: Out and back
Distance: 9 kilometres
Parking: Free
Waterfalls: Felker's Falls (22-metre terraced ribbon waterfall); Devil's Punchbowl (33.8-metre ribbon waterfall)

ALBION FALLS & BUTTERMILK FALLS VIA BRUCE TRAIL

Trail type: Loop
Distance: 7.7 kilometres
Parking: Free
Waterfalls: Albion Falls (19-metre cascade waterfall); Buttermilk Falls (23-metre terraced ribbon waterfall)

TIFFANY FALLS TO CANTERBURY FALLS

Trail type: Out and back
Distance: 5.1 kilometres (10 kilometres if made into a loop)
Parking: Paid parking (very limited)
Waterfalls: Tiffany Falls (21-metre cascade waterfall); Sherman Falls (17-metre curtain waterfall); Canterbury Falls (9.5-metre terraced ribbon cascade)



If You Go

Hamilton is easily accessible from across Canada! Fly into John C. Munro Hamilton International Airport or take a scenic drive—at less than two hours southwest of Toronto, it's a popular road trip destination. Learn more at tourismhamilton.com.

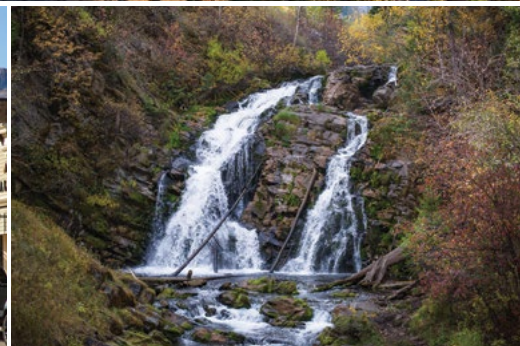
Hamilton is located on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe nations.



Fall For Fernie's Boldest Season



Photo: Matt Glastonbury



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NEWS

DWR'S HOLY GRAIL

The hardest part of making an environmentally friendly water-repellent coating isn't about water at all

BY DAVID WEBB

In the past few years, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances—better known as PFAS—have gone from obscurity to mainstream discourse in the outdoor industry. Known colloquially as “forever chemicals,” PFAS has been listed as a “chemical of concern” by Health Canada, and many regions, particularly countries in the European Union and U.S. states like California, are quickly moving towards partial or outright bans on their usage.

The roughly 5,000 known chemical compounds that utilize PFAS are remarkably effective at resisting water, stains, grease and oil. As such, PFAS has long been a key ingredient in the durable water repellent (DWR) coatings found on much of our outdoor gear. In short, it's been the stuff that made water bead off your new jacket.

But PFAS is bad for humans and the environment, with links to cancers, reproductive issues and impaired liver, kidney and thyroid function, among other health concerns. Consequently, over the past decade, many outdoor brands have moved toward using PFAS-free DWR.

Two years ago, scientists in Norway conducted a study that found unacceptable levels of PFAS in almost one-third of Norwegian children. It's no surprise, then, that the country is headed towards a full ban—and equally unsurprising that Norwegian company Helly Hansen has been phasing out PFAS for more than 10 years, even developing a face-fabric called Lifa Infinity Pro that doesn't require DWR at all.

“The transition from PFAS was kickstarted in Norway pretty early,” says Øyvind Vedvik, Helly Hansen's vice president for ski, sail and research and development, at the company's head office in Oslo. “All of our ski gear and outdoor gear have been [PFAS-free] for a number of years.”

Sounds like a good news story all around. But is it?

Pro can't resist oil the same way PFAS chemicals did. Why?

It has to do with the way PFAS lowers the surface tension of any material it's applied to. When something has a low surface tension, it repels any liquid with a higher surface tension. PFAS-based DWR was able to produce a surface tension as low as seven millinewtons per metre (mN/m). This means substances like oil

(20 to 30 mN/m) and water (approximately 70 mN/m) simply bounced off PFAS-based DWR.

Modern PFAS-free DWR, and hydrophobic fabric like Lifa Infinity Pro, creates a surface tension just a bit too high to be effective against oil—but will shed water just as well as before. Until oil comes in and spoils the fun.

So, what does this mean for the Canadian outdoors person? Well, in short, it means that as we transition fully to PFAS-free alternatives, you'll be required to wash your garments regularly with recommended

cleaners, like Nikwax or Grangers, in order to maintain performance, explains Yousef. And that means washing much more often—several times per season—and reapplying DWR once per year (depending on usage).

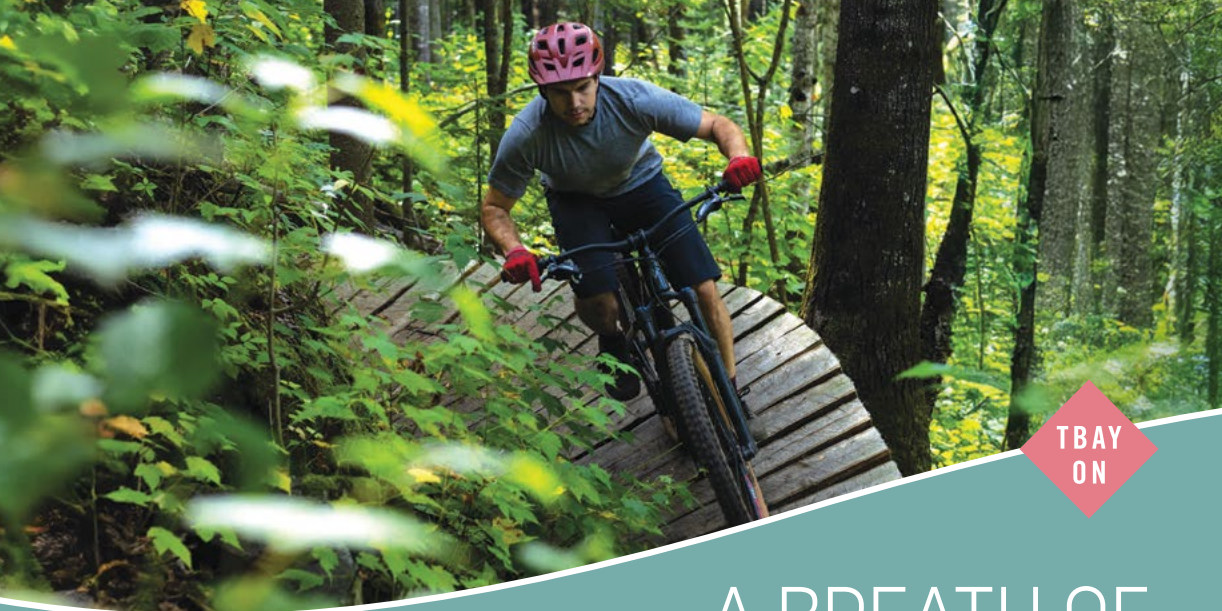
Will PFAS-free DWR ever achieve oil resistance? Vedvik explains that they're seeing positive results with things like silicon, as well as polymers like polypropylene, but ultimately oil resistance remains this avenue of chemistry's Holy Grail.

“If you have a recipe for it,” he jokes, “let me know.” ✕



“We do understand that the PFAS-free chemistry has some limitations... The main problem with PFAS-free is that it has no resistance to oil,” further explains Issam Yousef, research and development manager at Helly Hansen.

No oil resistance means that as you touch your gear—particularly around the zippers, jacket cuffs, etc.—oil from your skin absorbs into the fabric, turning it from hydrophobic to hydrophilic. That is, it goes from repelling water to absorbing it. Old-school PFAS was oil-resistant. And even Helly Hansen's DWR-free Lifa Infinity



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ROUNDUP TOP TIPS AND TRICKS FOR WOODCHOPPING

Chop your way to a better campfire this fall

BY NICOLE COENEN

Hi, I'm Nicole, an outdoor enthusiast, self-proclaimed hermit, amateur blacksmith and woodworker and author of *Axe in Hand*. But some folks know me better as "Hey! Aren't you that girl who chops wood on social media?" Yep, that's me.

I stumbled upon woodchopping and outdoor niches on social media and amassed over five million followers across my channels. It's been a wild journey, and one that I'm learning more about every day.

I volunteer with a community woodchopping group in my small Southern Gulf Island town in British Columbia. We source local trees, buck and chop them into firewood, sell that firewood to community members and donate the revenue back into local community initiatives. This group is where a lot of my firewood and woodchopping knowledge comes from as well as from immersing myself in the lifestyle of rural living.

Like most outdoor skills, when you learn directly from the land and the community that lives and works on it, you end up with an extra level of depth, the kind that comes from real hands-on experience, shared stories and quiet observations.

Working with the cycles and gifts of nature and tuning into the natural world around you give you so much insight and knowledge that is right there for you to access—it just takes some patience and practice. Sometimes we can't always be tuned in due to urban lifestyles and obligations. But when you get a chance to escape to the outdoors, even just for a

weekend trip to your friend's cabin or a night at a campground, you can reconnect with those quieter rhythms of life: wielding an axe to split some wood, stacking a pile to season for colder nights and creating warmth that can be shared.

Before you start dramatically splitting rounds like one of those obnoxious and dramatic social media woodchoppers (such as @nicole_coenen), start by making your workspace efficient and effective:



Choose Solid Ground with Good Drainage

Soft, mushy ground absorbs the force of your swing, bounces your logs around and turns into mud, which is not ideal when you want to keep your wood dry.

Find Your Chopping Block

Your chopping block should be:

- A sturdy, wide round of wood that sits flat on the ground
- Low enough (below your knee) for medium-to-large rounds, or a bit higher for kindling.
- Stable enough to absorb impact. You can test it by hitting it with the butt of your axe or a sledgehammer.

Check Your Clearance

Look overhead for branches and give yourself at least one metre of clearance all around to avoid stray flying wood.

Once you've got a good spot and a good block for chopping, let's get swinging!

How To Chop

Step one: Measure your distance: Place the wood on your chopping block. Set the axe where you want to strike, then step back until your hands are where they'll be at the end of the swing.

Step two: Get into stance: Step your feet shoulder-width apart with a slight bend in the knees. Hold your dominant hand near the axe head and your other hand near the knob, at the end of the handle. Tip: Keep your stance wide! Narrow stances put your shins in danger and throw off your balance.



Step three: Chop: Lift the axe overhead, as far back as you can maintain control and keep it straight (think: keeping it in line with your nose). Then, with your dominant hand, propel the axe forward and let it fall naturally with gravity. Your dominant hand slides down to meet your lower hand as the axe comes down. Lower your body into a slight squat to let the axe follow through into the block.

Read The Wood

Honing your chopping skills requires knowledge of the wood you're chopping.

Wet vs. Dry: Typically, freshly felled "wet wood" also known as "green wood" is harder to chop. Wood that is dry or "seasoned" has less than 20 percent moisture content and is usually easier to chop. Moisture in the wood adds weight and holds the wood fibres together. When wood dries out, the cell walls shrink and create more cracks, weakening the structure. There are exceptions to this, depending on the species of tree. Trees like cedar and alder have low density, relatively straight grain and split apart easily, even with a high moisture level. Trees like arbutus have very high-density grain and are typically very twisted. This makes the fibres lock together when dried out. So, as an exception, these can be easier to split when fresh.

Look for cracks or "rays" in dry rounds. These are natural weak spots where your axe will bite better. The natural cracks will give you a spot to target and tell you how the wood wants to split.

Do 'knot' aim at knots directly. It'll take a whole lot of unnecessary effort, and

your axe is more likely to get stuck, which adds frustration. Instead, chop parallel to the knot. This breaks apart the wood fibres around it and loosens it up.

Chop Better

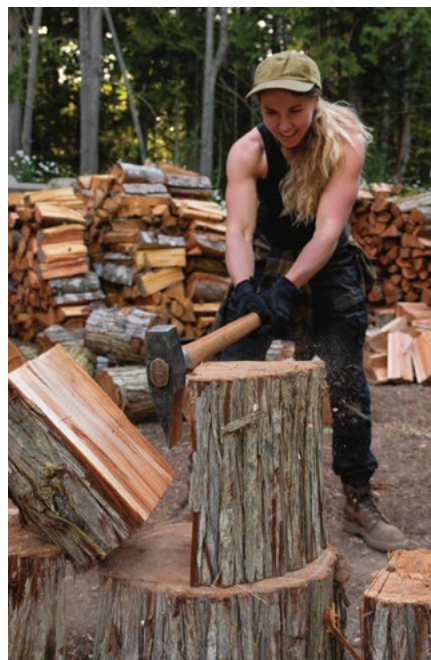
The Flick: Add this small movement to your swing to help your blade make a cut in the wood, instead of just hammering down. Just before the blade hits, "flick" your wrist up slightly so the axe bites into the wood.

Use your whole body: Start with your hips low. As you swing, squeeze your glutes to thrust your hips forward, adding power. Drop back into your squat on the follow-through.

Tippy toes: Raise onto your toes at the peak of your swing for extra height; plant back on your heels as you lower into your squat for balance.

As they say, "firewood warms you twice." It's a full-body workout.

Woodchopping isn't just about making firewood; it's a timeless skill that connects us to the land, community and history. Modern tools are amazing (and appreciated by tired backs!), but there's something deeply satisfying about splitting a stack of firewood with your power. So, find your block, clear your space and get to know the trees that keep you warm on cold nights. And if you'd like to dive deeper into the craft, the stories and the small details that turn chopping wood into an art, pick up my book, *Axe in Hand*. ✕



Common Problems & Fixes

Axe keeps getting stuck?

- **Check your axe head:** Narrow blades dive deep and could get stuck in dense wood, especially if your axe is extra sharp. A sharp axe isn't always the best thing to use. Sometimes, an axe that is razor sharp gets stuck more often in dense and knotted wood because it bites deeper without really pushing it apart. Wider heads like splitting mauls help push wood apart and don't get stuck as easily.
- **Use a bit of oil or WD-40** on the blade to keep it lubricated.



Big rounds?

Try these two chopping patterns:

- **Start with outside cuts:** Chop off chunks from the edge and work your way in. Wood on the outside (in the sapwood) tends to be less strong than wood closer to the heartwood (the centre of the log). By chopping around the outside and working your way in, you'll break apart the wood fibres and loosen up the overall structure of the piece, making every chop a bit easier.
- **Centre split:** you'll need a lot of power for the initial swings along the centre line. Try to look for any natural cracks or "rays" in the wood to give you an idea of weak spots. Keep chopping a line down the centre, in the middle, at the top, near the bottom and repeat. After the centre is split, the wood structure is looser and the rest of the wood will chop more easily.

THE LOW DOWN



THE HAPPY CAMPER LIGHTEN UP!

How backpackers can lighten their load

BY KEVIN CALLAN

I am generally a canoeist by heart. I perceive a backpacking trail to be one of the longest portages ever created. That said, however, I truly enjoy walking in the woods. There is something elemental about it, especially in the fall.

So, every autumn season, I pull out my backcountry hiking gear and figure out how I can make my pack just a little bit lighter. I go beyond my earlier days of packing silly, useless items, such as a latrine shovel or a separate wardrobe for each day.

I've also left all that ultralight weirdness behind. No longer do I remove the cardboard roll from the centre of the toilet paper, cut off the end of my toothbrush or trim down the edges of my topographic maps. I'm somewhere in between. I want to dance along the trail during the day, but I also want my dram of whisky and a cozy camp chair while watching the evening sunset.

The Zen of Tent Packing

When it comes to tents, your choice is simple. Aim for the smallest and lightest you can afford and spend more quality time huddled under a rain tarp during foul weather. Zpacks' Duplex Lite Tent (\$918; zpacks.com) is one of the most ultralight two-person shelters out there. I chose the slightly cheaper, but heavier, NEMO Hornet Elite OSMO™ Ultralight Backpacking Tent (\$849.99; nemoequipment.com).

Whatever the tent, how to pack it is crucial. There are the “rollers” and then there are the “crammers.” The rollers painstakingly lay out the tent, fold it in thirds, place the poles at one end and then roll everything up in a cigar shape. The difficulty always remains in getting the darn thing to fit in the storage bag and in your pack. To eliminate this hassle, and the

bulk of it all, use two separate compression sacks (stuff sacks with straps on the side that cinch down to reduce the size). Place the fly in one and the tent body in the other. This will decrease volume considerably, no matter the tent size.

Sleeping Bags: Down vs. Synthetic

The debate over down and synthetic sleeping bags is a very complex one. One backpacker will have you convinced that down (the soft plumage of a goose or duck) is lighter, warmer and can be compressed far more than any synthetic bag. Another backpacker will strongly be against using down and much prefer synthetic bags, firmly stating that if you ever get a down bag wet, its insulation ability would be reduced more than 80 percent and that if a



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: iStock; Kevin Callan



synthetic bag gets wet, it retains most of its loft and continues to keep you warm.

At the end of the day, I pack a down bag. It's usually more expensive but far lighter and cozier to sleep in. I just make darn sure it doesn't get wet. Compression bags will greatly reduce the bulk of the bag as well, especially if it's a down one.

Clothes: Merino Wool Is Your Saving Grace

The amount and type of clothes needed are a little more complex during the fall season. It can be a heat wave one moment and a bone-chilling drizzly day the next. You can't help but bring an extra sweater, long-johns and a wool toque. Just remember to choose clothing with the highest possible performance-to-weight ratio. A layer of fine merino wool is a lot lighter than a fleece jacket and a lot warmer in cold and wet conditions. It also holds up to 80 percent air, an excellent way to trap body heat.

The key ingredient is that the permeable material also allows body moisture to escape, keeping you dry and toasty warm. Combine a 200-gram base-layer crewneck with a 400-gram mid-layer zip turtleneck. The combination is perfect.

Camp Kitchen

The weight of cookware can add up, especially for a large group size. The problem is that most of what you bring is essential. Items such as a camp stove, fuel and cooking pots are indispensable. There are ways to limit the weight, however. First, spend the extra money, purchase the lightest stove possible and make good use of a windscreen to reduce your fuel consumption. A top seller for lightweight backpackers is the MSR PocketRocket Deluxe (\$114.95; [mcc.ca](#)) or the Jetboil Stash Cooking System (\$288; [jetboil.com](#)).

Trangia's alcohol-fuelled Micro Cookset (from \$49; [canadianoutdoorequipment.com](#)) is amazing, weighing in just under 282 grams.

A new-age titanium pot set cuts down the weight considerably but a cheaper aluminum pot set bought at a discount store works just as well. Make sure to leave your fork at home. Each person only needs a plastic spork and a handy Swiss Army knife for eating. Scrub pads can also be left at home. They end up becoming a breeding ground for bacteria anyway. A handful of pine needles and sand works just as good and is far more sanitary. And there's no need to pack an axe. A small lightweight saw will do.

Lightweight but Tasty Meals

Food weight can really add up. But if you keep to homemade dehydrated or pre-packed recipes for at least 80 percent of your meals, you can really keep the poundage of your food down. Happy Yak's Linguini Rosa With Shrimp (\$20; [happyyak.ca](#)) is delicious, Mountain House's Pasta Primavera (\$11; [mountainhouse.com](#)) is the most filling and Nomad Nutrition's Ukrainian Borscht

(\$17; [nomadnutrition.co](#)) makes a darn tasty soup for those cold fall evenings. And they are all Canadian companies.

Creating your own dehydrated recipes can be cheaper than buying a week's supply of pre-packed meals and a lot more fun. By combining visits to the local supermarket, bulk food store and drying your own food,



some real masterpieces can be created. Take note, however, that if you're making your own meals—as strange as this may sound—don't grocery shop when you're hungry; and keep portions, like rice or noodles, down to a science. ✕

Packing Your Pack

The final and probably best advice in keeping things as light as possible is to place every item that you would normally bring along on a trip in your pack. Then weigh the pack on a good quality scale. Take everything back out and begin considering which items could be left at home or replaced by a newer, lighter version.

Take special note of all those little extras you decide to pack along. They can cause a real problem. You don't think they mean much. But when added together, all those gadgets and gizmos can really put on the pounds. Start off by multitasking. Each item should have two or more jobs. Also, limit the amount of things like sunscreen, toothpaste and bug repellent. You'll never go through it all on one trip. Stash smaller amounts in smaller containers or shop for those convenient trial packs.

Store-bought first-aid kits also tend to have lots of useless items. By making your own, you not only reduce the weight but yield a much better kit. A repair kit can be made of duct tape and one of those handy multi-tools. Paper maps can easily be replaced by your phone and the latest trail map app. And an eReader copy of *War and Peace* is much lighter than the paperback edition.





GEAR GUIDE

FALL TRENDS

The outdoor world is constantly evolving: new activities, new niches, new ideas.

To keep up, the gear and apparel must change, too

BY RYAN STUART

Not-So-Core

THE TREND: We've all seen that the outdoors are getting busier, but at the same time, the number of people who consider themselves a core or regular participant in one activity continues to fall. So does the need for specialized apparel. In their place, versatile threads are trending, especially if they look casual enough to wear anywhere.

THE GEAR: The **Vuori Aspen Shirt Jacket** is made from Polartec's Wind Pro, a super tightly weaved fleece fabric. It has a button-down shirt style, but with a super soft and cozy technical fabric that's wind-resistant, breathable and hydrophobic. It kept us toasty on a chilly hike and looked sharp when we stopped at a pub on the way home. \$170; vuoriclothing.ca



Go Faster Features

THE TREND: Light and fast has been a mantra in just about every corner of adventure for decades, lightening and minimizing just about every niche of gear in the process. The best features are now trickling down to make more moderately paced adventures a little more user-friendly.

THE GEAR: Somewhere between a hydration vest and a minimalist backpack, the **Black Diamond Pursuit 30 pack** can be used for racing through a five-day backpacking route in a single weekend. Others gravitate towards the feature-rich day pack with pockets and pouches on the shoulder straps and sides of the pack that make it easy to keep all their essentials right where they want them. \$225; blackdiamondequipment.com

A Reflection of Me

THE TREND: There are more outdoor brands than ever: for a recent ski jacket review, we identified more than 50 brands. That's good for choice but bad for a brand that's trying to get noticed. To stand out, companies are using social media and interactive storytelling to set themselves apart.

THE GEAR: Few outdoor brands have as distinct a personality as **Trew**. In a sea of black and red, their ski outerwear is more often bright and bold and their #stayTREW hashtag focuses more on who they do stuff with than what they're doing. They also have a strong renewable focus with an Afterlife department that partners with independent makers to upcycle old outerwear into limited run products like this climbing chalk bag, which reuses old fleece, rain jackets and down jackets.

From \$88; trewgear.com



Microplastics Are Everywhere

THE TREND: Scientists continue to find microplastics in places they shouldn't be, like remote alpine lakes, fruits and vegetables, and our brain tissue. Yikes. No one knows the long-term impacts of consuming tiny bits of plastic, but the precautionary principle suggests we should avoid it.

THE GEAR: Many outdoor brands continue to work on reducing their dependence on plastic and reducing shedding plastics, which mostly happens in the wash. In the meantime,

a Lifestraw Go Series water bottle

is a good way of avoiding drinking microplastics while travelling and at home. A straw-style filter inside the bottle removes bacteria, parasites, sand, dirt, cloudiness and microplastics. It doesn't require elephant-calibre suction and improves the taste of water as well. **From \$61; [lifestraw.com](https://www.lifestraw.com)**



The Outdoors Still Cares

THE TREND: Politicians may have abandoned climate goals, but in surveys, most outdoor people still expect their gear makers to care about the environment. Outdoor apparel and gear brands continue to reduce their carbon footprint and adopt more sustainable practices in general.

THE GEAR: Outdoor Research's Foray and women's Aspire jackets are the first technical apparel certified carbon-neutral by the Climate Impact Partners. The rain shells are made from 100 percent recycled fabric without any intentionally added PFAS forever chemicals. Plus, the company offsets all its North American energy usage. In the field, these jackets are tough enough for nasty weather but light enough and highly breathable (including huge side vents) for summer use. **\$340; [outdoorresearch.com](https://www.outdoorresearch.com)**

Super Shoes for Hikers

THE TREND: "Super shoes" have crushed road running records since Nike invented the category in 2016. The combination of a stiff plate and thick, bouncy foam reduces impact and propels the runner into the next stride. More recently, shoe companies have used a similar mix to increase hiking efficiency.

THE GEAR: The newest super hiker, Merrell's SpeedArc Matis Boa, adds one more trend to the mix: two Boa dials. The laces have been replaced with cables built into the upper for a more secure and easier to adjust fit. Meanwhile, sandwiched between two layers of nitrogen infused foam is a full-length nylon plate that both protects the foot and projects energy into the next stride. It's subtle but noticeable; our legs tended to feel less tired after a hike. **\$350; [merrell.com](https://www.merrell.com)**



Why Buy When You Can Rent?

THE TREND: Maybe it's because people are dabbling in activities more than diving right in. Or because gear is expensive. Whatever the reason, there are more options than ever to rent gear.

THE GEAR: While most gear rentals focus on equipment, the maker of Gore-Tex has partnered with some resort rental departments and retail stores to rent Gore-Tex jackets and pants. The ski-specific kit—Gore-Tex's premium Pro fabric with Primaloft Silver insulation in key areas for a relaxed fit—will outperform most other apparel rental options, which tend to be mediocre. **From \$60; [gore-tex.com](https://www.gore-tex.com) x**

FIRESIDE RANT



BY RYAN STUART

Can Outdoor Recreation Save Democracy?

Playfulness and passion unite to inform a political perspective

Chris Pettingill's political career started sitting in the snow and progressed to digging in the dirt. Living in Hamilton, Ontario in his thirties, he volunteered for The Chill Foundation, a program that introduced kids to snowboarding. When he moved to Squamish around 2010, he discovered he loved mountain biking, too, and started helping with the Squamish Off-Road Cycling Association, a mountain bike trail building and advocacy club. Working with SORCA led to volunteering for the Squamish Chamber of Commerce.

"I was not necessarily interested in government, but volunteering showed me that giving back could be really fun and rewarding," says Pettingill. "I started wondering, what impact could I have?"

In 2018, he won a seat on Squamish district council. He's now in his second term.

Pettingill's path to politics is not unique: there are plenty of others who came to politics via recreation clubs.

It makes sense. Volunteering is the basis of civic engagement, and advocating for an outdoor passion, whether it's mountain biking, paddling or bird watching, is, in my opinion, one of the best ways to strengthen our democracy. With political polarization wider than the Rocky Mountain Trench, playing outside just might be the key to a stable political future.

To understand why, consider psychology's self-determination theory. It says that when our basic needs are met, humans naturally strive for growth and wellbeing by trying to meet three needs: belonging, competency and autonomy. As we learn a new activity, like rock climbing, we engage with other climbers and feel like a part of the rock-climbing

community. Belonging makes us feel good, so we climb more, our skills develop, and we begin to feel more competent, which leads to a sense of autonomy and a desire to contribute to our community.

"Civic engagement is one of the main reasons humans live in groups," explains Farhad Moghimehfar, a recreation researcher and the BC Regional Innovation Chair in Tourism and Sustainable Rural Development at Vancouver Island University. "We are together so we can co-create, grow and self-actualize."



We can achieve self-determination in any passion, from knitting to gaming, but it's hardwired into playing outdoors. While volunteering for any kind of nonprofit organization increases participation in public engagement, Moghimehfar's research shows more frequent nature-based recreation is associated with significantly greater environmental advocacy and activism, volunteering, literacy and political ecological citizenship.

"In my opinion, we really learn things not from reading and hearing, but by play," explains Moghimehfar.

It's how we teach kids, but as adults we often forget to make learning playful. Except outdoors. It's one of the few places

where it's okay for us to try things, fall, get back up and laugh about it with our buddies afterwards.

Beyond motivating us to get involved, for example by joining a club, playing outside also teaches us democratic skills. We have to adhere to rules, respect other users, accept compromise and see ourselves as part of a bigger picture.

"When you go out and build trails for a day, you're part of a group making things better," says Pettingill. "Those initial first steps make you realize you can

make a difference for your family and community."

Some will follow Pettingill's route onto a board, where they might be exposed to municipal politics, and decide to give government a try for themselves. But most won't. However, as long as they care for their passion, they are still making an important contribution to democracy.

One of POW Canada's main strategies in its efforts to fight

climate change is to motivate mountain bikers, skiers, climbers and paddlers to vote. Period.

The nonprofit's efforts may already be working. Voter turnout in the 2022 BC municipal elections was consistently higher in towns known for their outdoor recreation than the 29 percent provincial average: nearly 40 percent in Squamish, 31.9 percent in the emerging northeastern playground of Tumbler Ridge and over 50 percent in the ski towns of Rossland and Fernie.

It's impossible to say that's because outdoors people are inherently more engaged. But for anyone who has a passion and cares about democracy, joining an outdoor club is a good place to start. ✕

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BY NORA O'MALLEY

Leanna Carriere & Timm Döbert

Wings of Survival: Blending elite sport, storytelling and conservation science



Leanna Carriere and Dr. Timm Döbert are planning a 30,000-kilometre cycle and packraft tour that parallels the epic journey of Whimbrels, a migrating shorebird that travels along the spine of the Americas from Alaska to Patagonia.

Their expedition, called “Wings of Survival,” marries high-performance athleticism, science and conservation in a movement centred on telling impactful stories about the outdoors—rather than just having fun outside and posting cool photos.

For Carriere, who is Canada’s first female decathlete, the wake-up call came after having her daughter, Adalynn, in 2017 when one of her endurance races in the Okanagan, BC was cancelled due to wildfires.

“[Wildfires are] just happening more and more. All these efforts we’re putting into our own health and our own passionate goals are now being affected directly by the environment,” says Carriere over FaceTime from their home in Edmonton, Alberta.

“Doing this project is a great way to speak up and advocate for nature and the places we play,” says the personal trainer and co-founder of Seven Summit Snacks. “I feel like I need to do something or at least show (Adalynn) that she can do something.”

Originally from Germany, bird expert Döbert holds a PhD in Global Change Ecology from the University of Western Australia and is a Fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society. He says by emulating the migratory flyway of Whimbrels, they’ll create a powerful story arch that highlights the phenomenally impressive fitness of the bird while creating a beautiful connection to different habitats along the route.

“It’s conservation without borders,” says Döbert. “Unless we look at the globe as a whole versus just doing national efforts, it’s going to be really challenging to address all those issues because the biodiversity crisis, global warming and pollution, those are obviously all global issues. They can’t really be solved in one nation or state.”

“ALL THESE EFFORTS WE’RE PUTTING INTO OUR OWN HEALTH AND OUR OWN PASSIONATE GOALS ARE NOW BEING AFFECTED DIRECTLY BY THE ENVIRONMENT”

Preparation and training for Wings of Survival started over five years ago. In summer 2024, the vegan-diet athletes cycled cross-Canada with support driver Bill Ault, averaging 150-kilometres per day while highlighting 30 Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) throughout their 30-day ride.

“That’s a big achievement in itself [that] without catching any illness was pretty impressive,” says Döbert.

“Eating plant-based is so good for the environment, but it’s also good for health and performance. We recovered really quickly and didn’t lose any muscle mass,” adds Carriere, sharing that nightly dinners consisted of one-pot combos of tofu or veggie links from Big Mountain Foods and a can of beans, plus rice or pasta.

In August 2025, they embarked on an 800-kilometre cycle through Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan, connecting six KBA.

“Grassland birds are one of the most threatened,” says Döbert. “Birds Canada

is very excited about this storytelling opportunity as their focus bird this year is the Chestnut-collared Longspur.”

On top of training, Döbert and Carriere are putting a lot of effort into establishing connections with local groups, cyclists and non-profits along the migratory route of the Whimbrel.

“We will have community events as we cross each country,” says Döbert. “That’s something we’re really hoping to create. It’s a safety thing, but it’s also a really great way to engage media and to tell the story.”

They hope to start the journey in June 2026 by meeting researchers up in Alaska to help fit up to five Whimbrels with little GPS devices. They’ll find their way down to the southern tip of South America over nine months to potentially reunite with the birds.

At the Darién Gap, the 97-kilometre stretch of jungle separating Panama and Columbia, they’ll ditch the bikes and get into packrafts to crossover on the Caribbean side.

Other potential challenges will be wildfires and air pollution, plus the generally volatile political climate of many countries they will journey through.

“You have to be prepared to change course on the go. It’s very hard to exactly plan right now, because in 12-months the situation could, in so many of those countries, be very different,” he says.

Their overarching goal is to connect six continents across three migratory flyways by 2030, in effort to inspire people to help protect and rewild 30 percent of the world’s land and water by 2030, falling in line with the United Nations 30 x 30 biodiversity target.

Wings of Survival is still trying to secure a support vehicle and bike sponsor.

wingsofsurvival.com x

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WILD SIDE



BY ANDREW FINDLAY

Goatworthy

In Valhalla Provincial Park, goats are butting heads with hikers

There's nothing like unzipping your tent door and getting nose-to-nose with a mountain billy goat to start your morning. That was me a few summers ago, when I woke up at the climber's campground near the base of Gimli Peak in Valhalla Provincial Park.

The billy's razor-sharp horns were hard to ignore. He gazed at me with yellow, oval-shaped eyes, as if waiting for me to get up, which is in fact exactly what he was doing. It was unnerving but also exhilarating to be so close to such a beautiful creature. He eventually retreated to a regal perch atop a nearby two-storey high boulder. From there, he could observe the dozen or so kids and nannies grazing among the four tents scattered around the campsite.

I had been forewarned. The resident mountain goats of Gimli Peak have earned a reputation for socializing with people. Most of us, if we're lucky, observe these ungulate masters of the vertical world from a distance, tiny dots of white scaling mountain sides and cliff faces with deft skill.

However, in a few popular BC provincial parks, like Valhalla north of Nelson and Cathedral Lakes near the U.S. border, southwest of Keremeos, mountain goats are descending from the heights and mingling with people. Why goats are doing it is no secret to wildlife biologists. In spring and early summer, mountain goats, especially nannies with kids, have an intense drive to acquire minerals like

potassium, phosphorous and sodium to compensate for natural deficiencies that build up over winter. They travel 40 or more kilometres over rugged mountain terrain just to reach a natural salt lick. However, opportunistic herds, like the one that basked in the morning sun around our Gimli campsite, have found a much easier and readily available source—salty human urine. It's creating a tenuous human-wildlife dynamic. Kim Poole, a Nelson-based biologist, has



studied mountain goats around BC and calls it a very unusual situation.

"Gimli is ideal mountain goat habitat. When goats see people, their normal response is to avoid them," Poole says, explaining how these alpine specialists use cliffs to stay safe. "But human urine salt seems to be a far greater draw than natural salt licks. And it's really a human problem, not a goat problem."

Weening goats off this salty supply is proving to be a wildlife conservation conundrum and public safety concern. In a place like Gimli, it would be easy for the hapless hiker to mistake these photogenic

mountain goats for tame animals. But they're not. They're wild and, though rarely, can be lethal.

In 2010, a mountain goat in Washington State's Olympic National Park gored and killed a 63-year-old hiker. Park rangers eventually tracked and killed the animal. The Olympic Mountains are not endemic goat habitat. They only got established there after humans introduced them to the area in the 1920s; an ecological experiment

with no other rationale than to grow prey for hunters. In 2021, backpackers crossing Yoho National Parks' Burgess Pass discovered a dead female grizzly. Judging from the obvious puncture wounds, park officials determined that a mountain goat killed the bear.

BC is home to half the global population of mountain goats, *Oreamnos americanus*. These shaggy, white-coated animals typically live around a dozen years. An adult billy can

weigh between 80 and 100 kilograms, as much as a black bear. With their cloven hooves, mountain goats are skilled climbers and able to balance on a spot the size of a loonie. Getting an accurate population census is time-consuming and expensive, but government biologists estimate that between 40,000 and 70,000 mountain goats range throughout BC's rugged backcountry. The provincial government considers their population stable, but mountain goats have declined in certain sub-populations in southern BC. Human disturbance is considered the biggest threat.

Over the past several years, Kim Poole



has been working with BC Parks to get a handle on movement patterns and timing of visits to the Gimli Peak campsite, which is situated in an alpine meadow below the peak's imposing south ridge. It's a beautiful place known locally by climbers as "the beach." As part of this goat project, Poole and fellow researchers loaded a tranquilizer gun and took to the air in a helicopter. They managed to tranquilize four nannies and two billies out of an estimated herd of up to 25 that are known to frequent Gimli. Once on the ground, they gave the sedated animals oxygen while taking ear and throat swabs and blood samples.

The aim is to inform a strategy for mitigating human-goat interactions. History tells us there's no easy solution. Biologists have used a variety of hazing techniques—yappy dogs, bean bag guns and rock throwing—but with limited success. In 2011, the year after euthanizing the goat that killed the unfortunate hiker, park rangers in Olympic National Park killed a second aggressive goat after attempts to haze it with a paintball gun failed.

Poole says hazing is a blunt tool that requires staff time and budget. Another option is

creating diversionary salt licks away from people. But he calls it a "band-aid solution."

"Mountain goats seem to be able to smell pee from a long way away. We need to be addressing human behaviour," Poole says.

“HUMAN URINE SALT SEEMS TO BE A FAR GREATER DRAW THAN NATURAL SALT LICKS. AND IT'S REALLY A HUMAN PROBLEM, NOT A GOAT PROBLEM.”

And changing human behaviour can be tough. Though BC Parks has signage at the Gimli trailhead forbidding dogs in the park, visitors regularly hike to Gimli with unleashed pets that can agitate resident goats. And despite best intentions, too many campers prefer to pee in the meadow rather than visit a smelly outhouse.

Kirk Safford, conservation specialist for BC Park's Kootenay/Okanagan region, is dealing with the human-goat issue in Cathedral Provincial Park.

The park straddles a mountainous zone between the dry Similkameen Valley and the wet Cascade Range not far from the BC-Washington State border. The 300

square kilometre park of lakes, forests and granite peaks is rugged. The heart of the park is easily accessed by a bus operated by Cathedral Lakes Lodge, a privately owned tourist lodge on Lake Quinescoe that was

built in 1972, four years after the park was established. Easy access makes for abundant visitors.

Over the past decade, Safford has been getting more and more reports of mountain goats hanging around campers. Goats were also getting comfortable around the lodge—too comfortable, in fact—often lying near the outdoor hot tub and the backdoor of the kitchen.

"It seems kind of weird to be telling people to use the outhouse, but that's kind of what it comes down to," Safford says with a laugh. "Ninety percent of people do the right thing. But if we can reach that 10 percent, it could make a big difference."

We are the visitors in mountain goat country and the goats will lose if this human-animal dynamic doesn't change in some of our favourite mountain parks. There's no doubt they are spectacular to see up close, but it's better for all if we watch them from afar. ✕



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GADD'S TRUTH



BY WILL GADD

Lighter, But For What?

Will Gadd looks at the trend of gear getting ever-more lightweight and asks—why?

Gear accumulation is a real problem for many outdoor enthusiasts—periodic herd reduction is essential. A few years back, I was trying to pre-emptively reduce these gear cornices—those unstable mounds that form when you repeatedly shove

candy bar chunks (from bars that had been discontinued decades ago).

The pack was an Arc'teryx, a wonder of engineering for its time. A fan-shaped area high on the pack accommodated a helmeted head, allowing you to look up; the tight stitching, even almost 20 years later, was still solid, showcasing Arc'teryx's

backpacking trip with younger kids; my main job on these trips is to carry heavy things and set them up when they don't need carrying anymore. I have much lighter modern packs, but most needed some kind of repair: a broken proprietary Fastex buckle, some fabric that needed sewing, or simply not being big enough. In fact, looking at the gear stack, the only totally serviceable large packs were a brand-new one weighing about 300 grams and the relic, at over two kilograms (plus stains).

I grew up on the “light is right” approach to backpacking and mountain sports. While others were cutting their toothbrushes in half to save weight, I used one that fit on the end of my finger—the same one I used to brush my dog's teeth. It was lighter and had interesting tastes too.

My headlamp kicks out enough light to blind a bear, lasts through the longest night (or multiple nights) and weighs maybe one-quarter of what my first headlamp did. My lightest stove today weighs about 60 grams, compared to the 600 of my first Svea. So, I love light gear, and own a lot of it. But that's the problem: with a few exceptions like my huge pack and the Svea, light gear doesn't last as long, nor can it handle as much punishment.

Heavier gear offers advantages beyond just longevity. In high-hazard environments, the ability of our gear to handle unexpected use and abuse adds a margin of safety in unexpected situations. As climbing ropes become thinner (my favourite ice climbing rope is now 8.8mm, which would have astounded me 30 years ago), the incidence of ropes cutting and failing over edges during falls has increased. Anti-cut technology has improved, but lighter and thinner is still just that—lighter and thinner. I recently did some extensive testing with aluminum and steel ice screws at Black Diamond's



unused gear onto the top shelves of your garage, threatening a late-game Jenga-style collapse—when I found an old pack. It was in the bottom layer, and the extreme heat and pressure from the packs above had warped some of the nylon, seemingly reverting it to tar sands/oil/carbon. At least, that's what I think was on the outside; it was hard to tell between the three large blood stains (elk, mine, and ... who knows?) and what looked like smashed

classic attention to detail. But it also had Fastex buckles big enough to pull trucks out of a ditch, webbing that could hold back a grizzly and fabric that seemed at least rodent-resistant, judging by the gnawed areas. The weight was measured in kilos, not grams, though it was hard to tell how much was original weight and how much had been added.

I was happy to have found the relic, as I was about to head off on a family

headquarters in Utah. Aluminum screws are far lighter, and when carrying 16 of them across 15 kilometres of snow, then up a vertical ocean of ice, that's a major advantage. However, they fail in poor ice at much lower loads because aluminum breaks while steel bends. I tend to save the aluminum screws for very long approaches and big climbs, and even then, I take extra care in placing them.

Durability matters, too. My first set of adult skis lasted five years. My awesome

“I’VE SLOWLY COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT MUCH OF THE LIGHTEST AND FASTEST GEAR IS FOR “SINGLE-SEASON” USE COMPARED TO GEAR INTENDED FOR “NEAR-LIFETIME” USE”

carbon touring skis will be in the landfill or part of a fence long before five years is up. The aluminum mountain bike I ride around town is 15 years old, and while its geometry seems roughly equivalent to a 1980s disco ball, it still works well, even if most of the paint is missing. The fancy carbon frames in my garage barely survive a good crash, much less 10 years.

Some things are both far lighter and far better, from my headlamp to the latest

Dyneema pack I’ve been testing (the other working pack in my ‘pack cornice’). And if we cut both the weight of our gear and the amount of it we bring, we end up with less margin for error and fewer reserves to deal with miscalculations. We’ve seen a huge rise in the number of “Fastest Known Time” mountain rescues in the Rockies in the last five years. I love backcountry running with a light windbreaker and a few gels, but there’s very little margin for error if something goes wrong.

A friend of mine who works in SAR recently told me they’re handling a very high volume of calls for help, not due to accidents but simple fatigue, where the victim didn’t have the resources to stay warm and dry in the backcountry, or because a light but critical piece of gear like a ski binding failed and the skier didn’t have the gear to rig a fix. Too heavy to carry. So, I’ve added a lighter to my kit; at least I could build a fire.

All of this is to say that while I love

moving fast and light, I’ve slowly come to the conclusion that much of the lightest and fastest gear is for “single-season” use compared to gear intended for “near-lifetime” use. It doesn’t really matter much if my ice gear is 500 grams heavier, or my backpack for my kids’ trip is even 1,000 grams heavier, if it outlasts me and doesn’t break when I’m using it.

Yes, on a single-push alpine climb I’ll still bring my dog’s toothbrush, but most of the time it won’t matter much. Maybe instead of “lightest and fastest,” we could start thinking more along the lines of, “light enough to last a really long time, and strong enough not to break when I need it.” This will reduce the cornices in my gear room (it looks like a garage, but the cars lost that war a long time ago) and reduce the quantity of outdoor gear that goes into the landfills. There are some new efforts to “upcycle” everything from skis to jackets, but all that plastic generally isn’t going away.

Now, to use a certain pack, I have to find the female buckle to its proprietary male buckle from the distant past of only two years ago. No worries—I think I saw one sticking out somewhere near the “Jurassic” layer in my gear stack... x



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JOURNAL

STORY & PHOTOS BY JIM BAIRD

Northbound & Solo

Paddling 575 kilometres of wild water in the Northwest Territories



After an hour-long flight from Norman Wells, a floatplane deposits me on O'Grady Lake with a canoe and two weeks' worth of food and gear. I plan to travel 575 kilometres down the Natla and Keele Rivers in the Northwest Territories, and finally down a stretch of the Mackenzie River back to Norman Wells. I'm all alone, and when the plane lifts off, quickly disappearing into the cloudy sky, it leaves behind a profound silence.

This kind of solitude is rare. In the Mackenzie Mountains, you can fly for hours over ridge lines and rivers without seeing a single road, building or any other sign of development. It's a holdout of true wilderness—a place where you need to travel with the rhythms of the land, not against them.

This isn't my first whitewater rodeo. I've been lucky enough to have soloed several demanding northern rivers over the past

few years. Beyond the excitement and adventure that these trips bring, for me, they offer a way to return to something elemental where there is nothing but the river, the wind and the sound of your paddle as it moves through the water.

The Natla doesn't hold back. As I start paddling, the water levels are high and the river is steep, fast and restless. Boulder-strewn rapids come one after another and I need to stay fully dialled in to what's in front of me.

On day two, I get caught off guard. Foolishly, I careen around a blind corner without scouting and hit an unexpected Class III wave train. It's a blast to run, but my boat takes in a lot of water. I round the bend immediately down river and find another set of big-water rapids right in front of me. That's when I almost dump. I slide sideways over a boulder and all the water in my boat sloshes to one side. As I just barely right myself with a prolonged low brace, things have gotten real. I beast-paddle and manage to barely skirt the menacing wave

train, catching a safe eddy on river right, and I'm out of danger. A little shaken up, I take a moment to catch my breath and I bail out the canoe. Lesson learned.

What makes these rivers special isn't just the remoteness, scenery and whitewater thrills—it's the history that runs through them. These aren't forgotten routes.

They've been travelled for generations by the Mountain Dene, who used moose-skin boats to run the same channels and canyons on much of the Natla. At camp on day five, I find intentionally placed rocks and several very old cut poles, preserved by the long subarctic winters at the base of a deep valley carved by a tributary creek where it enters the river.

Later, I learn this area had been used for generations as a place to corral Dall sheep. Mountain Dene hunters, along with their dogs, would travel deep into the range and "push" Dall sheep down into the valley, where they'd funnel into a corral built from



the same poles. In the corral, the sheep could be harvested from closer range—calories hard won and heavily needed. The scale and knowledge behind that system blows me away. It reminds me that people here have lived with the land for a long time, and that the old ways existed in the not-so-distant past.

The Natla pours into the Keele River. The Keele is wide, clear and beautiful. It's much easier than the Natla but still demands my attention. Water levels are still high, and tight bends create challenging currents, but the flow is strong and I make good time. Somewhere on the Keele I cross paths with a guided canoe party. They're camped at the mouth of a tributary. From the seat of my canoe, I chat with a guide. He looks me over wide-eyed, amazed that I came down the Natla solo—and in high water too. "Horseshoes up your ass," he says. I'll take it.

“WHAT MAKES THESE RIVERS SPECIAL ISN'T JUST THE REMOTENESS, SCENERY AND WHITEWATER THRILLS—IT'S THE HISTORY THAT RUNS THROUGH THEM”

Continuing down the Keele, I see both moose and caribou, and birds of prey soar overhead. I paddle at the base of towering cliffs and watch many beautiful waterfalls pour off high banks into the river, still fed by melting snow in the alpine. I hook into a bull trout that nearly strips my reel bare; about seven or eight pounds I figure, releasing the beauty back into the blue waters.

On day nine, I stumble on a patch of wild strawberries growing along the edge of a sandy landslide and I pick a fair share for lunch. Along the lower Keele, I explore an old burn and wade through vibrant fireweed before finding a natural sulphur spring. This sulphur-rich spring water is traditionally consumed by Mountain Dene people in small amounts for its medicinal benefits.

It's day 11, and I follow the waters of the Keele into the Mackenzie, Canada's longest river. It's a different kind of beast. The terrain has flattened, but the challenges increase. I'd been warned about winds and large whitecaps on the Mackenzie, and soon, I find out why. Just past the

mouth of the Great Bear River, I'm pinned down by 55 km/h wind gusts that whip the Mackenzie into large whitecaps. It's 7 p.m. by the time the wind breaks. When the waves die down, I jump in the canoe and paddle past midnight on glass-like water underneath an endless northern sky. It doesn't get dark here in the summer, so when the moment's right, you can just go.

On day 14, I paddle up to Norman Wells. I completed 575 kilometres, with no portages and no dumps. The trip was a balance of challenges and smooth sailing. I covered a lot of water, yet it left me feeling sharpened, not worn down. The kind of solitude I experience on trips like these grounds me in a quiet, practical way. I grow, and I come back a little different.

Marcus Aurelius said, "You don't need to go to a fancy villa or a distant place to find peace. Your mind can be your retreat. Wherever you are, you carry the possibility of tranquility inside yourself."

I agree—true mental clarity and peace come from within, not from a location. But a solo journey through true wilderness isn't just a location. It's a journey, an ever-changing place where the mind's noise fades naturally, stripped away by the raw simplicity of the environment and the demands of the journey itself. You don't have to consciously retreat from a restless mindset to find contentment here, it finds you. ✕





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WAYS TO TEST 15 YOUR METTLE

Challenge yourself this fall season—we have 15 hikes, runs, paddles and scrambles to test your mettle (for everybody!)

BY RYAN STUART



“He who climbs upon the highest mountains
laughs at all tragedies, real or imaginary.”

— FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

The German philosopher was probably being more metaphorical than literal, but there is practical truth to his words. Tackling hard physical adventures tends to make the other challenges in life feel less difficult. If you can grind away for six hours to reach the top of that mountain, is having to redo that work assignment really that bad?

Autumn is as good a time as any to bite off more than you can comfortably chew and experience a little of what Nietzsche was talking about. It's easy... in a Type 2 fun kind of way (fun in retrospect). Just head to your closest urban limit, add a little creativity and you can probably find a micro-adventure worthy of your sweat and toil. Or turn to a classic like North

Vancouver's Grouse Grind, a stiff hike up a staircase along the slopes of the mountain that is a rite of passage on the West Coast and a daily ritual for fitness hounds.

Inspired by the Grind and Nietzsche-approved, these 15 adventures are tough, but doable in a fall day. They promise to test your mettle and leave you a little stronger in every possible way.





RIDE MEADOWS IN THE SKY PARKWAY

DIFFICULTY: HARD

STATS: 26 KM, 1,500 M

Why: The Meadows in the Sky Parkway is not the hardest hill climb in the entire country for its steepness, but rather its length. It gains a punishing 1,500 metres

through 15 hairpins as it climbs from the towering cedar and hemlock trees of a rare inland rainforest into the nearly treeless alpine of Mount Revelstoke National Park. Find resolve at the quad-resting viewpoints with epic views of the Selkirk and Monashee mountains and the town of Revelstoke far below—and with the anticipation of the much quicker trip down.

Gear Up: Even on warm days, bring a

jacket. Alpine weather is always fickle and the long descent will create a windchill.

Biggest Challenge: Just over a kilometre from the summit, the grade jacks up into a demoralizing “wall” of asphalt.

Stay: Snowforest Campground, located near the start of Meadows in the Sky Parkway, offers 62 campsites—including large pull-throughs for RVs (no sani-dump onsite). seerevelstoke.com/activities/road-cycling

BOWEN ISLAND CIRCUMNAVIGATION

DIFFICULTY: MODERATE

STATS: 33 KM

TIMING: 4 TO 8 HOURS

Why: The attraction to paddling around Bowen Island is all about situation. It sits like a chockstone in the mouth of Howe Sound, the most southerly fjord on the Pacific coast, and just across Burrard Inlet from Vancouver. Start a counterclockwise circumnavigation from Snug Cove with ocean to alpine views of Coast Range peaks pulling up the eastern and northern shores. Turning south reveals the Vancouver Island horizon and the open waters of the Strait of Georgia, before the home run with the city as a backdrop. Beyond the distance, the unpredictable marine weather is the Biggest Challenge.

Gear Up: A stable 16-foot or longer sea kayak with an efficient wingblade paddle is

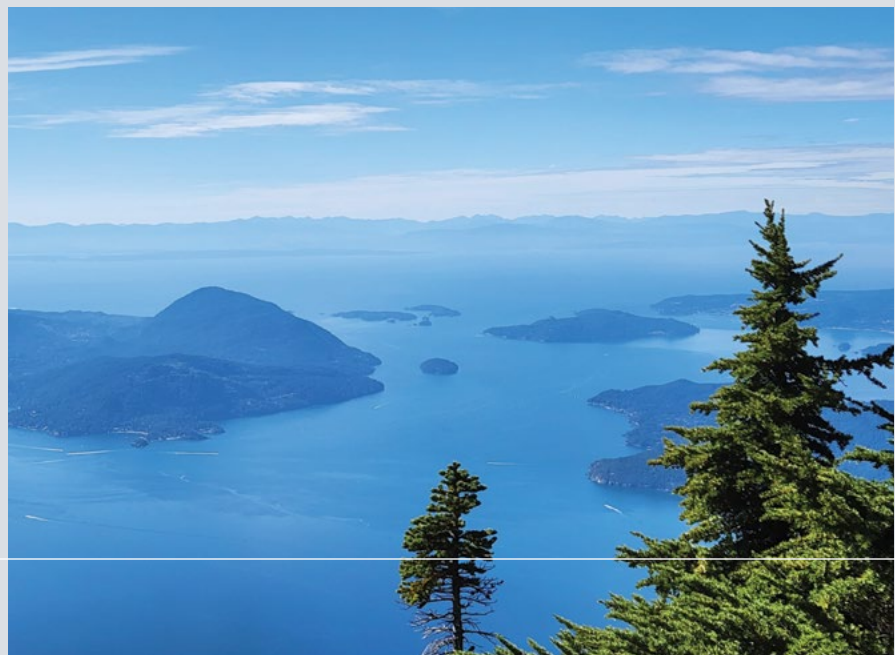
the best tool combo for the job.

Biggest Challenge: The southern coastline is exposed to the biggest ferry and wind waves, which can ricochet off the rocky shore making it feel even rougher.

Stay: Bowen is tight on accommodations. Camping is only permitted at tent pads

in Apodaca Park. Or book a cabin at the Legendary Wildwood Cabins, through Air BnB. For RV'ers, the full-service Capilano River RV Park, in nearby West Vancouver, is the best choice

(capilanoriverrvpark.com). tourismbowenisland.com





LORD OF THE SQUIRRELS MOUNTAIN BIKE LOOP

DIFFICULTY: MODERATE
STATS: 27.5 KM, 1,374 M

Why: There are plenty of mountain bike test pieces in British Columbia, but LOTS is arguably the best bang for the effort,

climbing from the Whistler Valley into the rocky alpine near the top of Mount Sproatt. Once out of the old growth forest, the route scrambles over granite slick rock and through meadows, with big mountain and glacier views all around, before plunging back down in a twisting, turning descent reminiscent of two squirrels chasing tails.

Gear Up: This is not a quick lap. You will appreciate a great granny gear, three litres of water and several snacks.

Biggest Challenge: Into the Mystic is the name of the climb that leads to LOTS. While it's machine-built, it is sustained and relentless.

Stay: You'll find no shortage of accommodations in Whistler—from hostels to the ultra luxe. Whistler Campground & RV Park is the best bet for RVs (whistlerolympicpark.com).
worca.com

HISTORIC NECHAKO CANOE

DIFFICULTY: HARD
STATS: 67.5 KM

Why: Prince George is river canoeing country: the city in central BC sits at the confluence of the Nechako and Fraser Rivers with significant tributaries joining them nearby. A classic trip, and the course of a marathon

canoe race for many years, is paddling the Nechako from Isle Pierre to the Fraser River confluence. Despite its proximity to the city, it mostly feels like a wild boreal river, with forested shorelines, easy moving water and a meandering course. Keen river reading skills will make a huge difference in speed.

Gear Up: The fastest vessel is a lightweight marathon canoe, like H2O Canoe's Slingshot 222 or Clipper Jensen Tandem Racing models.

Biggest Challenge: There's no significant whitewater but keep a sharp eye out for hard eddy lines and sweepers.

Stay: BC's gateway to the north has hotels a-plenty. We like the full-service Northern Experience RV Park, with its selection of back-in and pull-through RV sites and tent-only sites, too (northernexperiencerv.com).
northernhardwarepgcanoe.ca



SULPHUR MOUNTAIN HILL CLIMB

DIFFICULTY: MODERATE

STATS: 5.5 KM, 655 M

Why: Sulphur Mountain is the most

accessible summit in Banff National Park, just 27 switchbacks above the townsite. As such, it's a bit of a local proving ground. The Fastest Known Time for the ascent is just over 30 minutes. With a gondola ghosting overhead, it's not wilderness, but the regular views of the nearby peaks and

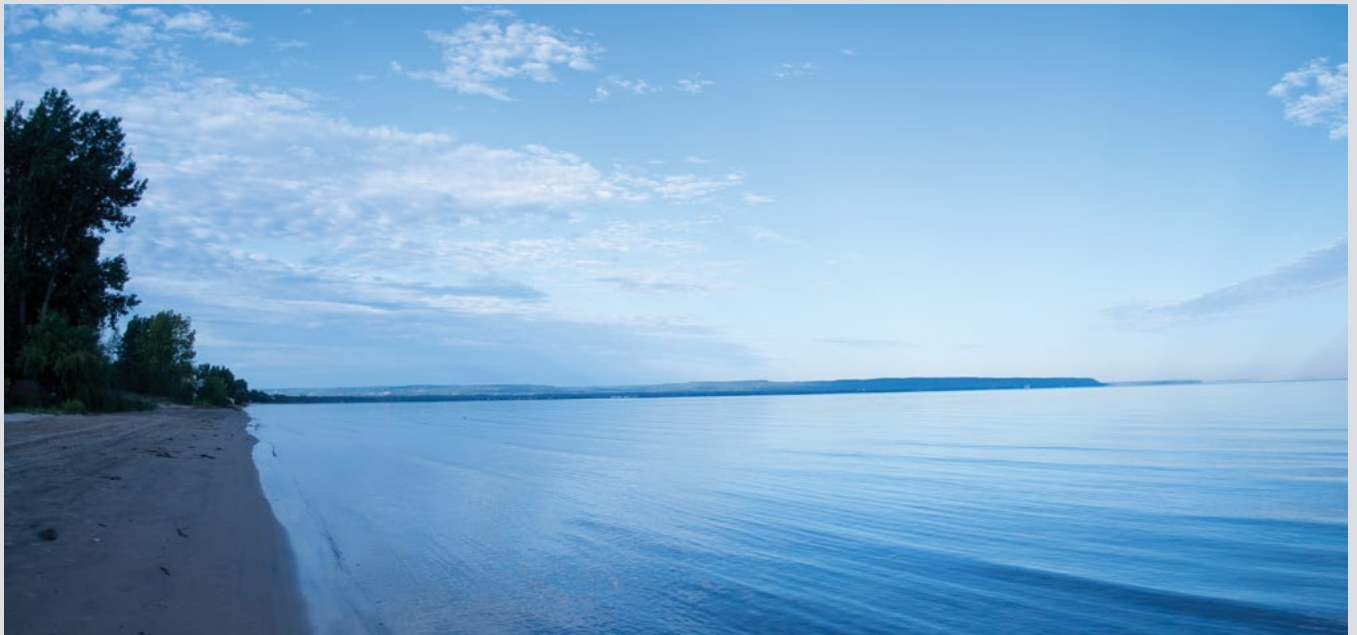
the town below keep it interesting, the visitor centre at the top serves lunch and cold drinks, and there is a one-way gondola pass for skipping the return descent. Better: continue past the Samson Peak and then return home by hiking down the other side of the mountain via the wilder Westside Trail.

Gear Up: A lightweight set of hiking poles, like Pursuit Carbon Z-Poles, will help push you upward and ease the descent back down.

Biggest Challenge: Not overindulging at the visitor centre restaurant.

Stay: There's a veritable buffet of options in Banff. RV'ers can head to the full-service, sani-dump equipped Tunnel Mountain Trailer Court; tenters can try Two Jack Lake. Both are close to Sulphur Mountain and downtown Banff (parks.canada.ca).

parks.canada.ca



WASAGA BEACH TREK

DIFFICULTY: EASY

STATS: 10 KM

Why: You could race up the Niagara Escarpment, but a bigger challenge around Georgian Bay is to hike the length of Wasaga Beach, the longest freshwater beach in the world. Hiking the 10 kilometres of sandy shoreline from Brocks Beach to The Point at the Nottawasaga

River is an exercise in seeing the details in the expanse of Georgian Bay. On the way back (to ease logistics, you might as well return) the Niagara Escarpment backstops the view. For the full test, stick to the sand, but there is a boardwalk along some sections.

Gear Up: Sand in your shoes is inevitable while beach hiking, which means blisters won't be far behind. Pack a blister kit, including lots of medical tape.

Biggest Challenge: Add calf raises to your workouts. There may be negligible elevation change, but the soft surface will leave your legs feeling like it was uphill both ways.

Stay: Since the provincial park is day-use only, RV'ers will likely head to Wasaga Pines (parkbridge.com) and tent campers can head to nearby Craigeith Provincial Park (ontarioparks.ca).

ontarioparks.ca



▼ DEATH RACE LIGHT

DIFFICULTY: MODERATE

STATS: 30 KM, 1,500 M

Why: Earning all 21 stamps in Grande Cache's Passport to the Peaks challenge is not doable in a day or maybe even a season, even by the ultramarathoners who compete in the local Canadian Death Race every August (sinistersports.ca). Stamps are awarded for signing the guest log on the 21 summits that surround town and, while

none of the climbs are technical, many are long and involved. A good start on the challenge is to tackle Leg 4 of the Death Race, which tags two high points and spends considerable time in the subalpine. The main destination is the craggy summit of 2,130-metre-high Mount Hammel, the most striking and interesting destination close to Grande Cache. After walking its summit ridge, descend to a low pass for the optional out-and-back trip up Ambler Mountain.

Gear Up: The routes are marked, but this

is the northern Rockies, and you will want navigation gear and skills. Plus, you can get inspired to enter next year's race!

Biggest Challenge: Finding the motivation to continue on to the second summit of Ambler, which is the one with the summit cairn.

Stay: Grande Cache Campground is open until October 13 this year, and has 77 RV and tent sites; 56 of which are full-service (mdgreenview.ab.ca).

mdgreenview.ab.ca

▼ HIGH ROCKIES TRAIL MOUNTAIN BIKE

DIFFICULTY: HARD

STATS: 80 KM, 1,830 M

Why: Even though the High Rockies Trail is mostly a wide and smooth green trail, riding it end-to-end in a day is no easy feat. Traversing a hillside through Alberta's rugged Kananaskis Country, it swoops up and down on the regular, which adds up

to more than a mile of climbing over its length. The rollercoaster and the beauty of Rocky Mountain views make it worth the grind and, with a road never far away (except for the last 15 kilometres), it's easy to break it up into manageable chunks.

Gear Up: Rather than lug many litres of water, bring MSR's TrailShot Microfilter and fill up at the many creeks and lakes en route.

Biggest Challenge: Transecting a major recreation corridor, with many access points and side trails, navigation will be tricky. Trailforks, a mountain bike mapping app, is a must.

Stay: The giant, 229-site Mount Kidd Campground is open year-round and has everything from full service RV sites to no-service tent spots (mountkiddrv.com).

albertaparks.ca





▼ MOUNT CARLETON 3 SUMMITS

DIFFICULTY: HARD

STATS: 30 KM, 586 METRES

Why: Who says there is no elevation in the Maritimes? The three highest summits in the Maritimes and New Brunswick are in Mount Carleton Provincial Park—Mount Sagamook, Head Mountain and Mount Carleton. Conveniently, they sit side-by-

side and are connected by a loop trail.

Ticking all three is just a matter of grinding away on nearly 600 metres of elevation gain and 30 kilometres of trail. For inspiration, there are plenty of viewpoints, including a fire tower lookout atop Carleton. If the rugged terrain around the summits slows you down, there are also a couple options for making the loop shorter.

Gear Up: The Arc'teryx Kopec Mid has enough stability for Mount Carleton's rough footing, but places the foot close to

the ground for a nimble feel.

Biggest Challenge: Remembering to slow down and enjoy the lofty views. The autumn colours are particularly spectacular from the aerie.

Stay: Don't delay! The park closes for transition time in October until January. Within, Armstrong Campground has sites for tents and RVs, while Williams and Franklin campgrounds are tent-only (parcsnbparks.info). hikingnb.ca

▼ SLEEPING GIANT 3 PEAKS CHALLENGE

DIFFICULTY: HARD

STATS: 31.5 KM, 1,290 M

Why: There are plenty of potential challenges in Sleeping Giant Provincial Park on both water and land. The toughest might be to tag the three high points near the literal and figurative “head” of the peninsula that juts out into Lake Superior just outside Thunder Bay. They are Nanabosho Lookout, The Head Trail and Top of the Giant. All three lookouts perch over sheer cliffs, high above Lake Superior, with outstanding views across to T-Bay and beyond. In between is beautiful coastal hiking, charming forests, stiff climbs and interesting geology.

Gear Up: Scarpa's Rush 2 Pro are part of a growing crop of light hikers made for light and fast missions like this one. They combine the protection and stability of



hikers with cushioning and energy of trail runners.

Biggest Challenge: Complete the loop counterclockwise, otherwise the climb over the Sawyer Bay Trail will break your heart.

Stay: The Marie Lousie Campground has 200 sites, with mixed use from tents to large RVs. There are even five rustic cabins available for rent (ontarioparks.ca). ontarioparks.ca

▼ MONT-MÉGANTIC ROAD CLIMB

DIFFICULTY: MODERATE

STATS: 5.3 KM, 511 M

Why: The highest paved road in Quebec, topping out at 1,106 metres, is probably the toughest hill climb east of the Rockies. The road to the Mont-Mégantic observatory (open to the public) includes grades topping 18 percent and, most years, stars as the toughest stage in the annual Tour de Beauce cycling race. Like the racers, begin with a rolling warm up around the nearby countryside before launching up the peak. The views from the summit make the effort worthwhile: across southeastern Quebec and into neighbouring Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Use a tour of the observatory to let your heart rate recover before peaking



the adrenaline on the bomb back down.

Gear Up: The designers of the Opus Fortitude didn't make the bike specifically for this climb, but they are based in Montreal and this comfortable road bike is ready to climb.

Biggest Challenge: Mont-Mégantic National Park limits daily access to the

peak to preserve the visitor experience.

Reserve your place online before your ride.

Stay: The park has two camping sectors, Franceville Sector, which welcomes RVs and tents; and Observatoire, which is tenting only.

sepaq.com



▼ PESKOWESK LAKE CANOE CIRCUIT

DIFFICULTY: HARD

STATS: 48 KILOMETRES, 13 PORTAGES, 12 LAKES

Why: In the interior of southern Nova Scotia, a string of wild and picturesque lakes lures canoeists into the remote backcountry of Kejimikujik National Park. This is the longest of several possible

circuits in the park and while most people take three or four days, for practiced canoe trippers, the loop to Peskawa Lake and back is doable in a day. The route jumps from lake to lake, crossing 12 in total, some crystal clear, others tea coloured, all reminiscent of the Canadian Shield with windswept pines and polished granite shorelines. With 13 portages along the way, it won't just be an arm workout.

Gear Up: Astral's TR1 Merge are a hiking boot-water shoe amphibian that will grip

the slipperiest of boulders and muddiest of portages.

Biggest Challenge: It's all about the transitions. A lot of time can disappear switching from paddling to portaging to paddling, so have a plan and pack gear strategically.

Stay: Whatever you arrived in will stay in the parking lot. This trip is backcountry only. Stay at one of the hundreds of rustic, leave-no-trace campsites within.

parks.canada.ca



▼ MONT-TREMBLANT GRAND BRULÉ HIKE

DIFFICULTY: MODERATE

STATS: 5.6 KM, 640 M

Why: Of the several trails leading to the summit of Mont-Tremblant, Grand Brulé is the most popular. Beginning just above the Tremblant village, it twists and turns up the forested slopes and ski runs right to the 878-metre summit. Most people

take a couple of hours, but speedsters have done it in under 40 minutes. After enjoying the view, hikers can take the lift down or extend the adventure by continuing to Mount Johannsen, the highest point in the Laurentians.

Gear Up: Lightweight and grippy trail runners—we like Saucony’s Peregrine 15—will keep you moving fast.

Biggest Challenge: The trail tends to be popular, so practice polite passing: make some noise as you approach, so you don’t

startle others, ask to pass at the next good spot, wait patiently for them to step aside, and then thank them profusely.

Stay: Parc National du Mont-Tremblant has a staggering 889 marked sites. La Menagerie, in La Diable sector, is popular for RV’ers. Lac Provost, Pemdina-Saint-Donat sector, is also fun (sepaq.com).

Or stay in the village at a fine hotel (tremblant.ca).

tremblant.ca

▼ MATTAWA RIVER PADDLE

DIFFICULTY: EXTREME

STATS: 64 KM, 5 PORTAGES

Why: For time immemorial the Mattawa River has served as a route across Ontario from the Ottawa River to the French River watershed and on to the upper Great Lakes. Between North Bay and Mattawa, it’s all

downriver. The venue for the annual Mattawa River Canoe Race is a mix of flat and moving water with just a few easy-to-portage rapids along the way. The current lends a hand, but it’s still a marathon—top times in the race are just under seven hours—especially if water levels are low, like they often are in the fall.

Gear Up: Because a full day of non-stop paddling will wear down even the most calloused of hands, pack a pair of NRS Boater’s Glove.

Biggest Challenge: When there’s lots of water the portages become optional, but the rapids require solid whitewater skills, particularly in an easily swamped marathon canoe.

Stay: Book a cabin or bring your RV to Mattawa River Resort. Can host up to 40-foot RVs, with blackwater and “honeywagon” service available (mattawariverresort.com).

mattawarivercanoeace.ca

▼ COAL BRANCH GRAVEL RIDE

DIFFICULTY: MODERATE

STATS: UP TO 248 KM

Why: The southern Alberta foothills get all the love, but there’s plenty of open country along the front ranges east of Jasper National Park, too. A series of mostly gravel roads loop through the scenic grass

and forest-covered hills south of Hinton, enabling routes of varying distances and difficulty. The ultimate is to hit the lofty Cardinal Divide, a 2,000-metre-high point on Highway 40. A shorter loop could start at the town of Cadomin, an alternate starting point that’s closer to the good stuff. Either way, expect firm gravel, quiet roads, epic foothill views and easy logistics.

Gear Up: A solid gravel rig like Devinci Cycles Hatchet will put you in position

to absorb the inevitable bumps without compromising pedaling efficiency.

Biggest Challenge: The weather is notoriously fickle in the foothills. Expect headwinds in both directions and bring extra layers, even on sunny days.

Stay: Campers will love the Hinton/Jasper KOA—which, along with tent sites, can handle up to 58-foot RVs with full services (koa.com).

bikepack.ca x

Fairy Meadow Hut in winter



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The 2022 ACC General Mountaineering Camp,
photo by Zoltan Kenwell

at

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A kayaker wearing a blue and yellow jacket and a green hat is paddling a red and blue kayak on the water. The background features a sandy beach with large rocks and a prominent, long, weathered log. Tall evergreen trees are visible on the right side of the frame under a blue sky with some clouds. The title 'ATE'S' is in large, bold, white, sans-serif font, and 'whim' is in a smaller, white, cursive font. A decorative white Greek key pattern runs horizontally across the top and middle of the page.

ATE'S whim

An epic kayak adventure is at the mercy of a goddess

STORY & PHOTOS BY FRANK WOLF



The morning breaks grey and brooding. After paddling 72 kilometres through calm, sunny conditions over the first two days of our journey, an ominous feeling pervades.

We started our kayak trip in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, and planned to work our way up to Alaska and around Prince of Wales Island. Before Covid, there used to be a ferry service between Rupert and Ketchikan, the first town about 90 kilometres north of the international border. The ferry made logistics easy in the old days—you could ferry up to Ketchikan with your kayaks, ramble about the Alaskan panhandle, then ferry back.

“WHEN A HEAVY SOUTHEAST GALE BLOWS IN, HECATE’S SHALLOW WATERS STIR INTO A FROTHING, ANGRY DOG”

My friend Dave Berrisford and I instead drove 16 hours with our kayaks up from Vancouver. We planned to paddle up and back to access our loop, meaning we’d have to face ‘her’ twice on this trip.

‘She’ was *Hecate*—a Greek goddess of the Underworld often associated with witchcraft, known for guarding the gates between the planes of the living and dead. We were paddling the north end of her

namesake. When a heavy southeast gale blows in, Hecate’s shallow waters stir into a frothing, angry dog—a creature often portrayed alongside the goddess in art and sculpture.

Just yesterday it seemed like we were in the midst of summer as we paddled over glassy waters past Burnt Cliff Island, watching a grizzly mom and her two cubs rolling rocks in the intertidal zone as they foraged for food, their cinnamon fur sparkling in the morning sun. Today feels like late winter on the coast, with dark skies and cool temperatures hinting at what was to come.

We start off with a five-kilometre crossing from our campsite to Cape Fox, a peninsula ringed by cliffs that juts into Hecate Strait, practically daring the goddess to lash her shores. The seas build slowly, almost imperceptibly. We’re like a couple of oblivious frogs in a pot of water on the stove, the heat steadily ramping up. As soon as we turn north along the western shore, the seas start to boil with wind-driven swell rolling in across 500 kilometres of open sea.

The waters break around us and pound the rocky shoreline. Ahead of us lies 20 kilometres of impenetrable cliff bands where we won’t be able to get off the water if things become unmanageable. As the holder of the keys to the gates between realms, Hecate is purported to be able to unlock the gates of death... and looking at the deteriorating seas, it seemed as if she’d done just that.

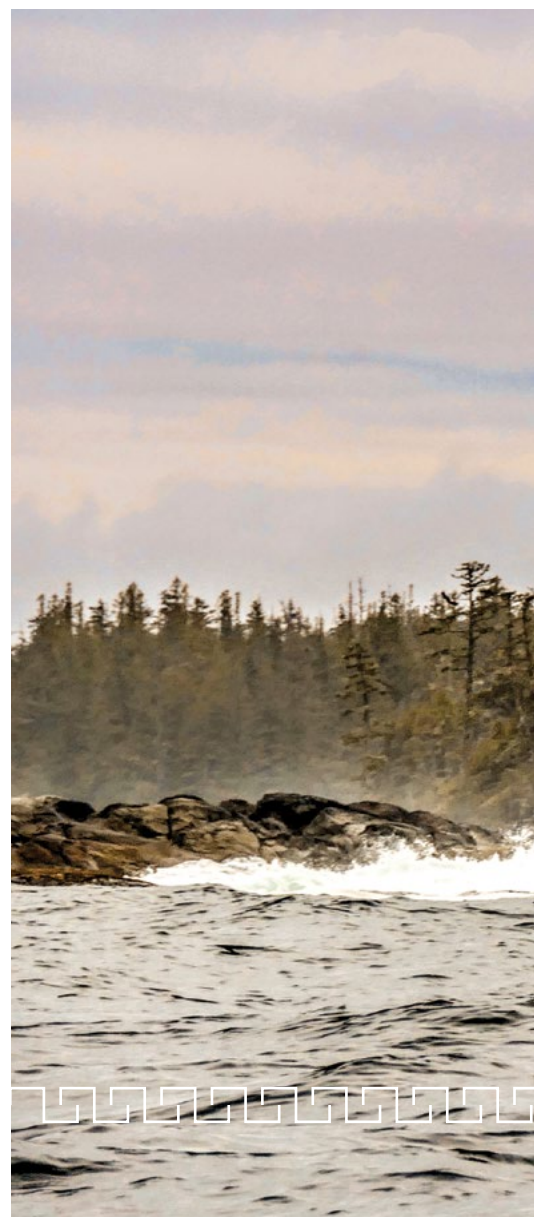
I turn to Dave as our boats bob in the swell, waves washing over our decks.

“What’s the forecast again today?” I ask. “Gale force later on.” He then pauses

before saying, “We should probably double check that.”

As a competitive whitewater slalom racer when he was younger, as well as a Class V ripper who regularly runs the wild rivers of BC’s Sea to Sky Highway where he lives, Dave has a high threshold for sporty waters—so if he says “we should check,” then we should check.

We are already a couple of kilometres past Boat Harbor, the only marked refuge on our chart, but another cove opens to our right. Slipping in, we spot a steep boulder beach. We make for it, and in the driving rain notice a small, dilapidated shack at the top of the landing. Upon investigation, it appears to be an old outhouse, but about 50 metres farther in the woods rises a towering relic of a boathouse on stilts. We double-check the weather on our satellite device and it looks like the Hecate is going storm force, so our decision to find refuge is a



good one. This will be our home for the night.

The rain comes off the ocean in sheets, drenching us as we haul our boats safely into the brush above the beach. The boathouse is missing half its floorboards, but there's enough room beneath the structure for us to hang a bunch of drying lines and set up our kitchen. Out back is a rotting tramway that runs around to the old Tree Point lighthouse. The lighthouse was manned from 1904 to 1969; the Art Deco relic still pokes up from the shoreline trees that have grown around it. Our shelter under the boathouse had been the supply point for its keepers and their families that used to live there.

I investigate the cavernous, airy boathouse. A broken set of rails run from the sea up to its barn doors. The ghosts of those who once lived here on this forbidding point are almost palpable as the howling wind whistles through the cracks of the ramshackle edifice. As a goddess

associated with ghosts, it seems that Hecate has trapped us in this place amongst its spirits. We are mere playthings, to be manipulated at her whim over the course of a month within the confines of the towering forest and ragged coast she calls her home.

Four days later, we drag ourselves into the town of Ketchikan. We'd lost an additional day of progress after Tree Point due to another Sou' Easter, so decided to adjust our route to a loop that would provide us more protection from what was shaping up to be a blustery month. I was surprised how uninhabited the coast was until Ketchikan, with little in the way of cabins or other signs of habitation up to this point. The town starts abruptly; a sudden swath of humanity plopped into the middle of the sprawling wild. We've already been in the U.S. for six days but border guards don't grow on trees, so this is our first chance to officially check into the country.

Walking up a gangway from the harbour in rain so dense a snorkel would have been handy, Dave and I head to the nearby federal building. Before we left, the machinations of politics had strained relations between the U.S. and Canada, to the point where many people I know were aghast that we'd even think to enter America for a trip—that our phones would be confiscated and we'd be booted from Alaska by federal agents.

Drenched from the deluge, we enter the warmth of the border services office. It's empty save for a customs officer and administrative assistant. An almost cartoonish, glowering photo of the American president stares down at us from the wall, but the two people manning the office are anything but intimidating, greeting us with welcoming smiles. Mary, the administrative assistant, is chipper as she gives us advice on where to stay and where to shop.



“Is this the usual weather up here this time of year?” I ask.

“Oh no, no, no,” Mary exclaims. “It’s been a record-setting cold and windy month so far. This is the worst in memory.”

Officer Smith, the customs agent, cheerily filled out my paperwork for me.

“Welcome to Alaska,” he says as he hands back my passport.

“Bye now! You boys go get warm up and dry out!” Mary adds as we step out the door.

Despite the monsoon conditions outside I feel quite snug and content inside, heartened by the friendliest border crossing I’d ever experienced.

We take Mary’s advice and check into the hotel across the street to dry out our sopping gear. After a week in the wind, we surreally find ourselves sipping beer and listening to live music at the New York Cafe that evening.

their glinting dorsals. It’s a family of four Orcas swimming parallel to me in the same direction. The large male, with its two-metre-high dorsal, is flanked by the female and the smaller calves. The pod motivates me to pick up my tempo and stay with them, hooting with joy. The six of us move rhythmically through the sea, side by side, for the final hour of the day. It’s like I’ve joined these apex predators, moving like a wild animal, empowered by the energy of the pack. At the harbour of Myers Chuck I pull into the lee of the wind and watch the group carry on, waving goodbye and thanking them for the assist.

Ten days into our journey, Dave and I pull into a bay at Deer Island on Seward Passage. Paddling along rocky shores throughout the day, camping seems to be scarce, but the island has a nice-looking

I set up my tent beneath a gargantuan cedar that sweeps in an angle over me, its branches disappearing into an evening sky of pink clouds interspersed with splashes of fading blue. Snuggling into my sleeping bag, I drift away into a deep slumber under the comforting gaze of these ancient sentinels, who will still be standing watch long after every single human currently alive has passed from this Earth.

“ DESPITE THE MONSOON CONDITIONS OUTSIDE I FEEL QUITE SNUG AND CONTENT INSIDE, HEARTENED BY THE FRIENDLIEST BORDER CROSSING I’D EVER EXPERIENCED ”

We arrive in Wrangell almost 400 kilometres into our journey. This is the northernmost point of our trip before we loop west and then south back to Canada. Dave and I find accommodation as the only guests of the cavernous Sourdough Lodge in this town of 2,000 people. It is a quiet community, not inundated with the cruise ship carnival of people that pour daily into Ketchikan.

In the Marina Bar, we wait exceedingly long for the jaded teenage server to acknowledge our presence. She mopes around, head down, until I walk up to her and ask, “Do we order from you or is there someone else?”

She looks at me vacantly. “I can take your order ... I guess.”

A couple of Tlingit women sit at the table beside us and survey the scene. I overhear one saying to the other, “Oh, the young server is here... we better order at the counter.” They already know what we just learned. The worker pool is obviously shallow in this isolated port town.

We strike up a conversation with the two middle-aged women. Laura is a flirtatious chatterbox, while Emma is quiet and reserved. They know about the spot among the old-growth giants we spent the night at on Deer Island, and tell us that Tlingit have indeed camped there since time immemorial.

The next day, with a fresh Sou’ Easterly blow looming in the forecast, we cross five kilometres over from Woronkofski Island to Zarembo Island. As with most



A couple of days later, we’re working against a heavy northwest wind along the rocky coast between Camano Point and Myers Chuck. The bad weather up here comes from the southeast, the good weather from the northwest. The sun is finally shining again, but at the cost of this headwind. When paddling into such conditions, you need to be as relentless as the wind itself. The harder it blows, the harder you paddle, and as long as you’re moving forward, you keep going.

Toward the end of the day, in the throws of this purgatory of effort, something in the periphery catches my eye. I turn to see four dark figures rising and falling in the wind-churned seas, the spray whipping off

curve on its southeastern shore that we make for.

Pulling onto a gravel and shell beach, we push through the shore brush and step into a dream world. All around us stand huge Western redcedars. We’re in a thousand-year-old forest that seems to stretch forever—trees that existed for centuries before Western humanity ever set foot in this place. These towering beings have been witness to the Indigenous Tlingit people who camped beneath their sheltering boughs. They’ve observed as generations were born, lived, laughed, cried and died without any knowledge that things would ever change, that their culture would be shattered and the distant future would become unrecognizable to them.



Prince of
Wales
Island

Alaska

Boat Harbour
(finish)

Prince Rupert
(start)

British
Columbia



of the islands in the Alaskan Panhandle, the names originate from the 18th and 19th century when the area belonged to Imperial Russia and was known as *Russian America* (in the case of these two islands they were named after naval lieutenant commanders who sailed the area). The lucrative sea otter trade is what brought the Russians here, and also collapsed sea otter populations to near extinction from a high of 300,000 worldwide to less than 2,000 before they were protected by international treaty in 1911.

As we draw nearer to Zarembo, the waters become increasingly chaotic. We wanted to go around the south shore of the island as it's a significantly shorter distance, but the wind and currents have a different plan for us. Away from the lee of Woronkofski, the wind roars up from the south, where it meets with a heavy current running against it, as well as the current of the Stikine River—a powerful river fresh with spring floodwaters that flows out of the coast mountains. There's a distinct line in the channel where the silty waters of the Stikine meet with the clear blue waters of the ocean. The mixing of these three forces at the northeast corner of Zarembo creates a bouncy, breaking torrent that resembles a high-volume whitewater river. In our tiny kayaks, all we can do is go with the flow. We hang on—bracing and paddling furiously until we're out of the wind and cross currents, safely on the north side of Zarembo.

“THE SOU' EASTER BLOWS AND BLOWS, PINNING US INTO FOGGY BAY WITH UP TO 50 KNOT STORM-FORCE WINDS”

Our detour, which adds 30 kilometres to our journey, ends up being a blessing. The mixing of the Stikine with the ocean creates a nutrient-rich zone teeming with fish and their predators, treating us to an explosion of wildlife. Pods of porpoise rise and fall in the mixing zone, as do scores of eagles, terns and gulls. For the first time on our trip, rafts of sea otters appear.

Since being protected from hunting, their numbers have recovered significantly, with approximately 70,000 in Alaska alone. Pups have recently been born and many of the otters we see are in mother/pup pairs, with the mother never letting us get too close and quickly shepherding her offspring



out of sight underwater when we approach. Indigenous Aleuts were conscripted by the Russians to hunt the otters by kayak during the fur trade days. Perhaps some latent memory of those kayak hunters is stirred by our presence and makes them wary of us—a survival instinct nestled deep in their evolutionary DNA.

The Zarembo safari continues all afternoon as a pair of large elk appear on shore, with continuous sightings of otter and porpoise. It's capped off by an afternoon-long accompaniment of a humpback mother and calf who perform full aerial breaches and slap their pectoral fins as they feed and frolic along the same path we're travelling. Always at the whim of the wind, the outcome this time has been quite agreeable.

On day 20, 700 kilometres into our journey, we complete a 14-kilometre crossing of Revillagigedo Channel to reconnect with our route up from Prince Rupert. The Hecate looms just south of us, and we'll have to confront her once more on our way around Cape Fox. On our way north, she teased us by holding us at Tree Point boat for an afternoon. This time, she will not be so kind. Taking out her key, Hecate again unlocks the gates of death—and won't close them for nine straight days.

The Sou' Easter blows and blows, pinning us into Foggy Bay with up to 50-knot storm-force winds. After a few days, Hecate inhales for a couple of hours and we sprint down the coast for 20 kilometres, just past Tree Point into Boat Harbor, where the storm settles in once more. The forecast gives little hope of reprieve for the next week—and we're nearing the end of our food and time. Through connections in Prince Rupert, we arrange a cross-

border boat pickup to escape the hold of this mischievous goddess.

My VHF radio crackles at 9 p.m. The ride is on its way, and Dave and I are packed and ready to go. The voice of our boat driver on the other end delivers bad news.

“We're stuck on an island down here at Cape Fox—it's too rough for us to come and get you. We're going to wait here and try again at first light.”

The seas pound the entrance to the cove, and any hope of delivery that evening. So close, and now foiled again. All we can do is hope for another small window, another inhalation between storms.

At 4 a.m., dawn creeps into our bay, as does a small motorboat. Inside the craft are Darren and Larry, two members of the Nisga'a First Nation. The Nisga'a are a small community of Indigenous people who control a vast swath of land on the U.S./Canada border and have flexibility going back and forth across the boundary. These two fellows, born and raised on the sea, and in tune with Hecate and her various moods, are the only ones willing and able to grab us from our storm-bound rumination.

We paddle out to their little boat, which is not much longer than our kayaks. Darren and Larry are casually dressed in cotton hoodies and Crocs. We load up our gear, strap our kayaks to the boat rails, and huddle into the standing room-only cabin. As we make our way around Cape Fox, the seas wash over the top of the boat. “This is nothing,” Darren quips with a smile, “You should have seen it last night.”

Tucking into the lee of Sitklan passage, we're finally released from Hecate's clutches, passing from her blustery realm toward the comfort of home. ✕





BEYOND THE DROOP

Mountain biking's injury crisis is costing us all

BY ANDREW FINDLAY

On a summer afternoon in 2010, 20-year-old Ethan Krueger pushed his bike to the top of a jump line on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast on the last day that he would ever ride a two-wheeled mountain bike.

He was with his best friend; "a brother from another mother." They knew these trails well. For some inexplicable reason, Krueger left his new helmet on the dirt

next to the trail, as they warmed up, starting small then progressively taking larger airs and practicing tricks. Krueger decided to do something different on a black diamond jump feature. He wanted to go bigger and higher than he ever had before. It's an impulse that anyone who's been a 20- or 30-something experienced mountain biker can relate to—pushing personal boundaries and the risk envelope to see what's possible on a bike.

“I remember looking at my helmet on the ground and thinking, ‘Yeah, this is a helmet jump,’” he said.

He put it on and pushed his bike beyond the normal launch and into the bush above. After pausing for a few minutes to catch his breath, clear a few branches and size up the jump, he dropped in and picked up speed. As soon as Krueger left the lip, he knew something was about to go wrong.

“I got bucked pretty hard,” he said.

His body pitched forward over the bars as he sailed past the normal landing transition. “That’s pretty much the last thing I remember of that day.”

What happened when he hit the dirt changed his life.

His friend saw him launch and heard the crash, followed by an ominous silence. When he reached Kreuger seconds later, he knew it was bad. Krueger’s back was bent at an impossible angle, his legs thrown over his head and tangled in the bike frame.



“I REALIZED THAT IF WE ARE GOING TO TRY TO DO SOMETHING MEANINGFUL IN THE PREVENTION SPACE THAT WE REALLY NEEDED TO ENGAGE WITH THE MOUNTAIN BIKE COMMUNITY”

“It was a full scorpion,” Kreuger said.

Two days later, he awoke post-operation in the intensive care unit at Vancouver General Hospital. He was groggy from the anesthetic and pain killers after suffering broken ribs and a skull fracture. That was relatively good news. The bad news came when the surgeon visited him.

“He was blunt,” Krueger said. “He



told me that I had suffered a serious back injury; that miracles are possible, but that I would probably never walk again.”

In a moment’s flash, Krueger became a mountain biking accident statistic with a life-changing injury. It marked the start of a long road of physical and mental healing.

Dr. Brian Kwon is a spine surgeon, professor of orthopaedics and Canada Research Chair in spinal cord injury at the University of British Columbia. He’s had to deliver a similarly painful message to dozens of patients over the years. Many of them are mountain bikers.

“I think we had just been seeing so many mountain bikers that we were getting a bit desensitized to it, the way you do to a car accident. Like, ‘Oh yeah, it’s another mountain biker with a spinal cord injury. We’ve been there,’” he said.

When four young men were on the ward at the same time with mountain bike injuries, it hit home for Dr. Kwon.

“[I realized that] we need to write up this data.’ One of the things that struck me was just that people weren’t really talking about it,” Dr. Kwon explained. “It’s staggering when you see this for real, and you know it’s not a one-off thing.” People are talking about it now. Last November, Dr. Kwon published a paper that documented 58 spinal cord injuries (SCIs) that occurred in BC from mountain biking accidents between 2008 and 2022. Fourteen of these patients ended up with quadriplegia, affecting both arms and legs, 13 with paraplegia, and the remaining suffered incomplete spinal injuries that left them with at least some partial motor function. Perhaps not surprisingly, 93 percent were

male, with an average age of 35.5 years.

To put these numbers in perspective, Kwon likes to point out that the number of mountain biking-related SCIs in BC every year is higher than those from amateur football in the entire U.S. Besides the unquantifiable emotional toll on victims and families, these 58 injuries will cost more than \$194 million in lifetime health care and rehabilitation, patient expenses and loss of productivity. Following the release of the study, Dr. Kwon presented the data to a few dozen ER docs involved with the Whistler Blackcomb ski patrol and who work at the Whistler Health Care Centre. It was an appropriate audience; 36 percent of the injuries documented happened at the Whistler Mountain Bike Park. According to Kwon, Whistler Blackcomb and its parent company Vail Resorts have been surprisingly quiet on the topic despite a senior resort executive being in the room with the Whistler doctors when he gave his presentation. Whistler Blackcomb declined to comment directly on Kwon’s study. Dane Gergovich, the resort’s senior communications manager, told me that the bike park patrol manages and assesses trails throughout the season. In an emailed statement, he touted the bike park’s “industry-leading,” safety measures, which include an orientation guide that riders are encouraged to read, and an emphasis on progression and the wearing of proper gear and equipment.

“It’s worth reiterating that the Whistler Mountain Bike Park is the largest of its kind in North America, and we take our commitment to safety incredibly seriously,” Gergovich said. Resort brass may be reticent about the spinal injury topic;



“IT’S STAGGERING WHEN YOU SEE THIS
FOR REAL, AND YOU KNOW IT’S NOT A
ONE-OFF THING”



“I’VE BEEN TOLD THAT ONE OF THE THINGS THAT DRIVES PARTICULARLY YOUNG PEOPLE IS TO TRY DOING SPECIFIC TRICKS SO THAT THEY CAN PUT IT ON THEIR INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT”

physicians certainly are not. According to Dr. Kwon, the response was the same, whether from ER docs in Whistler or physicians from resort towns in Quebec and Colorado that he spoke to at another conference last fall. That yes, this is happening, they know people personally who have suffered serious spinal injuries and that it’s “a bit shocking that it hasn’t been talked about,” Kwon said.

Dr. Kwon is not a mountain biker and

admits to knowing very little about it. He said his study is not meant to deter or scare people off the sport. He simply wants to shine a spotlight on what he and many of his medical colleagues view as a public health issue needing some serious attention. Back in Whistler, Kwon says local doctors started asking him all kinds of questions that he didn’t have answers to. What kind of trail were they on? What kind of obstacle were they doing? What kind of expertise did they have? What were

conditions when the accident happened?

“I realized that if we are going to try to do something meaningful in the prevention space that we really needed to engage with the mountain bike community,” he said. That’s what he’s doing now. As a follow-up study, Dr. Kwon is part of a team of researchers that created a questionnaire aimed at teasing out the characteristics of the rider, expertise, trails, protective gear, bikes and equipment, perception of risk, group dynamics and decision making. The questionnaire is being sent to a working group that includes mountain bikers with SCIs and other people involved in mountain biking and mountain bike tourism.

“AT THE END OF THE DAY, WE ALL WANT TO FINISH THE RIDE AND GET BACK TO OUR FAMILIES”

“I’ve been told that one of the things that drives particularly young people is to try doing specific tricks so that they can put it on their Instagram account to show what they did,” Kwon said. “I had no idea that was actually part of the sport.”

Since 2022, the last year of Kwon’s study period, there have been more than 20 mountain biking-related SCIs in the province. “That’s worrisome. It’s something that seems to be getting more and more common,” he said.

At the very least, Kwon’s study has called out the elephant that has been stomping around the world of mountain biking for years. Risk and, at times, the hyping of risk

is baked into the DNA of the sport. Every year, pro riders at Red Bull Rampage go bigger and bolder. Last year, Polish rider Symon Godziek sent a huge backflip, 30 metres from take-off to landing. The stunt was only good enough to place second to veteran BC pro Brandon Semenuk who claimed his 5th Rampage title and took home \$100,000 in prize money.

Mountain biking isn’t the only adrenaline sport that hypes risk, in this super-heated world of social media screen grabs. Scroll your Insta-feed and you’ll find endless reels of skiers out-running avalanches and dropping monster cliffs. The obvious difference is that snow is a lot more forgiving to fall on than dirt and rock. Crashing at speed on a mountain bike usually hurts. Sometimes people walk away with a few scrapes and cuts, a broken arm or wrist. Others are not so lucky. It’s the rapid de-acceleration of going over the handlebars and landing on your head or back that can lead to the sort of serious injury that put Ethan Krueger in wheelchair for life. Martin Littlejohn, executive director of the Western Canada Mountain Bike Tourism Association, said Kwon’s study has sparked some important conversations.

“The numbers speak for themselves and obviously it’s concerning. We don’t want to be number one in that category,” Littlejohn said. He believes there’s an opportunity around communication,

especially regarding events like Rampage and Crankworx that get a lot of eyeballs and clicks. Progression is essential and so is understanding risk. Pro riders spend years building up the skills and experience that are competition and camera-ready, and still they get injured and knocked out of comps.

That can get lost on a group of weekend warriors when bravado creeps into the consciousness and might push a rider to attempt a stunt or jump that is above their skill level. Littlejohn supports the efforts of Kwon and his fellow researchers to follow-up on the empirical study with a deeper dive into the behavioural science side of the equation; to better understand how ego, groupthink, confirmation bias, experience, fatigue and other factors play into decision-making and risk assessment on the trail. Equally important is proper signage warning riders of advanced features or stunts, something that is already standard procedure at bike parks and many sanctioned trail networks.

“We all accept that there are risks in mountain biking. Am I going to do that drop or take the ride-around?” Littlejohn said. “At the end of the day, we all want to finish the ride and get back to our families.”

That’s exactly what trail builder Dave Kelly wants; for people to have a great experience and get to the bottom of the trail safely. Kelly is one of three co-founders of Gravity Logic, a trail-building





and consulting company that emerged from the early days of Whistler Mountain Bike Park in 2005. Kelly is responsible for A-Line, arguably the world's most famous jump-line trail that drops 330 vertical metres over three kilometres. Riders from around the world visit Whistler with the expressed ambition of riding this trail. As a company, Kelly said they strive to build trails with safety top of mind. The way they build jumps and berms has changed to match the evolution of bike technology from the once standard 26-inch to the larger circumference 27.5 and 29-inch wheels.

“WHEN IT GOES WELL, THE EXPERIENCE IS THRILLING. WHEN IT DOESN'T, THERE CAN BE A HUGE PRICE TO PAY”

“That study is very eye-opening. I have two children who ride the Whistler Mountain Bike Park regularly, and it's a real concern. I'm happy to see them come home uninjured every single day that they go out,” Kelly said. The fact that his 16-year-old son has two close friends with serious mountain bike injuries, one in a wheelchair for life and the other still in a coma, is a visceral reminder of the stakes.

“That is the least favourite part of my job knowing that even if I build the perfect trail somebody is still going to get injured on it,” Kelly said.

It's been nearly 15 years since that fateful

day on the Sunshine Coast for Ethan Krueger. He remembers that conversation with the surgeon like it was yesterday. At first, he sunk into self-pity.

“Why me?” Krueger said about his initial reaction. When he began rehab at G.F. Strong, self-pity evaporated after meeting a woman who was paralyzed from a car accident that was no fault of her own. “I had nobody else to blame. I did this to myself,” he said, adding that this realization helped him move forward. Krueger dove into rehab. He admits that in the early days he was determined to be that one-in-a-million who would walk again. Meeting another young male mountain biker at G.F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre with a similar injury spurred a friendly competition. Eventually, Krueger arrived at a place of acceptance, that with his new physical limitations and realities, there would be some activities that he would never experience again. Mountain biking was something he said he had to get back.

Four years after his accident, he slid for the first time into the seat of an adaptive three-wheel mountain bike. Today, between his 9-to-5 job as a project manager for a sign company in the Lower Mainland, he teaches adaptive mountain biking and does advocacy work for the Kootenay Adaptive Sports Association. When asked about the UBC study, he said he wasn't surprised by the numbers. “I actually thought they would be higher,” he said. Besides wearing chest and neck protection, educating riders about the risks of jumping into

A-Line on their first trip to the bike park, Krueger is not sure what else can be done.

Dr. Brian Kwon believes prevention in the mountain bike space could go a long way to bring down the devastating human and emotional cost, not to mention the financial cost of spinal cord injuries. He uses his experience as an elite hockey player growing up in Saskatchewan as a metaphor. In his last year, a player in Regina was cross-checked violently into the boards. Now he's a quadriplegic.

“Cross-checking from behind was common at the time. And what happened? Well, there was a huge campaign to prevent those types of hits with penalties for cross-checking from behind. Then it kind of became not cool to cross-check people. Consequently, those types of hockey injuries have plummeted,” he said. However, hockey is not mountain biking. In a lot of ways, they're like apples and oranges. There are no referees or officials on the trail to police participants. The joy and appeal of mountain biking is its individual nature. Just a bike and one's skill and judgment to read the trail as it spools out in front of your tires. Events unfold quickly on a mountain bike. A trip down a technical trail is a series of split-second decisions as the brain sends electrical and chemical signals from one neuron to another. When it goes well, the experience is thrilling. When it doesn't, there can be a huge price to pay.

“Before my injury I knew that it was possible, but you never think it's going to happen to you,” Krueger said. ✕

ELECTRIFIED: BUILT FOR THE TRAIL

Explore experienced GMC's EVs at Crankworx Whistler

BY ALISON KARLENE HODGINS



Bikes fly through the sky. Athletes control whip-fast rides with surgeon-like skill and accuracy on jaw-droppingly huge jumps at Crankworx in Whistler, BC.

— This annual international mountain biking festival began right here 20 years ago. *Explore's* field photographer, Tavis, and I arrived just in time for the final leg of the tour.

For us, getting to the start line was half of the adventure. Rain pounded as a record-breaking storm soaked the winding Sea to Sky Highway. Peaked mountains disappeared beneath a coat of heavy fog. Luckily for us, we had the opportunity to drive a truck I've loved since my childhood—with a twist.

The long-loved GMC Sierra has been reinvented: the new Sierra EV Denali Extended Range is a mobile powerhouse equipped with essential safety features and comfortable convenience for daily commutes. Driving the drenched highway, we enabled Super Cruise, an industry-leading hands-free driving assistance technology. While offering a mental and physical respite, it still requires drivers to remain alert. Acceleration felt smooth and instantaneous, yet the dual-motor all-electric powertrain was whisper silent. We arrived comfortable and dry at Whistler's world-class adventure terrain.

This is the ideal setting for GMC, one of the event's sponsors with a deep-rooted connection to the outdoor community, providing strong, reliable adventure transport.

Jamie Dewhurst, GMC brand director, says, "we're showing that these [electric vehicles] are capable of keeping up with the high-paced nature that outdoor-focused people like to enjoy."

But it's not a true test drive until we experience the capabilities off the pavement. Taking the GMC Sierra EV down a backroad, we splashed over muddy puddles and confidently climbed rough gravel alongside a rushing river framed by mountains while remaining in full control.

Back at Crankworx, we watched as Hummer EVs transported pro athletes and their bikes up the mountain to the start of the race. "Hummer EV" might sound like an oxymoron, but GMC created an unlikely yet compatible pairing. "It's really flipped the script with what Hummer was," Dewhurst says, explaining that the Hummer EV was a bold, ambitious move, internally called GMC's "moonshot." The all-electric supertruck features an Infinity Roof with removable Sky Panels for stargazing.

I witnessed another game-changing function of these electric vehicles at the Red Bull container bar: fridges, screens, POS systems and a neon sign were all

powered by the Sierra EV.

These mid-size and EV trucks are more than just vehicles with electric power—they're rugged, off-grid tech devices that can handle real outdoor adventures, from accessing remote alpine lakes to brewing backcountry coffee. Stand-out features include CrabWalk (the ability to move diagonally), MultiPro Tailgate (a six-function tailgate) and factory lifts to make it easier to haul gear and conquer tough terrain. The GMC Sierra EV has a range of 740 kilometres, so your next road trip is as simple as charge and go.

We could have driven the 265-kilometre roundtrip distance from Burnaby to Whistler and back without a single charge, but we decided to experience an affordable charging station to boost the battery. Thousands of charging stations are popping up across the country if your trip will take you farther.

GMC has a lineup of nine SUVs and trucks with options for gas or EV power, plus five trims to choose from that match your style, budget and needs. Whether you're hauling an RV to your favourite campground or bringing your bike to the track, GMC's electric vehicles are made for true outdoor enthusiasts with a rugged design, hauling power and smart technology.

So grab the keys—we'll meet you out there. gmccanada.ca x

Southern **(DIS)COMFORT**





A 73-kilometre trek through Chilean Patagonia's southern mountains pushes Explore Magazine's president and publisher out of his comfort zone and into grandeur

BY DAVID WEBB
PHOTOS BY GONZALO ROBERT FOR FJALLRAVEN

Eight-hundred and twenty-three metres is not that much elevation. Particularly in Chile, a narrow strip of South America that dramatically rises from the Pacific into 6,000-metre Andean peaks. The landscape isn't

quite so stratospheric here in southern Patagonia, but regional massifs like Torres del Paine still pierce the clouds at 2,500 metres.

But 823 metres is plenty when you begin a hike at sea level and carry a 16.5-kilogram pack on your back. And 823 metres is

more than enough elevation to rise into the full brunt of Patagonia's infamous wind, now gusting up from a labyrinth of nearby fjords that lead outward to the wild Pacific and the climactic influence of the icy Southern Ocean just beyond.





I'm catching my breath after this stout morning climb when the first gust blows. It hits like a cross-check as I make my way across a rusty-brown, treeless mountaintop towards the shelter of a lush creek valley. Snaking along the ridgeline, I lean what feels like 45 degrees just to maintain a straight path. The wind is violent and urgent beyond any expectation—even, at one point, stealing the snug-tight rain cover right off my backpack. By chance, I grab the parachute a nanosecond before it vanishes into the gnarled beech trees below.

I've travelled more than 12,000 kilometres from Vancouver to the flipside of the globe—five hours and two seasons ahead of home—and it's day one of a 73-kilometre trek in Chilean Patagonia. At this moment, the wind, the tundra-like terrain and the distant glaciers all unveil the Patagonia of my dreams.

But the best is yet to come.

Swedes and Canadians generally vibe well together. We're hockey and curling rivals on the international stage, but otherwise—we're both northern folks. We're both a bit reserved, next to some southerly neighbours; we're both often perceived as polite; and both cultures are known for appreciating the outdoors.

But why am I talking about Swedes in Chile? Because Sweden is the home of Fjällräven, that outdoors brand with the



Arctic fox as a logo, and that's the reason I'm here. It's December, when both a Swede and a Canadian's thoughts turn to snow, but instead of stepping into Nordic skis, I've travelled to 51 degrees southern latitude to join the inaugural Fjällräven Classic Chile, alongside 400 participants from 38 nations.

“THE WIND IS VIOLENT AND URGENT BEYOND ANY EXPECTATION—EVEN, AT ONE POINT, STEALING THE SNUG-TIGHT RAIN COVER RIGHT OFF MY BACKPACK”

For the past 20 years, Fjällräven has organized group treks in remote places around the globe, dubbed the “Fjällräven

Classics.” Hundreds of participants buy a ticket to these Classics, then transport themselves to the staging grounds—where Fjällräven provides the framework and a few extras... and you do the rest. Everything you need is on your back and your feet are the mode of transport, in our case, over four days and 73 kilometres and with more than 3,500 metres of total elevation gain.

“The Fjällräven Classic is our way to inspire people into an outdoor life,” says Carl Hård af Segerstad, global events manager at Fjällräven. “We do this through a multi-day trek, where people bring all their equipment that they need in order to hike and camp out for three to six days. We provide basic safety support, we provide the route and logistics and make the threshold a little lower to access a multi-day adventure in the wilderness.”



Leave No Trace education is a major part of the trek—including rule number seven: be considerate to others. As such, Classics are not operated in well-trodden places like national parks.

“In Sweden we have the right to roam, everywhere. But it comes with responsibility. You have to follow a very simple rule—don’t destroy, don’t disturb. We try to export this mindset,” explains Martin Axelhed, CEO of Fjällräven.

The company develops relationships worldwide with private landowners to create Classics routes. This means they don’t end up dumping hundreds of people into a national park, for example, overwhelming public campsites and stomping down protected land. That would be the antithesis of what a Classic is meant to represent.

In Chile, it’s a previously un-hiked route

that carves through Estancio Cerro Guido, ranch-land owned by the same family for 150 years. The countryside is a mix of wind-bent beech forests, panoramic views, lush valleys, steep climbs and glacial lakes—accented by the comradery only shared exertion and wonder can create.

The first day of any trek is a blur. Night-before nerves ruin sleep. Wobbly trail-legs are fuelled by caffeine and excitement. Everything is new. You’re feeling your feet beneath you, settling into a rhythm and mentally processing a challenge that you’ve trained for and pushed yourself into. As the final few kilometres of my first day roll out, a flat trudge through pasture to our tranquil creekside campsite, it becomes a grind. Exhaustion sets in and my hips stiffen after some 15 kilometres of hiking with a vertical kilometre of total ascent.

It’s day two that Patagonia reveals itself to me.

You may be wondering what it’s like to trek with hundreds of other people—in our case, about 200 kicked off day one and the same trailed the following morning—but I couldn’t tell you. Treks are democratic that way. Herds thin based on pace; solo trekkers find their solace and social butterflies find their tribes.

Shortly after the second day’s halfway mark, a valley littered with hundred-year-old deadwood from a Depression-era flood, I find myself virtually alone. Birds chatter in the evergreens and wildflower fields ripple like waves in the breeze below crumbling, snow-spotted peaks on either side of the trail. Torres del Paine, that devil-horned mountain, peeks through the eastern clouds and glaciers announce their presence through gusts of icy wind. It may be summer in Patagonia, but the daytime highs rarely exceed the low to mid-teens and nighttime is well into single digits.

The valley widens to showcase iron-grey Lago Porteño; a waterbody surrounded by mountains without a trace of human’s touch and framed in the foreground by rusty wildflowers. Uncharacteristically, we’ve yet to see any rain over the past two days, but the air is misty and cool; hinting at a shower that will never come. Ahead, I can spot a few other trekkers, visible by the blaze-orange Fjällräven Classic tags flapping off their packs, but the only sound is my breath, the scraping of my rubber soles against loose dirt on a descent toward the water and soon, whitecaps that pound the lakeshore almost as heavy as ocean waves.

The solo walk is such a serene delight that I almost lament the sight of camp two, as



it signals the end of my favourite moment thus far. Almost. After about 20 kilometres of trekking, I soon see another reason to join a Fjällräven Classic. The company makes a point of conjuring a little trail



magic here and there; today's being warm cheese empanadas and cold Patagonian beer. It puts a Michelin Star restaurant to shame—or at least it feels that way. Another surprise, outhouses! Strictly Leave No Trace, yesterday's camp loo was a bag-and-tag affair. I never thought I'd be so happy to see a porta-potty. And the cold-plunge I'd later take, wobbling barefoot into the frigid shallows of Porteño, was better than an urban spa.

“MULTI-DAY TREKS THRUST DISCOMFORT INTO YOUR LIFE IN THE BEST WAY—REDUCING YOUR NEEDS TO EATING, MOVING AND SLEEPING”

That's why we do this.

Back home, life is comfortable at the worst of times and opulent at the best. Multi-day treks thrust discomfort into your life in the best way—reducing your needs to eating, moving and sleeping. A tent is luxury at day's end. Dehydrated camp food, sumptuous. But cold beer and fried cheese? Gourmet. And the simple hotel bed that awaits after four days of steady hiking through rollercoaster terrain? Godly.

The Fjällräven Classic is about more than just the hike. It's about harmony. I arrived solo but left with friends. I learned about the mountains of Taiwan from Lupo Wang, a photographer and guide from

the island nation. I met Matt Maynard and Mark Johanson, both immigrants to Chile from U.K. and U.S., respectively. Mark had fallen in love with the country and decided to stay, and Matt had fallen in love with a Chilean woman—a wandering Brit now with family roots in the Santiago suburbs. De facto locals, they showed me how to forage earthy digüeñe mushrooms and crisp chaura berries.

Other trekkers ranged from multi-generational family groups on their third, fourth, fifth and even sixth Classic; to solo vacationers whose spouses back home had no interest in trekking at the edge of the world; to couples on an adventurous outing.

It's almost festival-like in its execution. A day of hiking, fast, slow or in between—as you choose to make it—followed by group camping experiences, idyllically set near babbling brooks or subalpine lakes.

On the third and sunniest morning, I wander solo again. I pass a gaucho picturesquely cantering his horse with a half-dozen working dogs in tow. I hike through weatherworn trees with branches like witches' fingers. The fairytale forest enchants me into a daydream so deep I accidentally veer off the marked trail. A whistle and a wave from some trek-mates, strangers I would never catch up with, gets me sorted and I vow to stay more attentive.

It's not a guided trek. You're expected to

come prepared physically, with the proper gear—it's brand-agnostic that way—and some level of experience. But not too much is needed. As Axelhed had explained over camp dinner the previous night, the purpose is to inspire confidence.

“We started about 20 years ago in the north of Sweden. We had the goal of bringing as many people as possible into an environment where they feel a bit insecure—they don't know how much food, how much gas, how much extra gear, etcetera, to bring,” he'd said. “So, we lowered that bar. We supported them and supplied them with food and gas. Nowadays, we bring 2,000 people out per year ... and about 70 percent are newcomers.”

An hour later, I miss an opportunity to refill my waterbottles as I stride over a wooden bridge above a river so clear it seems to barely exist atop the stones below. Then, I climb into the most undulating and driest terrain yet. I shed a layer of clothing and soon drip the final drop of refreshment into my parched mouth.

It's uncomfortable, but not perilous. I know somewhere amongst the granite teeth surrounding me—and probably not more than a couple hundred metres in either direction—are likeminded trekkers who would surely share a sip, if I was desperate. It's a safety net that favours the bold. I'm hungry and thirsty, but I'm not alone. Not really.

I soon emerge from the rockiest terrain yet and stare agog at twin glacial lakes fronting granite spires surrounded by lush shrubbery and wind-warped trees that resemble Tolkien's Ents.

The murmur of a gathering crowd guides me to the second whisp of trail magic: fresh sopaipillas—like a Chilean doughnut—served from a lakeside tent. My new friends and I collect at the gravel shoreline and spend two hours on an extended lunchbreak. We won't mention it, but the last day is tomorrow. We savour the sweet dough, icy waters on our bare feet and this moment that will never come again.

The days are long but the trek is short. Four days and 73 kilometres are behind me almost startlingly quickly—in retrospect—as I walk steeply downslope towards the town of Serrano, an agricultural area set beside the iconic Torres del Paine and the monolithic Grey Glacier. The looming

icefield resembles a tsunami ready to smother the tiny town below; although one frozen in place for the past 10 millennia or so.

A post-trek party awaits; a worthy finish line. This is a celebration—of nature, of responsible tourism, of friendship, of goal-setting and physical challenge. Soon, we will scatter around the globe with stories, photos and WhatsApp chats as tethers to this shared adventure. For now, we clink bottles and tell stories as a band plays a Spanish version of "Redemption Song."

The finale is what every trekker craves: a commemoration of accomplishment. Yes, I did this! I set a goal and completed it with gusto. Yes, I'll take my pin and Trekking Passport stamps, thank-you very much. And thanks for the cheers too—I deserve them and I'll clap for others. And yes, I'll take the roast lamb sandwich, extra coleslaw, sir. I deserve that too.

A return to comfort never felt so sweet. ✕

Fjallraven Classic Chile

Chile is the most recent addition to the Fjällräven Classic event series. Set in Patagonia, trekkers will see mountain glaciers looming above pristine lakes, traverse historic estancias and experience trails only accessible during the event. Learn about this and other Fjällräven Classics at experience.

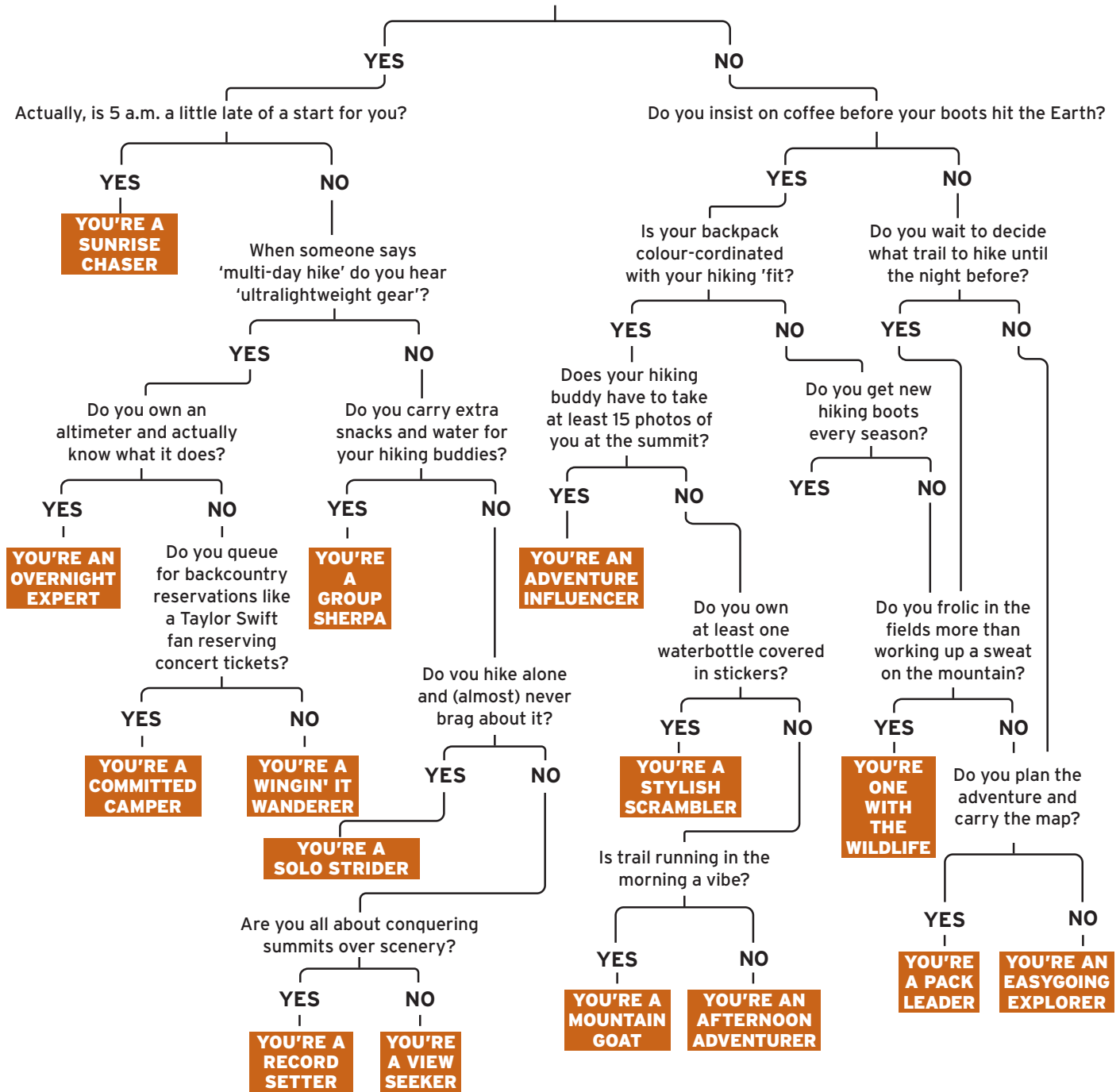
fjallraven.com/classic



WHAT TYPE OF HIKER ARE YOU?

Find out which of these 15 trail names fit you best

When the alarm goes off at 5 a.m., do you pop up like toast?



Crossword Answers (from Summer 2025)

Across:

- 14 Dixon Road
- 3 East Coast Trail
- 6 Siberian
- 10 Manitoulin
- 12 Maid of the Mist
- 16 ViaRhôna
- 18 Gaspésie
- 19 Kodiak
- 20 Drysuit

Down:

- 1 The Hobbit
- 2 Rehabilitation
- 4 Zinc Oxide
- 5 Clearwater
- 7 Sunshine Coast

- 8 Mike Douglas
- 9 Calypso Orchid
- 11 Savannah
- 13 Greg Hill
- 15 Teardrop
- 17 Muktuk



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COMPILED BY EXPLORE STAFF

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(\$300; kumaoutdoorgear.com)

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ADDHEAT Control Systems and two Power Banks, you can adjust your seats independently so you can both enjoy the heat you desire!



Places to Stay in Golden BC

(tourismgolden.com/accommodations)

Golden is an authentic mountain town that offers a wide range of accommodations from slopeside chalets to riverside retreats. Stay close to town, adventure, nature and everything in between. Find the perfect fit for your trip and book directly with local hosts.



YETI Hondo Beach Chair

(\$400; yeti.com)

Ditch the flimsy folding chair and upgrade to the YETI Hondo. Built for Canadian adventures, its legendary YETI toughness meets ultimate comfort. Kick back on the beach, by the lake, or around the campfire—this chair's ready for anything. Invest in relaxation that lasts!



YETI Cast Iron Skillet 8

(\$200; yeti.com)

Unleash your inner backcountry chef with the YETI 8" Cast Iron Skillet! Perfectly sized for solo adventures or cozy campsite meals, this skillet boasts legendary YETI durability. Sear steaks over the fire, bake bannock in the coals and create culinary magic wherever your adventures take you. Built to last, ready for anything!



Helly Hansen Rapide Insulator Windbreaker Jacket

(\$250; hellyhansen.com)

This water-resistant windbreaker will quickly become your most-worn shoulder-season jacket. The PFC-free DWR sheds showers with ease and the polyamide shell is highly breathable. Raglan sleeves move easy and elasticized cuffs, drawstring hem and snug hood keep the wind at bay. But the most impressive attribute is how warm the knitted mesh ventilation is—almost like a lightweight puffy, but even lighter still! ✕



THE MOMENT

By Tavis Gilmore and Alison Karlene Hodgins

It's mid-October; frost bites the tips of the trees, but the snow is not quite ready to stay. We wonder how something built by human hands can blend so seamlessly with nature. Untouched by canoes, the lake is a mirror, more translucent than the sky. Celebrating our five-year anniversary, our bond deepens without saying a word.

Location: Emerald Lake Lodge, Yoho National Park, BC, Canada

DETAILS

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| MODEL | Canon EOS Rebel T6i |
| SHUTTER SPEED | 1/320 |
| APERTURE | f/6.3 |
| FOCAL LENGTH | 18mm |
| ISO | 1600 |



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