



Fall 2009

DESTINATION

Rockin' in SQUAMISH

by DANIELLE EGAN

photography: MICHAEL BEDNAR

Midway along the Sea-to-Sky Highway between Vancouver and Whistler, this fast-growing community is welcoming under-40 outdoor enthusiasts keen to climb, paddle, hike, bike, and kiteboard in the natural surroundings.

After a relentless hour of scrambling toward the 610-metre first peak of the Stawamus Chief, my partner and I are starting to feel as if we're on some mythical never-ending journey. We've been lured along this 1.5-kilometre trail up the back side of the granite monolith by the promise of spectacular views of Howe Sound, the Squamish River valley, and the surrounding Coast Mountains.

When I was a suburbanite kid in the mid-1980s, Squamish to me was just a pit stop on the drive to Whistler, the Chief a giant grey "halfway there" signpost. Hikers, though, have long been attracted to the area for great backcountry treks within yodelling range of Vancouver. In recent years, that proximity has prompted Squamish to grow up and outward. With the impending Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, a renovated Sea-to-Sky Highway, and a flagging forestry industry, the former poor cousin to Whistler has been branded the "Outdoor Recreation Capital of Canada."



The population of Squamish, now more than 16,500, is on the rise. Between 1996 and 2008 it climbed 3.7 percent, compared to the provincial average of 1.7 percent. Among the new housing developments are two universities, two 18-hole golf courses, a yacht club, steadily growing numbers of hotels and bed-and-breakfast lodgings, and a range of guide-outfitters offering outdoor sports from mountain biking, river rafting, and kiteboarding to scuba diving and horseback riding.

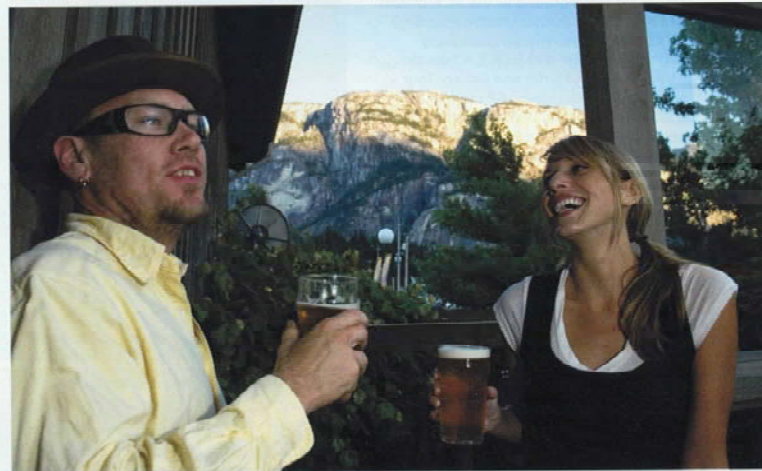
"You're getting close," says a descending hiker. He's only the second person we've met en route to First Peak this sunny September morning. We press on, thinking of the great views ahead and our secondary reward, the one-bedroom suite we've booked at the new Executive Suites Garibaldi Springs Golf Resort, complete with outdoor pool and a hot tub for soaking our aching limbs.

About half an hour later, after a couple of challenging ladders and rope pulls, and a total elevation gain of 500 metres, we reach the first of three summits on the Chief. And we have it all to ourselves.

● opposite: Rock climbers Ken and Kate Murray of Vancouver take in Howe Sound from atop Squamish's famous Stawamus Chief granite cliff.

right, top: David Waters and Brian Novak of White Rock visit downtown Squamish's Cleveland Avenue in a 1913 Rolls-Royce.

right: Tim Langille and Alicia Nicol of Squamish enjoy a pint at Howe Sound Inn & Brewing Company, with views of the Stawamus Chief.



Getting there

The District of Squamish is about halfway between Vancouver and Whistler on Hwy 99.

From this vantage, a helicopter flying near the Tantalus Range looks like a toy we could pluck from the sky. To the north, far below, the District of Squamish and Highway 99 snaking up the valley are buzzing with activity. The cacophony of construction noise reverberating upward is not exactly a soothing soundtrack for an otherwise romantic viewpoint. But it aptly reflects the area's ongoing metamorphosis. The district's growing pains are evident, for better and for worse.

Post-hike, we head downtown for some well-earned carbs. The architecture along Cleveland Avenue generally reflects Squamish's roots as a rough-and-tumble logging town. Still, there are a few eclectic boutiques: a Belgian

chocolatier, a hemp-clothing store, a well-stocked bookstore, and a "wool studio" selling knitting supplies, gelato, and espresso.

We stop in at the Howe Sound Inn & Brewing Company at Cleveland's south end. We bypass the lively bar, opting for a view of the Chief from the lounge where we fuel up on house-made veggie burgers, yam fries, and Garibaldi Honey Pale Ale.

After lunch, we head north to the Garibaldi Highlands and Estates. Amid the older single-family dwellings are stylish new homes, condos, and strip malls with trendy cafés and tapas bars. The youthful expansion of Squamish is reflected in the number of women pushing baby strollers. In British Columbia as a whole, about 50 percent

To do

PLAY

The range of outdoor adventures in Squamish is almost limitless. Bring your gear or rent locally at Valhalla Pure Outfitters (604-892-9092), Vertical Reality Sports Store (604-892-8248), and Tantalus Bike Shop (604-898-2588). ● **Hike** up the Stawamus Chief on peak-bound trails that originate in Stawamus Chief and Shannon Falls provincial parks, or take a rock-climbing lesson with Squamish Rock Guides (604-892-7816). ● **Mountain bike** in Smoke Bluffs Park and Crumpit Woods; Squamish Mountain Bike (www.squamishmountainbike.com) has maps and info. ● **Learn to kiteboard** at Squamish Spit (www.skypilotkiteboarding.com; www.windsure.com; www.vancouverkiteboardingschool.com). ● **Go underground** at the BC Museum of Mining (www.bcmuseumofmining.org). ● **Trainspot** at the West Coast Railway Heritage Park (604-898-9336). ● **Take** the autumn Artwalk Studio and Gallery Tour (www.squamishart.com). ● **Paddle or raft** the Squamish, Elaho, and Lower Cheakamus rivers with Sunwolf Outdoor Centre (604-898-1537; www.sunwolf.net). ● **Explore** provincial parks (www.bcparks.ca) surrounding Squamish, including Alice Lake, Brackendale Eagles, Garibaldi, Murrin, Porteau Cove, Shannon Falls, Stawamus Chief, and Tantalus.

EAT

Tourism Squamish (www.tourism.squamish.com) lists options from deli to deluxe dining. Here are just a few options. ● **The Burrow** (604-898-2801; 11-40437 Tantalus Road. Tapas, martinis, and chic minimalist decor. ● **The Watershed Grill** (604-898-6665), 41101 Government Road, Brackendale. Casual dining with lovely mountain views. ● **Pepe & Gringos** (604-898-3606, 40359 Tantalus Way. Giant pasta dishes and Tex-Mex fare.

SLEEP

Peruse the *B.C. Approved Accommodation Guide* (www.hellobc.com) and "Where to Stay" listings on Tourism Squamish (www.tourismsquamish.com) for a full range of accommodation options. ● **Executive Suites Garibaldi Springs Golf Resort** (877-815-0048; www.executivesuitesgaribaldi.com), 40900 Tantalus Road, Garibaldi Highlands. All-suite hotel. ● **Nu-Salya Bed & Breakfast Chalet** (877-604-9005; www.nusalya.com), 2014 Glacier Heights Place. Canada Select five-star lodging, outdoor hot tub. ● **Alice Lake Provincial Park** (reservations: 604-689-9025; www.discovercamping.ca). 108 vehicle and walk-in campsites.

of the population is under 40 years of age; here in Squamish, that figure is closer to 60 percent. It's an energetic community eager to take advantage of the outdoor-adventure opportunities all around them.

Afternoons in Squamish are the best time to watch windsurfers and kiteboarders. They come to catch the predictable winds off Squamish Spit, a long breakwater at the Squamish River's mouth, just south of downtown.

"This is an awesome and addictive sport," says Sandra Bicego. She moved here three years ago for the wind and is now vice president of the Squamish Windsports Society.



In 2006, the District of Squamish invested more than \$100,000 in improvements to the Spit, which attracts about 50 local regulars and a steady stream of international visitors. Bicego is quick to caution newcomers to windsports, however.

"The wind is a fickle mistress and this is a dangerous sport," she says, emphasizing that novice kiteboarders should undergo a full instruction program before trying the activity.

On this sunny afternoon, the local winds are living up to their reputation. (The word Squamish is derived from a Coast Salish word said to mean "Mother of the Wind.") The kiteboarders' trick aerial manoeuvres provide lively entertainment before we head off for a quiet dinner.

Our Saturday morning agenda had been a mountain-biking trek in Crumpit Woods, northeast of downtown. Apparently, there are 75 trails in the woods and adjacent Smoke Bluffs Park. But our gams are barking after yesterday's big hike, so we opt for a gentler outing to the Brackendale Fall Fair just north of town.

At the turn of the century, Brackendale was the hub of this farming region. Today, the community is part of the District of Squamish, and its core is the Brackendale Art Gallery: theatre, bistro, art school, and gallery in one.

The fall fair down the road has been hosted annually for 14 years by the Brackendale Farmers Institute, itself a going concern since 1915. At various booths, we meet sellers offering local honey, assorted jams, organic fruits and vegetables, and handmade jewellery.

Representatives Jessica Reid and Inis LeBlanc from Save Garibaldi are there to voice concern about a proposed ski resort north of Squamish that would occupy Crown land currently used as a recreation area. Reid and LeBlanc say many Squamish residents support the district's "smart growth" principles, but are concerned about the emerging quality-of-life issues that burgeoning Whistler faced a decade ago: population increase, urban and tourism development, potential fragmentation and loss of wildlife habitat.

"Active people tend to be proactive in all aspects of their lives," says LeBlanc. The catch-22 for many residents is how to make a living—largely through the tourism, service, and construction industries—and preserve the backyard wilderness at the same time.

On that note, it's time for us to get active again with a visit to Alice Lake Provincial Park north of Brackendale. We take a short walk around Alice Lake, one of four interconnected lakes in the park, and enjoy a pleasant swim, warming up in the sun afterward on the lake's floating docks.

Our final adventure is not outdoors but underground, at the Britannia Mine, a museum, National Historic Site, and B.C. Historic Landmark midway between Squamish and Vancouver. While about 300 people reside in the community of Britannia Beach today, some 60,000 lived in this remote mining town between 1904 and 1974. For decades, it was accessible only by boat.

The BC Museum of Mining offers guided train tours through Britannia's old mining tunnel—a perfect way to see how dramatically the local economy has shifted from its early industrial foundations. Our guide starts up an excruciatingly loud air-pressurized drill from the 1920s (known as "the widowmaker" for the breathing disorders it caused), then shows us the copper miners' rather primitive "toilet on wheels."

This was once the largest producing copper mine in the British Commonwealth,



● left: Garth Gleason and Tia Smith canoe Alice Lake with daughters Summer and Jett and the family dog, Nushka.

left, centre: A scenic overview of Squamish shows the community on the edge of Howe Sound, overlooked by the Stawamus Chief, with the sun-tipped peak of Mount Garibaldi in the distance.

left, bottom: Mountain biker Reed Cassidy catches air on a forest trail in his hometown of Squamish.

opposite: Reliable afternoon winds off Squamish Spit attract kiteboarders and windsurfers.



and the region's top employer prior to modern logging. The community grew up around it, with two pools, a bowling alley, tennis courts, and many social events. But there was great hardship, too; 173 miners perished in these dark tunnels, and an avalanche and a flood collectively took the lives of another 93 townspeople.

"The town broke down rapidly in the late '50s after workers unionized and copper prices plummeted," our guide tells us. The railway connecting Vancouver to Squamish was completed in 1956, the highway two years later. Many moved elsewhere for work. The Howe Sound Company took over operations at the Britannia Mine before selling to the Anaconda Mining Company in 1963. Though they kept the mine running, the boom days were over and the formerly close-knit community was never the same again.

When we step back outside into the sunshine, the views across Howe Sound seem all the more beautiful. The tour ends with a gold-panning lesson, and I score a few tiny flakes to take home as souvenirs.

Thousands will pass through this growing community early in 2010 in search of elusive Olympic gold. As a natural stopping point between Vancouver and Whistler, the "Outdoor Recreation Capital of Canada" that I've experienced this weekend is ready to welcome sports enthusiasts, and to offer them much more than a pit stop on the Sea-to-Sky Highway. ☺



Info

- **Tourism Squamish** (www.tourismsquamish.com).
- **District of Squamish** (www.squamish.ca).
- **Vancouver Coast and Mountains Tourism** (604-739-9011, 800-667-3306; www.vcmcb.com).