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Hike-a-bikes, grizzly bears and untamed backcountry singletrack; what better way to test the all-new line-up of Specialized women's bikes? But more than that, this trip opened our eyes to the limitless riding opportunities that exist beyond the better-known bike parks.

**C**rowie or Stella? I'm sprawled out on the dock at beautiful Spence Lake in the Chikotin, British Columbia. After an eight and a half hour epic ride I'm totally exhausted. Reaching up to accept my beer feels like an endeavor, but I make the effort. As I sip and sip my medicine I take time to reflect on the day's ride. I ponder how I managed to be in this incredible setting, after having just completing the ultimate ride of my life.

I'm at the press launch for the new Specialized women's mountain bike line and I'm a press launch virgin. I've heard stories of magnificent locations, cool trails and being showered with gifts, complete and utter junkies where you get to ride the latest gear and stay in top-notch accommodation. This trip has been nothing less, however I believe the bar has just been raised. Rachel Lambert and Amy Shreve from Specialized US product and marketing had something extra special planned for the launch of their 2011 Saffire and Era line up. An all-female press camp that wasn't just a day's trail riding, but an all-out adventure with memories to last a lifetime.

Our itinerary certainly sounded 'epic' with a capital 'E'. We'd meet in Whistler then fly 45 minutes over the coastal mountains to remote Loma Lake in the Southern Chilcotin. After a night of camping, a 4-hour long hike-a-bike awaited to the top of Lorna Pass (2,200m) with incredible alpine views. Sweeping alpine singletrack along Tyauhton Creek Trail would then drop us 600 metres vertically, down to Cowboy Camp in the valley below. Here we could choose to conquer Deer Pass, which peaks at 2,267m after a further hour hike-a-bike. Alternatively, we'd continue along flowing singletrack and scree slopes before a short climb up to the next camp at the picturesque Spruce Lake.

Day-two was billed as 40km of singletrack and 70% downhill, rolling through a Picea-wildflower meadows. We'd follow the Gunn Creek trail before finishing the day on the singletrack that surrounds Tyax Wilderness Resort—one of Canada's largest log lodges located on the gorgeous Tyauhton Lake. To organize the event, Rachel enlisted the help of Chris Winter from Big Mountain Bike Adventures—a Canadian based mountain bike travel company. They have experienced local guides and offer cross-country, all-mountain and downhill trips to 14 countries world-

# Beyond Whistler



wide. Trips are fully catered for, leaving you with little to do other than enjoy the riding experience. On paper it sounded almost too good to be true: scenic flights, around 80km of riding, all on single-track, camping and swimming in pristine glacial lakes—surely there was a catch...

#### ADVENTURE BOUND

I arrived in Whistler at the tail end of Crankwoxx, a mountain bike festival held annually at Whistler Mountain Bike Park. A spectator's dream with dual slalom, downhill, trials, enduro and cross-country events held all week long—if you can do it on a mountain bike, there's a competition for it at Crankwoxx. There's even a cheese-rolling competition, the only non-biking event. Contestants have to run (or fall) down a mountain chasing an 11-pound cheese wheel!

After a much-needed sleep I met Rachael, Amy and six other female journalists over breakfast. It was refreshing to be around like-minded women and the discussion was inevitably about bikes or riding bikes. After breakfast we headed off to meet our planes. Let the adventure begin...

We were to board two DeHavilland Beaver float planes. This seemed to be the pinnacle of excitement for most of us, and when our cals pulled into the docks there were many squeals of delight. The Beavers were an impressive sight.

Our pilot Dale Douglas from Tyax Air (also a very keen mountain biker) gave us a little insight into his machine. Apparently the Beaver is a Canadian icon; built in Canada between 1947 and 1967 it was the original short takeoff and landing aircraft. The Beaver I was boarding was almost 50 years old, although this strip of information is usually withheld until after you land!

Our first glimpse of the Chilcotins was nothing less than spectacular. An endless canvas of ever-changing scenery. Rugged and exposed peaks with smattering of remnant winter snow, numerous glacial lakes and huge green blankets of high alpine meadow. There were endless walls of loose shale scree slopes that appeared impassable from our vantage point in the sky. It was hard to imagine that the very next day I would be riding across a tiny goat track, carved into the side of one of these towering features—I was both excited and terrified.

Finally we flew in for a surprisingly smooth landing at our campsite on the shores of Lorna Lake. A glacial lake surrounded by towering snow capped peaks, the water a remarkable hue of milky blue.

We had a few nice introductions at camp. Our guides, Claire Kendrick and Lorraine Blanche, clearly passionate about her job, Claire was a first-class trip leader who had recently migrated from the UK to live her dream—her love of the Chilcotins was infectious. Lorraine Blanche, a successful freerider from BC was trying her hand at guiding for the first time. Additionally, Chris Winter founder of Big Mountain Bike Adventures and Sterling Lorence, photographer extraordinaire, joined us as the only males on the trip. I also met my bike, a shiny new 2011 Saline Pro, and before dinner I got busy setting it up.

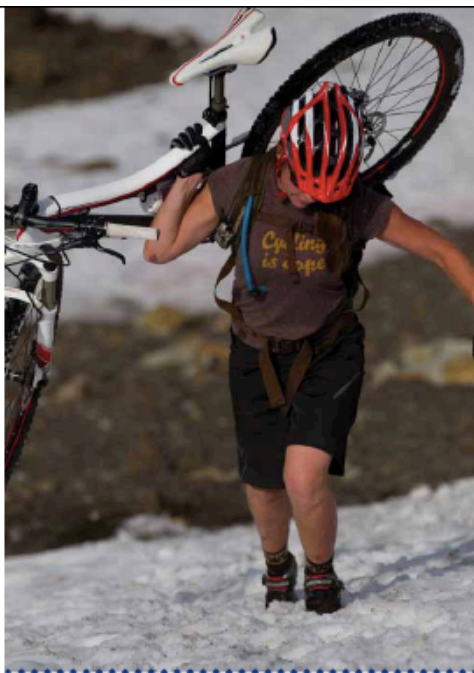
Daybreak came after a very long night of staring at the tent roof; my body clock still on Australian time. Following a tasty breakfast we set off on our ride... or was that walk. After a couple of hundred metres we came across our first creek crossing—the icy water a good morning wake-up. Ahead of us was a 5km climb up to Lorna Pass. I normally consider pushing uphill a

last resort, preferring to ride whenever possible. On reading the itinerary, I was a little sceptical of the hike-a-bike in their description, thinking it may have been exaggerated for those who don't like to climb. I was set to take a cold hard lesson on backcountry mountain biking Canadian style!

#### PAYING THE DUES

The trail was crazy steep. At times I was on my knees trying to push my bike over the next nasty pinch. Next came a huge scree slope with patches of icy snow. I don't think there was a "best" way to tackle the ice. Some chose to take the long way around while the rest of us dug our toes in and did our best to keep upright. After 45 minutes we reached the top. The views were absolutely stunning, I'd been so immersed in the task of pushing my bike that I'd forgotten to look around and found myself standing on top of the world. We took a long time to absorb our surroundings before heading off on a wonderful descent on sweet flowing singletrack.

Whoa... I'd completely forgotten the group rule of riding at 70% of your ability. Our guides had warned us of the remote areas, and if injured, the only way out was in a helicopter! But I was so happy to finally be riding that I was lying along, slowing only for the deep ruts and marion holes. With adrenaline pumping, it wasn't long before the shiny new Saline and I were rolling down the hill. A gunby fall, I jumped back on my bike and just a couple of hundred metres down the trail, I lost the front wheel and hit the ground with a solid thump. I got up slowly and examined my bleeding forearm. Thank goodness for arm-warmers. I was in a fair bit of pain but my embarrassment kept me from dwelling on my injuries. From now on it was 50% for me.



Onwards and the trail descended steeply into native pine forest before opening up into meadows of pretty alpine flowers. Eventually we reached Cowboy Camp for lunch. As the name suggests, we were deep in Canadian horse country. Hikers and bikers also frequent this backcountry with mountain bikers being relative newcomers. After lunch, our group split into two with some girls off to tackle another hike-a-bike, this time up to Deer Pass in search of more sensational vistas. I chose to continue along the valley to Spruce Lake. The valley trail was sweet and undulating at first, with many tree root step-ups. Later the trail turned narrow and exposed with a considerable drop to Tynghton Creek, gushing 100 metres below. We crossed the creek on numerous occasions. It was both wide, deep and far from tame, we had to sling our bikes high across our backs to avoid being washed away.

#### BIKES & BRAVADO

Eventually we came to a crossing we simply couldn't pass. "Perhaps that bank would be a better option", suggested Sterling our photographer. "I could also make for some great shots". The bank was a scree slope with a track about the width of my

foot. With my stiff soled mountain biking shoes, I was considering taking my chances with the rushing creek. Perhaps we could have both options, if it all went wrong we would plunge a few metres into the water beneath. We hesitantly agreed, and with bikes balancing on our shoulders—purely for photographic effect—we stepped out.

Clitia from Germany was first; she was cool, confident and made it look easy. Emily was next and not so confident. Her bike became unbalanced and she slid partway down the slope. Then Kristen who was in front of me lost her footing and slid wildly down the bank. Within inches of the ledge Chris grabbed hold of her pack, saving yet strangling her in the process. Thankfully we abandoned the idea. Chris who was wearing sensible freeride sneakers kerried the bikes across while the rest of us scrambled over.

Further down the trail we stumbled upon a grizzly bear lying in the grass. The bear spotted us and ran off. This could have been a piece of good fortune but the bear ran straight down the trail where we were headed—this was going to be interesting. We had previously discussed bear safety, and being from a country of cute fluffy animals I made sure I paid attention. The strategy was to talk loudly and

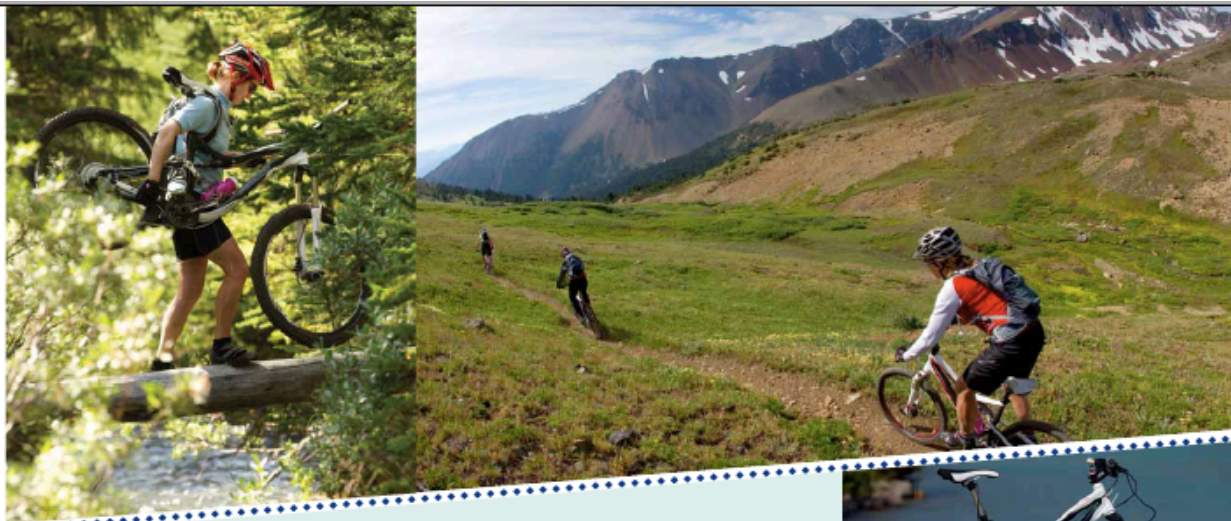


make sure the bear knew exactly where we were. Chits got his pepper spray out just in case. We chattered away nervy about nothing of importance, yipped and yahoosed, and I threw in the occasional Aussie 'cooee'. It was right about this time that Emily decided to have issues with her cleats! In a panicked state she fell off her bike several times right in front of me. I couldn't help but laugh, a nervous response perhaps. In the end I was laughing so hard I was struggling to ride... fortunately we never saw the bear again and rolled into Spruce Lake exhausted, hungry and totally out of water.

Met by a lake-chilled hiker for 'recovery', we camped in relative luxury as all the mod cons were delivered by Beaver to our lakeside retreat. Day two was set to be flat-out fun, just five hours of riding and 70% of the trail pointing downhill. With the toughest leg behind us we could let loose and give it our all. Again our group split into two with some girls choosing to ride a high alpine track known as 'Windy Pass', topping out at 2,200m and with another hike-a-bike ahead, they set off early. Call me crazy but I took the downhill option. Claire was our guide and she stopped often to give us enthusiastic descriptions of the trail ahead.

We set out on the Spruce Lake singletrack and dropped into pretty wildflower meadows. The views were absolutely breathtaking, at times distracting from the fast flowing trail. At first it was fairly loose and skater but as we descended into the forest, the trail became firmer with rock drops and loads of fun switchbacks. We crossed Gun Creek on numerous occasions, sometimes just a trickle of water to splash our legs and a wide raging torrent in other parts—thankfully we now had sturdy wooden bridges to ride across. It was obvious that we weren't very far from civilisation and we encountered polite hikers here and there.

Finally we reached the trails around Tyax lodge. Fires ravaged this district just a year before and the new saplings made the track a tight squeeze while the sandy corners kept us on our toes.



## SPECIALIZED 2011 A FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

Why was I here again? Ah that's right... the bikes!

Specialized has always taken their women's bikes seriously. They aren't the same as the guy's models with a smaller frame size and a pink paint job. Leg and torso lengths vary markedly for both genders but physiological averages show females typically have 25mm shorter reach than men (a figure derived from the combined torso and wingspan measurements). Specialized has based their geometry around this and the top tubes tend a little shorter as a result.

Their studies also show an average weight of 68kg for the girls versus 80kg for the guys. Suspension set-ups are tuned with this weight difference in mind. Lighter frame tubes are also used on smaller sizes to make their handlebars more comfortable, and their dia lies easier to manage on those Canadian-style hike-a-bike. Beyond this you also get a selection of women's specific parts to round out the package, saddles, grips and so on... it's all tailored to suit feminine proportions.

While these concepts have featured in their women's bikes for some time, their models have always been designed in tandem with the men's bikes—the Safire for example has always been based on the Stumpjumper and tweaked from there. For 2011 Specialized aims to take their

women's bikes to a whole new level. An engineer was assigned specifically to create the new Safire and there were no constraints, the design was allowed to evolve as a stand-alone bike, to better meet the needs of female riders. It also went through a team of 12 female test riders who had a voice in its design and the results are clearly unique. That's why they are so excited about this project and the girls-only product launch in the Chilcotins was a fitting celebration.

The 100mm travel XC-race oriented 'Bra' falls into a more affordable price bracket for 2011. While there are tweaks in component spec and frame construction, it isn't a radical departure from before. There's also a new 8y6 29er handlebar with women's specific sizing and excellent standover clearance, but it wasn't on show at this launch. For this event the spotlight really falls on the Safire...

### SAFIRE FSR PRO

With 120mm of rear travel and 115/140mm of adjustable travel up front, the Safire is the do-it-all XC trail bike from Specialized. While its styling now mirrors the current Stumpjumper, with the shock mounted in-line with the seat stays, there's a lot more going on with this all-new frame design.

Mounting the shock horizontally can make it harder to get a low stand over height on smaller frame sizes. Their solution was to tuck the shock up inside the top tube. While super smooth welds make it look like a one-piece tube, it actually consists of three parts, two tubes welded to the shock mount in the middle. The resulting top tube swoops down really low and offers tons of clearance.

Such a low top tube would normally take away from the space inside the main triangle. However the Safire features an equally swoopy down tube, which provides ample space for a large bottle—even on the smallest frame sizes. Up front, the bike gets an integrated headset with a really low stack height. Even with the relatively long 140mm travel forks, this manages to keep the handlebars at a reasonable height for climbing.

The top-end Safire Pro comes with a Specialized/Fox manufactured 'Brain' shock. On smooth trails the suspension is by default firmer for better pedalling efficiency. Hit some bumps and the shock swaps to being soft and squishy with no 'platic' effect at all. You can choose just the firmness of the 'smooth terrain mode' via the Brain Fade adjustment dial—the range goes from solid and almost locked, through to being very active where the 'Brain action' is unnoticeable. It's all automatic with no

handlebar remotes or rider input required.

While this Brain technology may be common to both men's and women's lines, the Bra and Safire models have been tuned to suit a lighter rider. Likewise the spring curve is more linear on the women's bikes, making them softer in the mid-stroke and more able to use all of their travel.

The thoughtful design doesn't end with the frame. Many of the components show careful consideration and willingness to source special parts to better suit the typical female mountain biker. Take the cranks for example...

There's no hiding the current curiosity for double chainring set-ups. However, most 2X10 cross-country cranks limit your low-end hill climbing gears. This may be an acceptable compromise for a gear-mashing guy, but girls are more inclined to climb in a lower gear using fitness and finesse (clearly the superior technique).

Rather than compromise versatility in hilly terrain, Specialized got SRAM to make a special 24/36 X-Glide double chainring combo. When combined with the 11-36 cassette, you get a proper granny gear for climbing and a slightly compromised top-end, that shouldn't be missed on this sort of bike. Additionally, the cranks rely on a common 64/104 bolt pattern—that means you can always fit a standard triple ring set-up if you desire. As it stands, the big ring sits where the middle chainring normally would on a triple, and this produces a straighter, smoother running chain line than most off-the-peg 2X10 drivetrains. Both Bra and Safire models feature this clever 2X10 set-up on their upper end models.

Naturally you'll find an anatomically designed women's saddle, thin grips for smaller hands and suitably sized handlebars. While all of this is tailored with women

in mind, Specialized choose gender-neutral colour schemes. Why no girly paint jobs? Because the very same attributes that make them ideal for a smaller, lighter female build will also benefit men of smaller stature. Besides, understated styling generally appeals for longer than girly colour schemes that shout 'look at me!'

The Safire was definitely a fun bike on the trail, good stability, suitably relaxed handling and pretty light for an alloy trail bike with 120/140mm of travel (11.7kg) with the stock fixed height seatpost and no pedals). The front end was surprisingly low when you consider it had a riser bar and a standard rise stem. I have to run a flat bar with the stem flipped upside down to achieve a similar feel on my own bike.

While the Brain can make it pedal like a World Cup racer, I preferred the suspension feel with the Brain Fade dial wound out. It still pedalled pretty well but offered a smoother, less noticeable transition between the active and inactive suspension modes. Too much Bra in action and the suspension sometimes delivers an odd jerky feel over smaller rolling bumps that don't cleanly trigger the Brain into action.

Having a granny gear was great but I did miss the 32 tooth chainring that I'm used to on my usual triple chainring cranks. In this constantly undulating terrain I often found myself over-gearing in the big ring or spinning madly in granny. The result seemed to be a lot of swapping from big ring to little

and back again, but at least the X-Glide shifting was top-notch.

I've owned a few dualies over the years, and most have followed similar lines to the Safire; trail bikes with a little extra travel and not too racy. In the scheme of things, the Safire was definitely a great pedaller, the Bra is helping here no doubt. It was also a confidence inspiring and playful bike that was great to ride on what was very unfamiliar territory.

More than anything, it was refreshing to see their uncompromising approach to women's bike design. It's an important part of their company and a market they clearly value, not an afterthought as often seems the case. Anything could have happened on our backcountry idyllic, bear-free tracks, blizzards, broken bones, Beaver book-downs, you name it. It would have been far safer, cheaper and easier to put us up in Whistler to ride some crazy green trails. That they dumped us at the top of the Chilcotins, and left us to pedal our own way back, exemplifies their attitude towards women's mountain biking; they clearly respect the finer sex and take us seriously in the dirt. Good on ya Specialized!





## Trip Costing

Big Mountain Adventures ([www.ridebig.com](http://www.ridebig.com)) offers the Chilcotins experience as part of their "Sea to Sky" trip; a 10 day adventure that also takes in the trails of Vancouver, the Sunshine Coast, Squamish, Whistler and Pemberton. The all-inclusive cost for the Sea to Sky trip is \$2,760US. They also offer three-day private trips to the Chilcotins with a day in Pemberton. Costing varies, but with four riders and a guide you'd be looking at around \$990US per person. You can also go to Tyax Air ([www.tyax.com](http://www.tyax.com)) for further information on tours in this area.

Return flights to Vancouver, Canada are usually around \$1,500 from the eastern states.

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### A FITTING END

Eventually we emerged onto a dusty road where a huge shuttle van from Tyax Wilderness Lodge was waiting—no boring road climbs for us! A short drive later and we were diving into the beautiful Tyaughton Lake. The water was breathtakingly cold, a table with beers and gourmet nibbles was set-up beside the dock—could it get any better than this?

Dinner and endless chatter provided a fitting end to our adventure. The mix of people was fantastic and the often-unpredictable alpine weather had been on our side for the entire trip. We couldn't have asked for more.

I have long dreamed of a riding holiday in Canada. The trails of Whistler and Pemberton are legendary; purpose built mountain bike trails conveniently located

close to civilisation. Just walk out the door from your accommodation and there's a massive trail network laid out before you. Yet Canada has so much more to offer...

Take a relatively short trip off the beaten track and you'll find a diverse system of unpolished tracks and bridle trails, surrounded by some of the most sensational scenery you could ever hope to experience. The Chilcotins offer a bespoke adventure with endless possibilities for those who wish to explore. Combine this with Whistler and Pemberton mountain bike parks and you have one of the world's finest riding destinations. 

Article by Amber Hardwick  
Photography by Sterling Lawrence



### WHAT'S NEW FOR THE GUYS?

While the guys didn't get to ride the Chilcotins, there are a couple of real highlights within their 2011 bike range. The Epic features an all-new frame which is said to be both lighter and a good deal stiffer. In its 29-inch variant, it even uses a special 142x1.2mm through-axle for rear wheel to eliminate flex.

Also new is the Camber. A 120mm trail bike that fills the gap between the race oriented Epic and the 140mm travel Stumpjumper. The Camber will also come in a 29-inch version that offers 100mm of rear wheel travel.

Finally, the Carbon Stumpjumper hardtail has been on a diet and the new S-Works frame is said to weigh just 920g in a 26er and 1,049g in the 29-inch version!



2011 Camber 29er