

THE LOW DOWN



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SOUTH CHILCOTIN MOUNTAINS PROVINCIAL PARK, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Don't fence me in...

BY RYAN STUART

From Windy Pass, everything that makes the South Chilcotins special spreads out like a sampling menu of awesomeness. On the southwest horizon are the dark grey peaks of the British Columbia Coast Range spearing into the sky and flecked with pocket glaciers. In the other direction, the crumbly South Chilcotin Mountains top out in funky rock formations of card tables, castles and dog ears. In between is a maze of ridges and valleys full of trails, meadows, lakes and

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wildlife. And right in front of me is an alpine smorgasbord teasing and inviting rambling exploration in just about every direction.

We were literally dropped into this mountain paradise. Yesterday, a float plane picked-up my wife and I in Whistler and flew us north through the epic mountains of the Coast Range, to the teal waters of Warner Lake. In a while, the same plane will snatch us back to town. In between, Troy Knecht, the operations manager and a guide for Tyax Adventures, leads us on a wander through the heart of a mountain wilderness famous among mountain bikers and horseback riders but often overlooked by the two-footed crowd. In our short visit we find the South Chilcotins might be the ultimate place to backpack—without a heavy pack.

“The trails were built for horses and they’re great mountain biking,” Troy tells us as we climb out of the float plane at Warner Lake on day one. “But in some ways, they’re even better for hiking.”

After the plane flies away, and before Warner Lake returns to mirror calm, Troy spreads out the topo map to orient us. Goldbridge is the nearest town and the trailhead is about 30 kilometres away, near Tyaughton Lake and Tyax’s headquarters. The flight skipped the long slog from the valley below and landed us just shy of the alpine.

Troy stabs a finger on our position. Trails spider-web outwards across the map and mixed in among the lines are several shovels and pickaxes marking abandoned mine sites. The miners beat us in beautiful trails bringing supplies in and out, establishing most of the trails in the area. We set out upon one, above the lakeshore through open forest, across the occasional creek, big mountains rising above us.

This is bear country—a study pegged the local population of grizzlies at 215—and Troy entertains us with stories of running into the bruins, regularly interrupting himself with hoots and hollers to let them know we’re coming.

He does a good job and all we see are a few old signs before we take a side trail to check out Trigger Camp, a rustic log cabin surrounded by open meadow.

After the mines closed in the 1940s, hunters and horseback riders came. Some built cabins in the valleys, like this one, and pushed trails into the alpine. Eventually a horseback tour company had five cabins in use, spread along 200 kilometres of trail.

Around the time interest in horseback riding began to wane, Dale Douglas took his first flight into the South Chilcotin. The national mountain bike champion-turned-float plane pilot saw the potential of combining the two.

“I knew I could keep a float plane busy flying mountain bikers into the trails,” he remembers.

He started Tyax Adventures, bought a plane and rented the horse packing cabins. He flew mountain bikers into one of the lakes. Over the years he added guiding and catering and eventually bought the cabins. In mountain bike circles,





LEFT: Hiring an outfitter to fly you into South Chilcotin Mountains Provincial Park maximizes time on the alpine trails. ABOVE: Tough access means solitude and big vistas.

the South Chilcotin are now synonymous with the ultimate in adventure riding.

We run into a couple of mountain bikers at lunch. The smiles on their faces suggest they agree. They're very polite and respectful, calling out and slowing down as they approach, letting us pass before riding on. This is normal for mountain bikers up here, says Troy.

"We make it a point of educating everyone we fly in about the importance of slowing down," he says. "We're a long way from a hospital. There could be a bear around every corner. And people understand that it's pretty special to have multi-use trails in the backcountry."

Our destination for the night is Spruce Lake Camp, Tyax's newest. To get there we hike through some of the nicest terrain of the trip. The trail climbs gradually through a series of huge grassy meadows. In early summer they're filled with wildflowers, says Troy. Right now they just scream

freedom. I have to hold myself back from going all *Sound of Music* and running through them.

Around 4:30 p.m. we wander into Spruce Camp, dusty, thirsty and hungry. Troy had radioed the cook a half-hour down the trail and she has appetizers ready and beer chilling in the creek. Refreshed, we move into our private tent: a roomy canvas home with cots and warm sleeping bags, made all the better because I didn't have to carry it in. We eat a gourmet dinner outside, the day's light slowly climbing the hills to the west and the stars appearing one by one.

The next morning is frosty, but the camp's cabin is cozy and the coffee is hot. We linger over breakfast, waiting for the day to warm up, before hitting the trail towards Windy Pass. The first part of the seven-kilometre hike is in the forest and Troy spends a lot of it with clippers in hand, snipping back overhanging branches. Tomorrow he'll lug a chainsaw out to clean up some deadfall. Even though it's a provincial park, Tyax does the majority of the trail maintenance in the area.

After a few kilometres of uphill progress, the trail benches and pops into an alpine meadow, hillsides funnelling us up towards the pass. One more stiff climb and we arrive at the pass, a sprawling network of low points between three ridge lines. Wind

swirls around us, providing natural air conditioning.

Fat marmots whistle their displeasure at our presence. There are too many mountains to count. I could sit up here all day. Or explore for hours.

But we can't. We have a float

plane to catch. It will whisk us back to reality much too soon.

Heading down the trail, back to Spruce Lake, all we can do is enjoy the moment and hope the plane will be late.

Anything to spend a few more minutes in paradise. ✕

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TRIP PLANNER

South Chilcotin Mountains Provincial Park

is about five hours north of Vancouver, first on Highway 99 past Whistler and Pemberton and then on a series of logging roads to Tyaughton Lake. It's possible to hike in, but a better bet is to maximize time and fly in by float plane, either from Whistler or Tyaughton Lake or even right from Vancouver. There are cabins, a lodge and camping at Tyaughton Lake right next to the float plane base.

Tyax Adventures is the main company flying into the area and offers packages out of their five different camps. Tours range from day-trips to weeklong guided and catered trips. Two- to three-day tours are most common. Camp stays are all catered, including three meals per day. Each camp is unique, but all have a kitchen cabin and canvas wall tents for guests.

The camps are an easy day-trip apart with multiple route options depending on the weather and interest. Hikers can expect to walk anywhere from 10 to 25 kilometres per day on anything from rolling terrain to up and over mountain passes and scrambling to summits. Overnight trips start at \$265 per person, per day.

tyxadventures.com



South Chilcotin Mountains Provincial Park, British Columbia