

Some of the world's most spectacular biking is accessible only by seaplane. Sounds expensive? Not in Canada, thanks to a weak dollar and low-cost flights. **Stuart Millar** reports

# Reinventing the wheels

The engine note of the 1965 DeHavilland Beaver seaplane dropped a tone as it banked sharp left over stands of massive Douglas firs and lined up the landing on the shimmering water below. As Dale, the pilot, caressed his craft down on to the sapphire surface of Spruce Lake with barely a ripple, the first rushes of adrenaline began to kick in — excitement tinged with raw nerves. From the cockpit, I had been given a sneak preview of the riches I was about to be handed.

At 6,000ft up, in the middle of the endless wilderness of British Columbia and hundreds of miles from the nearest blacktop road (hence the seaplane), we were surrounded by dense, old growth forest rising steeply from the shore to arid peaks and windblown ridgelines.

After a couple of hundred years of tried and tested service, the pack horse remains the preferred mode of transport for accessing this pristine landscape. But we were planning to use something a bit more 21st-century and a lot more rock and roll: squeezed in behind the seats in the back of the Beaver's tiny cabin were heavy-duty, long-suspension mountain bikes that were going to carry us up two high passes and bring us blasting back down the other side. We were on a simple mission: to bag some of the world's best — and least ridden — singletrack trails while getting up close to the spectacular alpine landscape of BC's Southern Chilcotin mountains.

Canada's west coast has carved itself

an unassailable position at the top of the mountain bike chain. From the elevated timber trails in the temperate rainforest of Vancouver's north shore through Whistler's world-beating bike park and northwards into the back-country, this is one vast playground, designed by nature to test the limits of both riders and the fat-tired machines they are riding.

To make the most of the thousands of square miles of prime biking terrain, you need a guide. That is where Chris Winter comes in. A local who knows where the most exquisite trails are hidden, Winter, 32, is a former pro skier turned bike evangelist who has made it his life's work to enable the rest of the world to experience the joy of bottomless, fast descents through scenery still untouched by civilisation.

The trips Winter runs through his company, Big Mountain Freeride Adventures, are unique. Being based in Whistler means that clients get the best of both worlds, mixing the bike park's superb downhill trails, berms and jumps with epic forays into the back-country. So it is possible to be doing laps down the bike park's A-line — the world's most ridden trail — one day and then be out several miles beyond the middle of nowhere hanging with the grizzlies the next.

But while the going may be hardcore, the trips are by no means aimed solely at expert riders. The real genius of the Big Mountain operation was that it used Whistler's 40-odd, lovingly sculpted downhill trails as a giant learning zone to teach us the skills needed to tackle

the big stuff. After just a couple of days of riding the bike park, it is impossible not to feel yourself progressing. There are trails and obstacles graded for every level and hundreds of top-class riders to watch and learn from. And all of it accessed by chairlift so there are no uphill slogs.

It is no exaggeration to say that since its launch four years ago, the bike park has revolutionised mountain biking, blowing away the conventional wisdom of what was possible on two wheels. As a result, the prediction is that it is set to rival snowboarding and skiing for popularity. Last summer, 60,000 people rode the bike park, which this season has got even better, tripling in size to 3,400 vertical feet with the opening of the sublime Garbanzo section.

The hand-built ladder bridges, jumps and drops are only part of the attraction of the park. The other stars are the black bears, which can be seen all over the mountainside in summer. On the first day, I had to brake hard as I rounded a corner and an adult black bear ambled out of the trees on to the trail 10ft in front of me, paused to sniff the air and moved casually on.

Even after just a day in the park, I could feel my riding improve. The technical trails off Garbanzo had been a big step up for me, but with a few tips from Winter, I was already starting to clear sections that I would probably have walked down before.

So it was time for our first wilderness epic. There were eight of us on the seaplane trip — Winter, a cheerfully deranged Swiss rider called Francois, five other Whistler locals and me. We set off at what, it is fair to say, was a breakneck pace. After 10 minutes of trying to keep in touch with the rest of the group through the labyrinth of trails that snaked away into the trees from the lake, I was sweating hard and swearing harder. And that was before we started the main climb up to Windy Pass (elevation: 7,500ft).

This was a painful lesson that the best things in life never come easy. For the next 90 minutes, in searing midsummer heat, we trudged uphill through the undergrowth. Hike-a-bike they call it round here. Most of the time we were on foot pushing the bikes; occasionally for a few beautiful seconds we'd be able to hop on for a trundle along a flat section before the trail turned upwards again.

Then, just as I began to think that an encounter with a grizzly or a cougar would at least offer a welcome escape, I reached the tree line and emerged into the sub-alpine. The transformation was breathtaking as the forest gave way to trembling aspens and rolling wildflower



Adrenaline rush... Stuart Millar gets to grips with one of the world's best, and least ridden, singletrack trails



PHOTOGRAPHS: AROLLE.COM

meadows carpeted in pale blues, reds and yellows. Above us, steep scree slopes fell away from high ridges. We still had a fair way to go, but the new landscape helped me find a second wind.

Eventually, gloriously, we made it to the top of Windy Pass and stopped to suck down calories in the form of salami sandwiches, energy bars, figs and chocolate brownies. Then it was time for the real fun to begin.

All the pain of the uphill climb was forgotten as we dropped the seats on our bikes right down and hit the first swooping descent. This part of the trail consisted of dirt packed so smooth it felt like somebody had steamrollered it to perfection just for us. And it was so, so fast, whizzing us down through meadows, across clear alpine streams and all too quickly back down to Eldorado Creek where we were going to begin heading uphill again.

But all this was only a warm up for second big descent down Lick Creek. As we caught our breath after the next climb, we drank in the view. Strung along the valley floor beneath us was a series of lakes, each of them bleached a different shade of green or blue by the glaring afternoon sunshine. They were our destination and all that lay between us and them was several thousand feet of twisting, sandy singletrack.

We blazed downwards, throwing up thick clouds of dust, sliding the bikes into the tight switchback corners, easing off the disc brakes and reaching scary velocity on the straights. My arms ached from the effort of holding on, my eyes were streaming from the speed and

the dust and the sheer exhilaration of it all. Sometimes the trail widened slightly through forested sections. Sometimes it climbed sharply. But all the time, it just kept on going. At one point, after what must have been a full, brake burning hour of non-stop descending, we stopped and regrouped on the assumption that we had reached the valley floor, shaking our heads and laughing like kids in amazement. Then the trail swooped downward again and we realised there were further fantastic depths yet to plumb. When we did finally reach the main road, the evening light was soft and warm and we had been riding — and hiking — for almost eight hours.

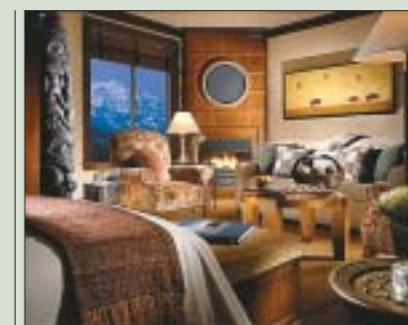
There was plenty more to come over the next few days: more laps on A-line's table-top jumps; another trip to the top of Garbanzo for a gorgeous black-diamond graded run called No Joke; and then, to finish off, a mini hike-a-bike epic, this time off the back of Whistler mountain, to hit three legendary BC trails known by locals as Khyber, Babylon and Tunnel Vision. It was another blistering hot day and the riding was far more technically challenging. But by then, my muscles had got used to the hard work and I had found my flow. Four hours later, when we blasted back to the valley floor, dirt-caked, scratched, bitten and smelly, all I wanted to do was go back up and do it all over again. Big Mountain's brochure had promised a perfect Canadian bike adventure; it delivered far, far more.

## Extreme comfort

Just because you are on a hardcore adventure doesn't mean you have to deny yourself a serious bit of pampering. There is no better feeling after a hard day on the bike or snowboard than to come home to unwind in a lavishly serviced hotel room.

It has never been a struggle to find top-class accommodation in Whistler, with properties like the Chateau, the Westin, the Pan Pacific, and the new boutique Sundial. But this summer, a major new player has arrived in town which raises the standard higher still — the Four Seasons Whistler (+604 935 3400, fourseasons.com/whistler, standard room from C\$345 per night).

Although it is a large five-star hotel, with 273 rooms, and would not welcome the hip or boutique tag, it boasts a relaxed, funky vibe. Unlike many North American hotels, the decor never strays into the stuffy or chintzy — it exudes understated, quirky elegance.



The best feature by far is the bed, undoubtedly the largest and most irresistibly restful I've ever slept in. And then there is the spa. The massage treatment was, of course, excellent but a bigger draw for me was the enormous outdoor pool, with the mountains only a couple of hundred yards away. **SM**



## Get your skates on

If you're looking for a sure-fire way to send the kids back to school in September as the certified offspring of the coolest parents on the planet, take them along to your nearest skatepark.

At Bay 66 in London's Westbourne Park (020-8969 4669, baysixty6.com) for example, you pay £3 to get in and £10 for an hour's tuition with the aptly named Gary Bullet (you need to bring your own skate gear). 'It's for absolute beginners really,' says Tim Crooks, manager of Bay 66. 'Two or three lessons, and they're skaters, and can come back whenever they want to ride all over the park.'

Since introducing lessons last summer, there's been no shortage of kids, normally aged between 12 and 15, giving it a shot, prompting other skateparks to follow Bay 66's example. A directory of the parks around the UK can be found at [sidewalkmag.com](http://sidewalkmag.com).

For extra brownie points, you take them to see the professionals in action. All the big skateboard companies send their professional riders on worldwide tours, hitting Britain at the height of the summer break.

### Skate tour dates

- The Red Bull Vert Sessions tour, which is also open to aspiring BMXers, hits Birmingham on the Aug 25 and 26, Castleford, near Leeds, on Sept 1 and 2, London on Sept 4 and Brighton on Sept 5. For venue information and to register (not mandatory) go to [redbullvertsessions.co.uk](http://redbullvertsessions.co.uk).
- The Karma/Hurley skate team hits the UK's parks this August, including Stockport Skatepark, Bolton Bones, Southport Skatepark, Lancaster Skatepark, Brighton's Level and Bay 66. More info at [karmaskateboards.com](http://karmaskateboards.com) or [hurley.com](http://hurley.com).

- The Eastpak Transition Tour is at Midsommer Norton on Aug 12, Malvern's High Street and Victoria Park in Pickersleigh on Aug 13, Abington Street in Northampton Aug 14, Crouch End's Hornsey Town Hall, Aug 15, Devonshire Square in Bexhill-on-Sea on Aug 16, Brighton and Hove's Hove Lagoon on Aug 17 and finally Albert Pier, St Peter Port, Guernsey on Aug 22.

- The Cliché 'Roast Beef' Tour sees the French team at Slam City Skates, London on Aug 11, Lloyds in Bristol on Aug 13, Exit Skate Shop and Hyde Park Skatepark in Leeds Aug 15, Focus Skate Shop and Bristo Square in Edinburgh Aug 17 and Devonshire Green Park, Sheffield on Aug 20. **Chris Moran**

## Way to go

▶▶▶ **Getting there:** Zoom (0870 2400055, flyzoom.com) flies direct to Vancouver from Gatwick, Stansted and Glasgow with one-way fares from £139. Next summer, the service will expand to seven flights a week from Gatwick, Glasgow, Manchester and Belfast.

▶▶▶ **Where to stay:** Four Seasons (see box); Westin Resort and Spa (+604 905 5000, starwood.com/westin) offers a junior suite with queen bed, sofa bed and kitchen from C\$203 per night.

▶▶▶ **On your bike:** Big Mountain Freeride Adventures (+604 894 0220, ridebig.com) runs three different packages to Whistler. The five-day Escape costs C\$1,750 and includes guiding, seaplane flights, bike park passes, lunches and snacks. Big Mountain also specialises in custom backcountry packages for small groups.

▶▶▶ **Further information:** Tourism Whistler (800 9447 8537, mywhistler.com).



Country code: 001.  
Flight time: London-Vancouver 10hrs.  
Time difference: -8hrs.  
Currency: £1=2.34 Canadian dollars.